

## My “Big Day” attempt May 1<sup>st</sup> 2004 – Dylan

I have been involved in day listing (attempting to identify, by sight and/or sound, as many bird species as possible within a 24-hour period) since 1994. May is the month when the number of species available, is at its’ peak. Newly arrived summer migrants setting up territories, thus in full song and yet a few tardy winter visitors awaiting their departure to the north. Added to that, the resident species are well into their breeding activities, thus can be relied upon to be in certain areas; adds up to the recipe for a successful sojourn into the field. Oh! I nearly forgot, the best laid plans etc... the notoriously fickle English weather can always put a spanner in the works. On Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004, all of these factors came into play.

As I said, I have been partaking in May “Big Day” events since 1994, what I have failed to explain is that, all bar one, they have been non-motorised. I use a bicycle. It’s environmentally friendly and also means that I don’t have to retrace my steps going back to a parked vehicle. My mileage has risen from 58 in 1994 to 90+ in 2004. My species tally has also risen from a very modest 109 to a much more respectable 121. Over the years the combined number of species recorded tops 170, so if all the factors fall into place a total of 130 should be possible.

As the Sandwich Church clock struck midnight I recorded my first bird when a Lapwing called out in the dark. Four minutes later and the bird I had come for, a Grasshopper Warbler, commenced its’ monotonous rattle and I was off to a great start. An Oystercatcher “piped” far off and a Sedge Warbler sang from a reeded ditch. Moorhen, Little Grebe and Mallard were all recorded before I set off, across the Ash Levels, heading for Grove Ferry. A Nightingale sang from thick cover by Richborough and a Little Owl called, in response to my whistles, at Guston. Woodpigeons clattered out of their roost site as I cycled under some tall trees near Elmstone and a Cetti’s Warbler was heard near the Blue Bridge. I arrived at Grove Ferry at 01.30 and sat on the ramp for a short coffee break.

As I made my way towards Stodmarsh, Water Rail, Greylag, Reed Warbler, Coot, Cuckoo, Redshank, Canada Goose, Mute Swan & Common Tern all made it onto the lengthening list. Cycling through Trenley Park Wood, a brief stop in a gateway allowed me to goad a Tawny Owl into responding to my feeble attempt at a call. It can’t have been so bad, as the Owl actually flew into the tree above my head! Passing the barracks, Blackbird and Robins sang under the streetlights and further down the hill a Song Thrush had joined in. I hate the hill out of Canterbury that takes you up to Blean. Every year I push my bike up past St Edmund’s and the College, Police cars slow down, see that it’s a nutter with binoculars round his neck, then speed off into the night! Have you ever tried to explain to an officer of the law why you need binoculars, even if it is dark? The RSPB Reserve at Church Woods was reached by 04.15hrs and, almost immediately, I record a Woodcock flying overhead uttering a mixture of grunts and squeaks that pass as it’s song. Another cup of coffee and the long wait for dawn.

At 04.51 a cock Pheasant greeted the day and, as the light began to grow the woods became alive to the various sounds that constitute the “dawn chorus”. By the time I left the woods at 06.35 my list had reached 53 species. Almost all of the target species had been “ticked” with the exception of Nuthatch and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. This is the second year that these two have failed to appear for me. The real bonus, however, was the discovery of a singing male Spotted Flycatcher, so I can’t complain really. As much as I hate the hill whilst I’m going up, coming back down into Canterbury is exhilarating. Speeding down the hill I recorded Feral Rock Dove (pretentious name for Street Pigeon), Goldfinch, Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gull. I arrive at my rendezvous with Grey Wagtail just in time to see the male fly to the nest site and the female fly out to join him. Both perching on a small riverside ledge to be admired. If only they were all so obliging.

Swifts, high up over the Cathedral were species number 59. I arrived at the Café door as the owner was unlocking. Never were a fresh coffee and a bacon sandwich more welcome. I got back underway by 07.20, heading along the new cycle track that leads to Fordwich. The skies had been overcast for most of the time I’d been out, but now the ominous sound of thunder accompanied the darkening clouds. I managed to add Rook and Common Whitethroat before the first drops of rain started. A Hobby flashed through Fordwich village as the rain intensified and by the time I reached the fishing lake, I was soaked. Great Crested Grebe and Swallow were new additions, but the rain ruined any chance of several other species. I took shelter for a few minutes then, as the rain eased made my way on towards Trenley Park Wood adding Reed Bunting, Grey Heron, Gadwall and Cormorant. Lady Luck then smiled, scanning across the Trout Lake, 3 Common Terns had a stunning Arctic Tern for company.

I left the lakes and continued up through Trenley Park Wood to join the Stodmarsh Road. A Jay called as I passed by. The sun began to shine and a Grey Partridge scurried away as I stopped to scan across to Collard’s Lake. Things became a little surreal as I slowly pedalled on towards the village. A Corn Bunting sang from a hawthorn hedge and was joined by a pair of Yellow Wagtails, then in quick succession, single Fieldfare and Common Snipe flew directly overhead, calling loudly! Linnet, Yellowhammer and House Martin were also recorded before I turned onto the track that leads to the Stodmarsh NNR carpark. My total was now up to 78 species. I had arranged to meet Ross Crates here at 09.30hrs, so I had a few minutes to grab another coffee and have a quick scout around. Bumping into Brendan Ryan, we had time to compare notes before Ross arrived in the carpark, having cycled over from Herne Bay.

Ross and I then pushed our bikes around the reserve, via the Lampern Wall and the riverbank, to Grove Ferry. Shelduck, Shoveler, Kingfisher, Bearded Tit, Sand Martin, Marsh Harrier, Teal, Ruff, Skylark, Lesser Whitethroat and a fly over Greenshank were all new additions before we reached Harrison’s Drove. A male Ruddy Duck, a target species here, was seen on the first pool. Sparrowhawks are notoriously difficult during their breeding season, so I was really grateful when one flew low over the reeds as we scanned from the new hide. Just time for a quick chat with John Cantelo and co before we continued on to the ramp and four more new species, Pochard, Pied Wagtail, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers.

Our route then took us north to Reculver. We passed through Chislet and along the lane through Marshside, where another bonus bird awaited. As we passed a large gated property, I heard a Wood Warbler singing. Ross and I stopped and watched the bird, high up in the canopy of a mature sycamore. We were enjoying fantastic views when the Lady of the house, and several dogs, approached us enquiring if we had stopped to purchase any eggs? When we explained that there was a Wood Warbler singing in her front garden she replied that she also had five Peacocks wandering the gardens as well.

Kestrel and Tufted Duck were added as we passed Brooke Farm with a Wheatear at the Towers and 2 Curlews flying past taking my total to 100 species at 12.28hrs. The cycle track alongside the Oyster Farm allowed slow progress as Meadow Pipit, Dunlin, Black-headed Gull, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper and Little Egret meant that we made frequent stops. The rest of the journey across to Minnis Bay added only Great Black-back, Sandwich Tern, Turnstone and Sanderling. A stop at the Café gave my legs, and back, a rest. My scope and backpack were really starting to get uncomfortable. We then followed the coast to reach Foreness and North Foreland. With hindsight this was an awful waste of effort. The tides were all wrong and we only managed to add Rock Pipit, Fulmar and Gannet. The Purple Sandpiper that we had hoped for were out amongst the rocks somewhere and not found.

We called in at my home to allow me to dump my backpack and grab a quick drink before we headed down into Ramsgate Harbour. After a real struggle, we located the female Eider and then headed onwards to Pegwell Bay. Gadget had been in the area since 16.00hrs; we arrived at 17.30hrs to the news of a ring-tailed Hen Harrier seen an hour ago. The only additions we managed in the next 90 minutes were Whimbrel, Common Gull, Peregrine and Knot. My day total was now at 120 species, so a phone call from SBBOT with news of an Avocet on the new scrape was catalyst to us pedalling along the cycle track to see the bird and allow me to equal my best ever total. We made a half-hearted attempt at locating a Whinchat, failing dismally, then called it a day at 200.00hrs.

Back at the Obs, I put my bike up on the car-rack and cracked open a can of 1664. Ross had a cup of tea! I would like to thank Ross for his company and support during the day, the Obs Bods for the bonus snippets (and the beer) and Gadget for staking out Pegwell Bay. It was a great day but I have a feeling that I would have done better had I attempted it later in the month. Once I've recovered from this bout of madness I might have another bash mid month?