



Museum of Natural Science

July 9, 2020

Dear Donors,

Every year, the LSU Museum of Natural Science ornithology graduate students hold a “Big Day” fundraiser, during which a small team tries to see as many bird species as possible in Louisiana in a single day (24 hours) to raise money to support our research program. This year, like much of the rest of the world, we had to change our plans somewhat. Instead we held a “socially distanced Big Day”, and each of us watched for birds in our yards and local parks. Because many graduate students are currently home with family, we had participants in seven states spanning much of the continent: California, Nevada, Arizona, Missouri, Louisiana, Michigan, and New York. Three LSUMNS students even birded near their homes in Colombia and Brazil, adding a colorful array of tropical hummingbirds, toucans, parakeets, and tanagers to the usual roster of North American species. With this expanded geographic scope, we shattered previous Big Day totals: our Louisiana-only record stands at 221 species, but this year we collectively notched **332 bird species** on June 11th. You can see the full list of species recorded at <https://www.lsu.edu/mns/news/index.php>

You can read the highlights of each of our days below, and please consider donating at [lsufoundation.org/bigday2020](https://lsufoundation.org/bigday2020) support the LSU Museum of Natural Science ornithology graduate students. We greatly appreciate your generosity.

**Glaucia Del-Rio & Marco Rego:** Close to São Paulo, in Southeast Brazil, there are many excellent birding spots, most of them in pristine Atlantic Forest environments, but in the small town of Salesópolis there is one spot particularly special to us. We chose to bird in Salesópolis not only because we knew the area would be empty of any human agglomeration, but also because it is the home of one of the most endangered antbird species, the São Paulo Marsh Antwren. There are estimated to be only a few hundred of these birds left in the world. Glaucia studied this bird for her master’s research, and she goes back to Salesópolis every year to look for birds banded 10 years ago. So in the morning of June 11<sup>th</sup>, with our birding area defined, we woke up at 4:30 am and drove about 2 hours to the east of São Paulo to the small town of Salesópolis. Since it is winter here in the Southern Hemisphere, we arrived at our destination just after dawn at 7 am and kept birding there until 10:30 am. To our delight, we had a beautiful winter morning with a blue sky and temperatures around 60°F (15°C). Birds were singing everywhere. The place itself comprises a mosaic of different types of habitats with Eucalyptus farms blended with native Atlantic Forest

vegetation and cattail marshes along small rivers. The birding was incredible, and YES! We did see the Antwren! We also saw many other species, including some endemic Atlantic Forest ones. Our highlights were singing Bare-throated Bellbirds, Brazilian Tanagers, Red-breasted Toucans, two distinct morphs of Surucura Trogon, a Long-tailed Reed Finch, and over 100 other species.

**Diego Cueva:** Fortunately, the date of the Big Day aligned with when the quarantine restrictions in my hometown allowed me to go out of my house. So I went out birding. I visited a beautiful foothill forest in my home city Villavicencio, Meta, Colombia. The locality is known as "Bosques de Bavaria" because the biggest brewery in Colombia – Bavaria – was located at the entrance of the forest."Bosques de Bavaria" or Bavaria's forest is a beautiful 3 km (1.9 miles) uphill path that goes from 490 meters to 940 meters (1600 - 3100 ft). It is an exceptional location because you can get a mix of avifaunas from the Andes region, Amazon region, or even Llanos region (Colombia's grasslands). I started birding at 5:30 when it was still dark. However, during the first part of the morning, I got some rain that discourages bird activity. Nevertheless, throughout the next six hours, I birdwatched on this path and was able to record 53 species. Some of the species recorded during the morning are the Golden-tailed Sapphire, White-chinned Jacamar, Gilded Barbet, Spot-winged Antbird, Yellow-bellied Tanager, and Paradise Tanager. Due to local guidelines, I kept myself home the rest of the day.

**David Vander Pluym:** Currently still living in Lake Havasu City, Arizona, before making the move to Louisiana, I had an opportunity to add some southwestern U.S. specialty birds to the Big Day. My wife, also an avid birder, joined me in starting the morning scanning the north end of Lake Havasu on Arizona's "west coast" for lingering waterbirds and checking the lakeside riparian strip for breeding birds. Lingering waterbirds on the lake included Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, a new summer high count for the lower Colorado River Valley of Eared Grebes, and a Common Loon. We also had breeding Redheads with fluffy babies (only recently has this species become a regular breeder here) and Western and Clark's grebes. In the dense tamarisk and mesquite we added Greater Roadrunner, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Crissal Thrasher, and Lucy's Warbler. We also had Abert's Towhee, a widespread species in Arizona, but whose range barely reaches outside the state, primarily into the nearby Salton Sink of California. We next went to a city park to pad our day list with locally rare Inca Doves, American Robin, and Bronzed Cowbird. With the temperatures starting to climb toward the triple digits, we called it a day having added some new information about our local birdlife.

**Anna Hiller:** Like David I also spent this year's socially distanced "Big Day" in the western US, where I'm visiting my family in California. After a morning zoom meeting preparing for the LSU outreach event "Girls Virtual Road Trip to the Museum," I spent the rest of the afternoon birding locally in a transect from the pine forests of the eastern Sierra Nevadas down through the arid scrub of the Great Basin. Highlights from my front window included a White-headed Woodpecker, a pair of Green-tailed Towhees, and several Steller's Jays. There were many

Brown Creepers singing their high thin melodic song, and the “meep-meep”s of Red-breasted Nuthatches. I then drove a loop down the mountain and north towards Carson City, stopping to bird along several deserted parking lots and small fire roads in the shadow of Sierras. Despite the late start I saw brightly colored male Western Tanagers, three Lazuli Buntings, and many pumpkin orange Bullock's Orioles. With some enthusiastic pishing I observed the ever entertaining Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, as well as Brewer's Sparrows and Spotted Towhees. I ended my day along several marshes I visited last year for Global Big Day, adding Sandhill Crane (new family for the day!), Bald Eagle, Black-billed Magpie, Lesser Goldfinch, and Yellow-headed Blackbird to the list. One of these ponds even has a colony of the Endangered Tricolored Blackbird, the only site for this species in the state of Nevada. As the sun set behind the ridgeline I drove back home, serenaded by the “Chicago, Chicago!” of California Quail.

**Marky Mutchler:** Dodging zoom meetings and deadlines, I was able to spend this unnaturally cool June morning wandering my neighborhood located in northwestern Missouri. Walking a few miles, I was able to pick up several common breeding species found in suburban Kansas City. Located near where the east meets the west, and the south meets the north, species such as Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Dickcissels, and Western Kingbirds are all relatively common in my backyard. After the cool morning hike, I drove five minutes to my old high school. The school grounds are located in a more rural setting and are often home to grassland birds that likely weren't possible for other team members to find today. Scoring birds such as nesting Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Grasshopper Sparrows, Bell's Vireos, and Common Nighthawks, my short visit was a success. As the afternoon drew to a close, I had to spend much of my time inside working but did manage to spot a pair of Mississippi Kites from the window. This species, although common in Louisiana, represents a recent expansion north into Missouri and the Midwest. I spent the rest of the evening in my small backyard, painting and casually observing the pair of Gray Catbirds feasting on the last of our serviceberries. Once the mosquitos grew unbearable and the lightning bugs began to blink, I decided to call it an evening as one more nighthawk bounced by.

**Andre Moncrieff:** For the Big Day this year, I birded a few of my favorite spots close to my hometown of Berrien Springs in southwest Michigan. The first of these spots, the renowned Three Oaks sewage ponds, held several lingering Bonaparte's Gulls and lots of Purple Martins calling overhead. I then visited the “Lakeside Road bridge” hotspot on the Galien River. Here I encountered two obliging Cerulean Warblers, which waylaid my plans to also visit the nearby Warren Dunes State Park. I ended up watching and photographing these warblers for 1.5 hours—hopefully my fellow grad students will let me off the hook for getting sidetracked! Several other interesting species at the bridge included Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Parula, and Scarlet Tanager.

**Eamon Corbett:** I spent the Big Day near my hometown in suburban New York, birding at a string of parks along the coast of the Long Island Sound. I focused my efforts on tracking down marsh, shore, and ocean birds that would be challenging for my colleagues inland to

find. This strategy paid off with waterfowl like Mute Swan, American Black Duck, Bufflehead, and Greater Scaup, shorebirds including American Oystercatcher and Willet, numerous nesting Osprey, and a Marsh Wren carefully constructing its nest in the reeds. Other highlights of the day included a huge Common Raven being chased by comparatively tiny Fish Crows, a small group of introduced Monk Parakeets nesting in the lights over a baseball field, and a squadron of Wild Turkeys raiding a nature center bird feeder. A late afternoon Cliff Swallow at Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx was my final new bird, bringing my tally for the day to 70 species.

**Oscar Johnson:** Being the middle of summer in hot and humid Baton Rouge, the “Big Day” provided a good opportunity to explore some conservation areas that I had not previously visited. To that end, I spent the majority of the day birding the Kendalwood Road Conservation Area in southeastern Baton Rouge Parish, where I focused on searching for uncommon local breeding species. This effort paid off, with six species of breeding warblers including Swainson’s, Kentucky, and Prothonotary. I also found a selection of hardwood forest breeding species such as Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher that can be tough to find in the parish. A swing by the LSU Tiger Stadium around midday scored the female of a pair of American Kestrels that have a nest high on a ledge on the outside of the stadium. This species is uncommon in south Louisiana in the summer, with only a handful of summer records for the parish. All said, it was a great day to be outside and a welcome respite during quarantine.

**Matt Brady:** Much like Oscar, I took the “Socially Distanced Big Day” as an excuse to bird some local sites that I’d had my eye on but hadn’t yet visited. Recently, LSUMNS Research Associate Dan Lane and others have documented territorial Worm-eating Warblers and American Redstarts at a new Conservation Area in northeastern East Baton Rouge Parish. Neither of these species have been previously recorded as breeders in the Baton Rouge area, so I was excited for the opportunity to see them close to home. Sandy Creek Community Park is an interesting area of former pine plantation and bottomland hardwood forest that is home to a wide variety of breeding species, including Hooded, Kentucky, Prothonotary, and Swainson’s Warblers, Acadian Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, and Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireos. In addition to these expected species, I was able to locate a bright orange-and-black male American Redstart, as well as three Worm-eating Warblers, including a singing male and a territorial pair. In the afternoon, I headed a few miles west of Baton Rouge to the Atchafalaya Basin, visiting South Farm, a well-known spot for waterbirds. Here I was able to add a wide variety of species I had not seen earlier in the day, including Roseate Spoonbill, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, Little Blue Heron, both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and a distant Swallow-tailed Kite. I was hoping to see Wood Storks as well, but every big day has some misses!

**Rafael Marcondes:** Not owning a vehicle and trying to finish my dissertation make it difficult to get out to natural areas around Baton Rouge. So my humble contribution to the Big Day consisted of the 10 (!) species I observed in my routine foot-powered morning commute to

campus. Thus I added to our list such avian staples of urban Baton Rouge as Blue Jay, Downy Woodpecker, Carolina Chickadee and Northern Mockingbird.

**Subir B. Shakya:** Anybody who has visited LSU will know the LSU lakes, situated along the eastern edge of the campus. Around 5-6 miles in perimeter, the lakes are a common recreational spot for many Baton Rouge denizens, whether it be for running or for biking. As such for the Big Day, I went looking for birds around the lakes on my bicycle. While there wasn't anything too out of place this time around, the large number of ducklings, mostly Wood Ducks, just scampering around everywhere was a pleasant sight to behold. American Robins, Common Grackles, Blue Jays, and Northern Mockingbirds were common throughout the trees around the lakes. A Great Egret stalked fish over a small dam built along the golf course. Two Red-bellied Woodpeckers were fighting one another in the trees on the northeastern part of City Park Lake, a spot often called "the rookery" as it is home to many cormorants and White Ibises. Many Red-winged Blackbirds were nesting all along the sedges, cattails, and other miscellaneous flora at the edge of the lakes. Though not the most spectacular of the sites on this list, the lakes are still an important birding destination for any LSU birder.

**Jessie Salter:** This year, rather than going far afield, I used the Big Day as an opportunity to go birding in my own neighborhood, the lovely Garden District here in Baton Rouge. Though I keep an informal yard list and take note of species I see and hear as I walk my dog everyday, I realized I had never actually set out in my neighborhood with the sole purpose of observing my local birds. Having just returned to Baton Rouge after six weeks away, I started my walk with a Mississippi Kite soaring high overhead – my first for the season and always a delight to see. Mostly I encountered the usual suspects – lots of Blue Jays, Northern Cardinals, American Robins, White-winged and Mourning doves – but my slow and steady pace was rewarded with a few highlights. I finally saw the Purple Martins inhabiting my neighbor's nest box (a site I pass by everyday), and even glimpsed a few nestlings inside. On a shady oak-lined street, I watched an adorable Tufted Titmouse bounce around the branches above my head – a bird I have heard in my yard on occasion but never seen in the neighborhood. I even picked up a new bird for my neighborhood list when a Northern Flicker appeared at eye level on a tree six feet in front of me. Though I only totaled 18 species, my morning bird walk was a great reminder of how birding can change the way you see your surroundings and provide an escape in even the most seemingly mundane places.