

# IOS Lister's Corner 2009

## Year Lists: 2009 & Alltime Big Years

If 2008's record amount of Big Year tallies were unexpected, this year's were record-breaking, unprecedented and completely remarkable. At least four birders tied or exceeded the former Illinois Big Year record, set in 2004. Keith McMullen, Pete Moxon, Bob Fisher and Jeff Skrentny all deserve pats on their backs for a year well done! And the top two have moved the annual record up nearly 3% from the old record!

Along with the amazingly top tallies, there were at least 12 birders who passed the 300 mark (with rumors of even more), breaking last years record of eight. It may take another year or two to evaluate the last two years of eye-popping 300+ tallies. Are birders becoming more skilled, more knowledgeable about bird habitat, experts in annual Big Year planning or should one attribute the recent year tally increases to advances in communication? One can't help but feel there may be at least half a dozen 300+ tallies annually from this point onward. With the amazing number of rare, documentation-worthy species reported this year, it's possible that various tallies could be modified after IORC voting results are made publicly available.

**Key:** • = list submitted

*(updated 8/23/10; compiled by Eric Walters & Joe Lill)*

### 2009 Illinois Year List

330	Keith McMullen
330	Pete Moxon
325	Bob Fisher
322	Jeff Skrentny
317	Michael Baum
312	Jeff Smith
311	Mike Madsen
309	Jeffrey Sanders
306	Karen Fisher
305	Rob Erickson
305	Greg Neise
<u>305</u>	<u>Eric Walters</u>
297	Craig Taylor
295	Alan Stokie
294	David B. Johnson
294	Tim Kuesel
289	Douglas Stotz
285	Dan Williams
280	Joe Lill
280	Jim Mountjoy
277	Thad Edmonds
274	Beau Schaefer
265	Eric Secker
263	Urs Geiser
263	Geoffrey A. Williamson
261	John McKee
258	Darrell Shambaugh
257	Maury Brucker
255	Matthew Cvetas
255	Travis Mahan
255	Brian C. Smith
252	Ted Hartzler
<u>251</u>	<u>Jeff Sundberg</u>
247	Vernon Kleen
245	Bob Carper
232	Cindy Alberico
225	Jeff Thomas
223	Christine Williamson

222	John Longhenry
218	Anthony Friend
208	Bill Reddinger
171	Nathan Goldberg
169	Todd Anderson

### Alltime Big Year Lists (over 300)

330	Keith McMullen	2009•
330	Pete Moxon	2009•
325	Bob Fisher	2009•
322	Bob Fisher	2004•
322	Jeff Skrentny	2009•
320	Andy Sigler	2008•
318	Keith McMullen	2007•
318	Dan Kassebaum	2008•
318	Mark Seiffert	2008•
317	Bruce Heimer	2008•
317	Michael Baum	2009•
316	Robert Chapel	1996•
316	Karen Fisher	2004•
315	Robert Chapel	2000•
314	Kevin Richmond	1986•
314	Alan Stokie	2003•
314	Keith McMullen	2004•
312	Jeff Smith	2009•
311	Keith McMullen	2008•
311	Mike Madsen	2009•
310	Louise Augustine	1986•
310	Alan Stokie	2004•
309	Eric Walters	1990•
309	Dan Kassebaum	1996•
309	Robert Chapel	1998
309	Michael Retter	1999•
309	Travis Mahan	2003•
309	Alan Stokie	2005•
309	Jeffrey Sanders	2009•
308	Richard Biss	1978
308	Dan Kassebaum	2007•
307	Tom Pucelik	1983

306	Robert Chapel	1999
306	Adam Reyburn	1999
306	Keith McMullen	2000
306	Robert Chapel	2001
306	Jeffrey Sanders	2008•
306	Karen Fisher	2009•
305	Kevin Richmond	1985
305	Robert Chapel	1995•
305	Dan Kassebaum	2003•
305	Craig Taylor	2008
305	Rob Erickson	2009
305	Greg Neise	2009•
305	Eric Walters	2009
304	Dan Kassebaum	2000•
303	Robert Chapel	1997
303	Keith McMullen	2001
303	Keith McMullen	2006
302	Louise Augustine	1988•
302	Eric Walters	1989
302	Eric Secker	2004
302	Keith McMullen	2005
302	Jeffrey Sanders	2005•
301	Myrna Deaton	1988
301	Todd Fink	1994
301	Keith McMullen	2003
301	Mike Madsen	2005•
300	Myrna Deaton	1994
300	Keith McMullen	1999•
300	Alan Stokie	1999
300	Keith McMullen	2002
300	Bob Fisher	2008

### Most 300+ Illinois Big Years

This new list documents historical tallies of over 300 annual species. The late Bob Chapel long ago set a challenging standard of seven years over 300.

But Keith's ongoing annual adventures, with no signs of him slowing down, have put the former record in the rear view mirror.

(3 minimum)

11	Keith McMullen
7	Robert Chapel
5	Dan Kassebaum
4	Alan Stokie
3	Bob Fisher
3	Jeffrey Sanders
3	Eric Walters

### Progression of the IL Big Year Record

75+	Robert Kennicott	c.1855
100+	F. Dayton	c.1895
117	Herbert & Alice Walter	1897
162+	Benjamin T. Gault	c.1925
170	William Dreuth	1932
182	William Dreuth	1933
187	William Dreuth	1937
203	William Dreuth	1938
225+	Charles C. Clark	c.1960
241	Betty & Harry Shaw	1970
290	Larry Balch	1971
308	Richard Biss	1978
314	Kevin Richmond	1986
316	Robert Chapel	1996
322	Bob Fisher	2004
330	Keith McMullen	2009
330	Pete Moxon	2009

### 2009: The Biggest of Big Years

2009 entered on the heels of the alltime best statistical Big Year on record with no hint that the year would eclipse the records of 2008. A number of birders began their year with personal plans of attempting to exceed 300 species, including Keith McMullen, Pete Moxon and Bob Fisher. Jeff Skrentny's initial plan was to simply add state life birds, but after a nice start to the year, he later decided to join the fray.

For Bob Fisher the year started with the chasing of a vagrant in Ogle County yard, where an overwintering Spotted Towhee was observed. It was a good omen for him as his state-record 2004 Big Year also started with this same vagrant. Not long after, on January 11th, White-winged Crossbills began a massive invasion into Illinois, with large groups of Common Redpolls following a few weeks later. Included in the redpoll invasion was the rare Hoary visiting a Chicago Botanic Gardens feeder, giving birders ample opportunities to list all three species by mid-February. It was less than two months into the new year and things were starting out well!

Early Spring vagrants are typically waterfowl-related, so it came as a surprise when, in one Champaign field, a Bewick's Wren, a Harris' Sparrow and a Le Conte's Sparrows were discovered. Bob and Karen Fisher had the great fortune to log this rarity trifecta, leading some folks to think that, perhaps, this year could exceed the previous record year. When rare birds typically associated with summer (the wren) and fall (both sparrows) show up early in the year, it's prudent for Big Year listers to try and get them so as to avoid being put in the vulnerable spot of missing them later in the year. Another benefit is that one can spend their time in the fall chasing missing species instead of these earlier-found rarities.

Another key sign that it will be a good Big Year was that there were multiple appearances of certain vagrant species. For example, there were two or more Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropic Cormorants, Barrow's Goldeneyes, Brown Pelicans, California Gulls, Bewick's Wrens and Spotted Towhees located during the year, giving listers multiple tries at normally hard-to-get species.

Other important elements to a Big Year are the latter Spring vagrants. 2009 didn't have an abundance of these, but the Stephenson County Golden-crowned Sparrow and the downstate Tropical Kingbird each remained for days and, as a result, many birders added these to their year's tally. One of the dynamics of Big Years are the interesting situations and fond memories that arise. For example, the Fishers had to walk out into a farm field while absorbing good-natured ribbing from a nearby pipeline crew who wondered why they came so far to see the Tropical Kingbird. Bob's indelible image from that day was of his wife Karen and Sue Friscia sitting on camp stools, scopes in hand, in the midst of this pipeline crew and their trucks.

The result of the winter's rare species, along with the early spring records of rarities typically found much later in the year, some listers were closing in on 300 species by late May. Pete Moxon was well over 290 by mid-May, with others hot on his trail. Moxon made a special effort to get to 300 before the end of May, and the combination of Brown Pelican, Western Kingbird and Red-necked Grebe during the last two days of May got him to his target. It was at this point that Jeff Skrentny joined the chase and, although sitting much further behind at around 260 species, he had plenty of regulars species to clean up that would, potentially, help him catch up to the others.

Typically, early summer is left for rest and recovery before the second-half sprint to the end. However, 2009 offered continued excitement with the lingering Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in Madison County. Later that month, Skrentny almost convinced his birding buddies to forego the extra time it would take to return to examine a strange cormorant in Lake County, but it was a good thing they turned around, as a Neotropic Cormorant was a great June addition to a Big Year list!

Topping those two species was the early July discovery of a Royal Tern at LaSalle Lake to kick off the second half of the Big Year. The Fishers received a timely afternoon phone call which allowed them to record this exciting species, while Skrentny received the sighting info during afternoon rush-hour traffic, creating a temporary hesitation regarding whether or not to make the chase. But things soon took a 'tern' for the better, and a few hours later he had his binocs on this vagrant. The second half of the Big Year had started with a bang!

The end of July was as profitable for McMullen as early July was for others. Relocating the Carlyle Lake

Neotropic Cormorant on July 30th made up for missing the Lake County bird earlier in the year. But that day wasn't over: soon after a thunderstorm had passed he noticed a large pinkish wading bird flying over heading in a general northerly direction - a Roseate Spoonbill! Not only was he ecstatic over that find, but also it was his 300th species for the year! As it turns out it was a 2009 Big Year trend, with four birders getting to 300 faster than the former alltime record.

August offered a number of options to catch the larger rare shorebirds, but only Moxon and Skrentny bagged the rarest passerine of the month at Montrose (a Lark Bunting).

September was a special month for all the top listers. The well-known Carlyle Pelagic boat and field trip led to views of hard-to-list species such as Red Knot, Red Phalarope, Western Sandpiper and Whimbrel. A Roseate Spoonbill (possibly the same one found 2 months prior by McMullen) was present nearby a few days later. Skrentny finally breached the 300 species threshold during this month, now only about 15 species behind the top two tallies. Meanwhile, further north at Lake Shelbyville, the Fishers and McMullen were searching for a rare shorebird when a large falcon flew over, which Bob presumed was just a Peregrine. However, the others present took a closer look and to their delight the bird 'morphed' into a Prairie Falcon. This situation highlighted an ever-present theme of the year, that all the listers received essential help from others' rare bird reports (and in this case an immediate vagrant report from which Bob benefited). By the end of September the top listers were in the vicinity of 315 for the year, so the former record of 322 was definitely threatened, especially since there were still three months left in the year.

October had a double blessing on the same day, with a Purple Sandpiper located at Waukegan and then, even better, an adult Glaucous-winged Gull Skrentny and company identified at Lake County's Northpoint Marina. The sandpiper didn't stay long, but the gull obliged all the top listers by posing for hours on the beach. For those who had missed on Tundra Swan, scoters, Goshawk and Golden Eagle for the year, the IBSP Hawkwatch and nearby lakefront provided species cleanup opportunities. These actually pushed McMullen's tally up to the former state record of 322, so it was now just a formality the old record would be broken. The new question was how many birders would pass that threshold and what would be the final species tally?

November typically offers a number of rare birds, but only Skrentny was able to list the rarest vagrant of the month, Illinois' second Sage Thrasher record, seen at Chicago's Northerly Island. Moxon helped identify a Pacific Loon at Carlyle Lake to help keep his tally near the top. At mid-month, Fisher was still well off his

former 2004 state record tally with him thinking he had no chance at even getting close to it....

December usually has little to offer in the early part of the month as fall migration is basically over. One typically hopes for some vagrants to be found on the latter part of the month CBC's. However, perhaps not surprising in this truly amazing year, early December had many rare birds to try and chase down. If it wasn't the Brant and Barrow's Goldeneye in Peoria, it was the Black-legged Kittiwake at Clinton Lake or the Jersey County Rufous Hummingbird (McMullen's species #327). The number of rarities almost made it seem like the peak of migration! But on December 6th, in one of the year's most amazing afternoons of birding, Skrentny and company discovered Purple Sandpiper at Waukegan, Pacific Loon at IBSP and Western Grebe at Northpoint Marina - besting their double-blessing October trip (and moving Skrentny up to 317 species)! Many others were able to see these species, joining in their excitement.

Rarities were raining down during early December at an unprecedented rate. But would it last till the end of the year? Skrentny was birding midmorning in Randolph County when he and Greg Neise took valuable time to stop and look through the massive blackbird flocks. To their shock, a female Great-tailed Grackle stepped out from among the throng! Termed "the surprise bird of the year" by Skrentny, another December vagrant had graced the state. Minutes later, McMullen hears his phone ring and upon answering hears Neise on the other side, saying, "Keith, we've got a Great-tailed Grackle in Randolph County. Thought you might want to know." This rarity is only a 40 minute drive away, but McMullen had decided to hang up his binoculars on his Big Year chase with his remarkable 329 species tally. Furthermore, as anybody who has tried would know, trying to find a large grackle amongst a roving flock of over 5000 other grackles isn't exactly a guarantee. However, after five more minutes and three other calls of from birders around the state encouraging him to give it a try, it was down to his wife's input.... Before he could even ask her, she asked him, "Aren't you going to go look for that bird?" So, off on his last adventure of his Big Year and within an hour later, he had relocated the grackle and pushed up his year tally to 330!

Meanwhile, back up in Northern Illinois, the big news was a Varied Thrush being intermittently seen at a feeder. A number of birders had tried and missed it in the prior week. Yet, perhaps not surprising in this most surprising of Big Years, the thrush decided to make numerous public appearances on the last day of the year, allowing Skrentny, Moxon and Fisher to add one last species for the year. And so the Big Year ended for the Bob Fisher, replicating the exact way it started: enjoying birding fellowship while watching a vagrant bird in a yard in Ogle County. The honor of adding the final new species of the year fell to Pete Moxon, who managed to see the thrush as the last daylight of 2009 faded away.

When the numbers were finally in, as it currently stands, at least four birders either tied or passed the former state record, while pushing the new state benchmark to 330 species, a tally that could take many years to break. On the other hand, as many of the top listers noted, with the high-tech communication methods such as Sue Friscia's IBET and Greg Neise's IBF, rare bird sightings can now be relayed and acted on within minutes. That fact, along with prior Big Year experience, the planning out of scheduled chases for rare birds, and the ability for some to chase at a moment's notice, certainly has led to the record tallies of 2009 and will likely be needed for any reasonable attempt at breaking the new state Big Year record in the future. Let the chasing begin!