

KEYS TO SUCCESS IN THE GREAT TEXAS BIRDING CLASSIC WEEKLONG COMPETITION

By Bill Baker

Having participated in the Great Texas Birding Classic's Weeklong tournament every year since 1997, I'd like to share some important keys to having a successful week. I experienced the agony of defeat and the thrill of victory, but after each and every year I made it a point to learn something from the experience that would make it easier to compete the following year. I must say that regardless of where my team finished at the end of the week, each year holds special memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life. So if you are contemplating getting your feet wet in the longest, the zaniest, and most challenging birding competition in the world, please consider these keys to a safe and successful week of competition.

1. PLANNING, PLANNING, AND MORE PLANNING

- a. You must keep in mind that this is not a "Big Day"! It is a "Big Week"!!
- b. Set a goal of the number of species you intend to find and identify.
- c. Have a set of Great Texas Wildlife Trail Maps and a Texas Highway map for reference.
- d. Know the rules of the competition inside and out and diligently adhere to them.
- e. Minimize miles and maximize birds. Time can be your enemy if you are not careful in planning.
- f. Even birders have to eat once in a while! Know where you can find decent fast food or bring supplies to last at least 7 days. Sure you can stop and dine in fine restaurants and stay in high-end hotels, but you will probably end up applauding others success at the end of the week if you do.
- g. A good night's sleep, (no more than 4.5 hours) can come in handy as well! Find a cheap motel with a hot shower and clean bed. Have a good idea of where you might be each night and make reservations early. You can usually change reservations 24 hours in advance if a change is needed.
- h. Keep a log book of hotel/motel phone numbers for each town that you will be passing through. You might just end up in that small town one night chasing an elusive target bird!
- i. Make sure you have your own alarm clock. Those wake-up calls don't always come when they should.
- j. Pre-determine a target list for each region of the state you will visit. Develop a route around those targets that will minimize your time spent. Keep in mind that there are many species that you will find multiple regions of the state, so don't go out of your way to find them in one particular section. Focus on those species that are exclusives for that region. It is typically habitat that marks the differences between regions, so if you miss a particular species in the Pineywoods of east Texas, you will more than likely not get that species anywhere else.
- k. Exclusives and rarities are the key to being competitive. It is very important that you get as many exclusives as possible in each region of the state that your team chooses to bird, and it is paramount to get as many of the rarities as possible. For all practical purposes, every team will get the common species found in Texas,

and most teams will get the exclusives as well. What can set you apart from the other teams is your ability to find and identify those “hard-to-find” rarities that visit Texas each spring.

2. PICK YOUR TEAM CAREFULLY: COMPATIBILITY MATTERS

- a.* Without question, team members with exceptional birding skills are preferred.
- b.* However, there are other factors that one must consider when recruiting a team to compete in the Weeklong tournament. Factors such as:
 - i.* Are all team members fully committed to a full week of competitive birding?
 - ii.* Does everyone on the team have the time to dedicate to the task at hand?
 - iii.* Are there health issues which may prevent a team member from participating?
 - iv.* Does everyone on the team have the personality to get along in a confined space under duress for 6-8 days?
- c.* Recruit members with a variety of birding skill sets if possible.
- d.* It can be very beneficial to have one or more “locals” on the team, or someone familiar with the geography and highway system of Texas. A GPS can be a handy tool to have as well.

3. PICK A PRACTICAL VEHICLE

- a.* This can be just as important as the route you choose. Remember, you will be living in this vehicle almost 20 hours per day for at least 6 straight days. In reality, it will be more like 7-8 days.
- b.* A good Weeklong vehicle not only has plenty of space for 3-4 people, but has plenty of storage space for bags of clothing, foul weather gear, ice chests, books, laptop computer, snacks, cleaning supplies, and a trash can.
- c.* Good visibility is essential. Avoid tinted windows as they can be a hindrance.
- d.* Keep Windex, or other cleaning solutions available, along with paper towels for cleaning your windows and headlights. Over time, insects will blanket your windshield and headlights and driving can be hazardous.
- e.* Multiple doors are also important for those times when those quick “jump out and jump back in” events occur.
- f.* There are times fuel efficiency might have to be compromised for storage space and comfort. Remember, you may be driving as much as 2,000 miles or more.

4. PATIENCE AND ENDURANCE

- a.* As noted, this is a **BIG WEEK**, not a Big Day. Although time is always critical and one must be prudent, be meticulous in getting every target in the region of Texas you are in, even if it takes a little extra time (within reason of course). You probably won't be back that way again. The distances involved are measured in hundreds of miles, not tens of miles.
- b.* As the competition wears on, you and your team will become very tired, irritable, hungry, and divided on what to do or where to go next.. Keep your focus on your species goal. This is not about you, but about achieving your team's goal.

- c. Although it seems the 6 days of competition will never end, they will. Get as much rest as possible, don't complain if you don't get to eat what you want, sleep where you want, sit where you want, or do what you want. Remember, this is a team sport. There is no "I" in team! (Bet you never heard that before!).

5. GOOD EQUIPMENT: BINOCULARS AND SCOPES

- a. Good quality optics can make your trip a successful one. Find a pair of binoculars that are comfortable, easy to focus, and provide you the ability to quickly and clearly view your targets.
- b. A good spotting scope is also essential to your success. There are a variety of options available at reasonable costs. Remember, this is a lifetime investment in a piece of equipment that you will come to depend on. I would suggest a minimum of 2 scopes per team. This will increase your ability to quickly view and identify targets at a great distance. All too often your target will be visible for just a brief period of time. It is essential that each team member get a chance to view these targets for confirmation of identification and to adhere to contest rules.
- c. A camera attachment and digital camera can also come in handy while using your scope. All too often one will not have enough viewing time to pay attention to all the detail needed in verifying rarities and exclusives. A good digital picture can be priceless.

6. GOOD EARS PAY DIVIDENDS

- a. The dawn chorus can be your best friend if you know your bird songs. Being able to identify species by their songs and calls can save you an immense amount of time.
- b. Additionally, there are many species that occupy dense forests and brush that can be hard to see. Learn these songs and calls or you will find yourself spending an inordinate amount of time stalking a vireo or flycatcher.
- c. At the same time, be aware that a great number of the migrants passing through Texas do not sing and you must be able to find them on your own.
- d. The bottom line here is to learn to bird by ear. Remember, birds sing so we can identify them! At least that is my opinion.

7. SCOUTING, SCOUTING AND MORE SCOUTING

- a. When you examine a map of the area to be covered during the Weeklong tournament the task can seem overwhelming, especially now that the event is statewide.
- b. First you must understand there is no way to cover all of this vast territory. Therefore you must spend some time scouting in advance to determine where you can maximize your species diversity while minimizing your miles. Take time to bird the various regions of the state prior to the count week and plan a route accordingly.
- c. Even scouting this vast area can seem a daunting task. To attack this issue it is wise to assign each team member a region to scout 1-2 weeks prior to the count week.

- d.* If you don't have time to scout each region your team plans to visit, scout what you can and depend on the reports of others through personal contacts, online postings, and other competitors.

8. FIND THOSE EXCLUSIVES AND RARITIES!

- a.* As I mentioned before, if you want to have a competitive team you must make every effort to find species that are exclusive to each region of the state you plan to bird.
- b.* Also keep your eyes peeled for rarities that commonly show up in Texas and along the coast each spring. The ability to find and identify rare species will help set your team apart from others.
- c.* Scouting is the primary strategy for ensuring that exclusives and rare birds are found.
- d.* Don't hesitate to share your information with other competitors. Remember, the real winners of the contest are the birds!

9. DIVERSITY OF HABITATS

- a.* Understanding the habitat type each species requires is a critical key to success. Knowing where to find your targets by habitat type will greatly enhance your chances of being highly competitive.
- b.* Study these requirements in advance and practice this technique during your scouting forays.
- c.* It may help to take your checklist and develop your own list of species by habitat type.

10. STAY SAFE AND BE PREPARED FOR CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

- a.* Your top priority during the Weeklong birding competition is **SAFETY**. No birding trophy or rare bird is worth risking life or limb. Drive safely and abide by the rules of the road. Because you will be both riding and hiking long distances during the week, be prepared for the following encounters:
 - i.* Texas Highway Department State Troopers – They can and will write you a ticket for violation of state traffic laws.
 - ii.* County Sheriff's Department Officers – They will also write you a ticket for traffic violations.
 - iii.* Local city law enforcement officers – They too will write you a ticket for traffic violations in their jurisdiction. Most of the small towns in Texas have a considerably lower speed limit than you will find outside the city limits. Be keenly aware of this.
 - iv.* Border Patrol – You will more than likely encounter these officers at night in the regions along the Texas-Mexico border, particularly directly along the Rio Grande River. They are very suspicious of folks driving along the Rio Grande River late at night making strange sounds while driving vehicles with the windows down.
 - v.* Rattlesnakes – These critters can be found throughout the state and can surely ruin your birding trip. So don't forget to look down from time to time. There is nothing more sobering than to be standing out in the middle

of the south Texas scrub at 5 am and hear that distinctive nervous rattle right down by your feet.

- vi. Private Lands – Always get permission in advance to enter someone's property. State laws give property owners considerable rights to defend their property.

So now that you know what to do, what are you waiting for! Sign up immediately to participate in this year's Weeklong competition. I assure you it will be an experience like no other in the birding world. It is truly a marathon, a bird race, a true survivor story of extreme birding. In reality, everyone that participates and finishes the week is a winner. You will have stories you can tell your children and grandchildren for ages to come. What other opportunity will you have to see over 300 species of birds in such a short period of time?