

2020 KENTUCKY YEAR LIST

Most of us play with year lists of one type or another. If nothing else, it motivates us on some of those days when we are feeling a bit lazy about getting out and getting some fresh air. I've always wanted to see 300 species in Kentucky during a year. It isn't such a monumental task in states surrounding us because of more birders, better habitat, and/or lots of north-south extent (IL, IN, OH). Some may remember I tried in 2013 with my friend, Eddie Huber, and we got 299 and 297, respectively.

Though I did not anticipate undertaking a KY big year during 2020, a flurry of good birds that showed up during February put it on my radar. I got lucky and got to see Jane & Pat Bell's Varied Thrush (they live five minutes away) and the Burrowing Owl showed up. Prior to that, we'd found a Spotted Towhee in Fulton County and the Western Tanager had continued from Dec 2019. That seemed to make for a pretty good start.

After not birding much during January and early February, I began trying not to miss good birds during late February. I also tried (generally unsuccessfully) to find a couple of winter birds that I might not have a chance to see late in the year. Spring migration continued to yield some nice birds including Neotropic Cormorant, Glossy and White-faced Ibis, Red-necked Grebe, Red Knot, White-winged Dove, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

Every year about the time spring migration is winding down, I get really busy on our family's farm, and that typically lasts well into August. During the summer months I was able to find or chase a few more nice birds including Sooty Tern (on Kentucky Lake as the remnants of Tropical Storm Cristobal passed by), Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and Swallow-tailed Kite (*both* in Gloria Birtell's yard in Marshall County!), and Roseate Spoonbill. This year it seemed like there was more to do than ever during late summer on the farm, but I got back to looking for year birds by mid-August when the Wood Stork appeared at the Falls of the Ohio and a Brown Pelican showed up at Doe Valley Lake. Unfortunately, the fall shorebird season was pretty dismal, and I was only able to add a couple of the regulars.

When I attempted a KY big year during 2013, the horribly unproductive period was mid-September all the way to mid-November when I didn't add a single bird. This year it was late October to late November. Besides a few winter 2019-2020 birds I missed (Black and Surf Scoters, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Pine Siskin) that showed up, the fall season produced only a few oddities; we did get lucky and flushed a couple of Yellow Rails in Henderson County during October, and a few diligent searches finally produced a Nelson's Sparrow. However, I couldn't seem to run into anything different until the last week of November. That period of unproductivity nearly burned me out, and I was going to give it one more week when I was finally able to run into Evening Grosbeaks and then found a few good birds like Northern Shrike, Black-capped Chickadee, and the returning Prairie Falcon. Those along with a lucky break on a Long-tailed Duck and a long-anticipated Great Black-backed Gull finally got me to 300 . . . whew!

A couple of nice surprises during December (Snowy Owl and Red Crossbill) kept me motivated . . . and a seemingly entire fall-long sojourn to find a Ruffed Grouse finally ended with a bird flushed on Pine Mountain December 23rd ... that made for a final total of 303 for the year

Covid certainly made 2020 a unique time to work on a state year list. During the spring I maintained a few friends in a bubble. However, when the virus became more widespread later in the year, I ended up birding by myself way too much. I particularly missed having a friend like Eddie Huber alongside; he had been there every step of the way to share good finds and commiserate over our failures throughout 2013.

Obviously someone who engages in such an endeavor leans on the local birding community for a number of finds during the year. With every passing year, eBird makes communication about unusual birds more efficient. The combination of eBird and friends who were interested in my list (thanks to all of you who I did not name above because I didn't want leave someone out) resulted in probably no fewer than 20 species being added to my list as the year unfolded.

Following are some interesting aspects to the year's pursuits, some comparing 2020 to 2013.

Seen 2013 but not 2020

Say's Phoebe (Jan)
White-winged Crossbill (Jan)
Rough-legged Hawk (Jan)
Long-eared Owl (Feb)
California Gull (Mar)
Cinnamon Teal (Mar)
Red Phalarope (May & Oct)
Anhinga (May)
Whimbrel (May & Jul)
Sabine's Gull (Sep) (299)

Seen 2020 but not 2013

Western Tanager (Jan)
Burrowing Owl (Feb)
Varied Thrush (Feb)
Pacific Loon (Feb)
Harris's Sparrow (Mar)
White-faced Ibis (May)
Bewick's Wren (May)
Red Knot (May)
Sooty Tern (Jun)
Swallow-tailed Kite (Jul)
Brown Pelican (Aug)
Wood Stork (Aug)
Yellow Rail (Oct)
Black-capped Chickadee (Nov) (303)

**Better birds seen both during
2013 and 2020 (2013 / 2020)**

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (Aug / Jun)
Long-tailed Duck (Jan / Nov)
Black Scoter (Apr / Oct)
White-winged Scoter (Feb / Jan)
Red-necked Grebe (Nov / Mar)
Western Grebe (Mar / Dec)
Ruffed Grouse (Mar / Dec)
White-winged Dove (May / May)
Black-billed Cuckoo (Jun / May)
Red-throated Loon (Feb / Jan)
Neotropic Cormorant (Mar / Apr)
Least Bittern (Apr / May)
American Bittern (Apr / Apr)
Glossy Ibis (May / May)
Roseate Spoonbill (Sep / Aug)
American Avocet (Apr / Apr)
Piping Plover (Sep / Sep)
Upland Sandpiper (Jul / Aug)
Red-necked Phalarope (May / May)
Glaucous Gull (Jan / Jan)
Great Black-backed Gull (Mar / Dec)
Rufous Hummingbird (Jan / Jan)
Golden Eagle (Jan / Jan)
Barn Owl (Jan / Jan)
Snowy Owl (Dec / Dec)
No. Saw-whet Owl (Jan / Oct)
Prairie Falcon (Dec / Nov)
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (Jun / Apr)
Northern Shrike (Jan / Nov)
Brown-headed Nuthatch (Jan / Mar)
Common Raven (Mar / Mar)
Red Crossbill (Jan / Dec)
Evening Grosbeak (Feb / Nov)
Spotted Towhee (Jan / Jan)
Lark Sparrow (Apr / Apr)
LeConte's Sparrow (Jan / Jan)
Nelson's Sparrow (Apr / Oct)
Yellow-headed Blackbird (Dec / May)
Connecticut Warbler (May / May)

Seen in KY during 2020 but not by me

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (Jul)
Magnificent Frigatebird (Sep & Nov)
Rough-legged Hawk (Nov)
Purple Gallinule (Nov)
Whimbrel (May)
Common Redpoll (Dec)
White-winged Crossbill (Nov & Dec)

**Most regularly occurring species
missed both 2013 and 2020**

Mottled Duck
Tricolored Heron
White Ibis
King Rail
Marbled Godwit
Hudsonian Godwit
Ruff
A jaeger
Little Gull
Black-legged Kittiwake
Bachman's Sparrow
Snow Bunting

Bird(s) of the year

Burrowing Owl ... I guess it would have to be the Burrowing Owl as it was a first state record and my only new state bird added during the year. However, right behind in my appreciation of them would have to be the two **Red Knots** David Roemer found at McElroy Lake in May (I've always wanted to see a spring knot in KY; boy were they pretty!) and Valerie Brown's **Bewick's Wren** (didn't think I'd ever see one again in KY).

Luckiest birds

Long-tailed Duck ... re-found a bird seen by Brian Wulker earlier in the day on Ohio River, Carroll County, after *much* effort; it was truly a needle in a haystack, but persistence and lucky timing helped!

Sooty Tern ... happened to see the flash of a distant one on a scan of Ky Lake during passage of T.S. Cristobal's remnants in June with Mark Monroe; only had it in view for a few minutes; if I hadn't seen the flash of white when I did probably would have totally missed it.

Biggest disappointments

** Can't find a King Rail in KY any more (this was also lamented during 2013)

** Rough-legged Hawks are no longer regular (I knew it might even be tough during 2013 but since then it has become even rarer)

** Couldn't find *anything* during passage of remnants of Hurricane Laura despite good birds being found nearby in TN and MO

** Again this year, no rarer hummingbirds showed up

** Two of my favorite groups, shorebirds and gulls, were a disappointment overall; got all the regular shorebirds, but mostly during spring and missed *both* species of godwits again (similar to 2013). Especially the fall shorebird migration was nearly a bust with nothing but the regulars being found. Roseanna's September Piping Plover -- at a spot where I'd never in a million years look for one -- was the lone highlight. Only the December Great Black-backed Gull at the Calvert City landfill was a decent gull find during the year (2013 yielded California and Sabine's). Also not a single report of a jaeger this year . . .

Most ardent searches

Upland Sandpiper ... I went all over looking for this species when I had time during July and August.

Finally heard (only) three single migrants over Open Pond one morning.

Ruffed Grouse ... my quest for a grouse didn't really begin until late October; Scott Freidhof said they could sometimes be heard drumming on nice days in fall, so I went a few places in hopes of hearing one (no luck). I finally got serious and searched on Pine Mountain near Kingdom Come SP and kicked one up the last week of December *right* where Scott had flagged a point where he'd kicked one up during a hunting trip in 2007 or 2008 (at least 12 years ago!). The grouse search did take me to some places I hadn't been in several years as well as some new spots. It also got me back in touch with a couple of old friends from my days in state government. It would have been a sore miss, but very satisfying getting a glimpse of one *finally.*

Prairie Falcon ... because I wasn't really thinking about a big year during the first month and a half of 2020, I didn't go look for the Prairie Falcon until everyone else had "ticked" it during January. I searched several times during February and early March with no luck. However, on my second or third fall trip to Frostburg Road, there is was on one of the new metal poles.