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Of all the many arcane and weird rituals indulged in by birders, none is more strange than the "century run." At the peak of the spring migration, which is, in the northeast, around the middle of May, a group of birders will attempt to record sightings of more than one hundred species of birds in a single day. Some strict conservatives insist that each bird must be seen and identified by at least two members of the group in order to be counted. Others will accept a bird which is seen by one member but flies away before anyone else can see it, or will accept records based on sound only. This makes it easier to find an owl, which is easy to hear but hard to see in the dark, and also to record birds during the dawn chorus even though they are not visible. Such elusive but noisy singers as the white-eyed vireo can thus be recorded by voice alone, if the song or call is sufficiently distinctive to make it impossible to mistake it.

Technically, the period of the century run is from midnight to midnight, but most birders will settle for a 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. start, and a final tally at around nine or ten at night. Of course, when different teams are contesting for the greatest count, they may choose to use the whole twenty-four hours, in the hope of out-counting their competitors. A 3 a.m. start, however, gives ample time to record several owls, and to then hear the dawn chorus at its fullest. In the evening, the night flight of the woodcock or the ovenbird can be recorded as soon as it is dark, which will certainly have occurred by 10 p.m.

If you are the typical non-birder, or even a beginning birder, the idea of seeing or hearing a hundred species in one day may seem an impossible goal. You probably don't even know a hundred birds, including those that you see only in winter at your feeders. Actually, the record number is much higher than 100; at last report, it was about 230 species. There are a number of mind-numbing century runs like the Montezuma Muck Race in central New York and the World Series of Birding along the Atlantic coast in New Jersey and adjacent areas, when several teams vie for prizes and would consider a mere hundred species an abject failure.

In theory, I should have participated in my first century run in 1941, when I was a freshman and was taking the beginning ornithology course. However, during that year I was working about 35 hours a week, and much of that time was of necessity on Sunday, so I had to pass up on the century run that year. In 1942, I was living near campus and working fewer hours, so it was possible for me to join the group. It occurred on May 16, and I was a member of a group consisting of Harold Axtell, who figures prominently in a later chapter, his wife, Rachel, also an accomplished birder, Herbert Bleich, Norman Levardsen, also freshmen, and me, the least knowledgeable and possibly most eager of the group.

Both Norm and I hoped that some of Harold's birding expertise would rub off on us before the day ended.

In the standard mode, we assembled at the chilly pre-dawn hour of 3:00 a.m. Our first stop was at a known screech owl territory, where Harold was able to whistle up our first bird of the day. (Screech owls do not screech. They whistle, in an eerie sort of way; they bark like a small dog; but they don't screech. Nor do they hoot.) Encouraged by our first success, we drove to a wooded valley some miles away where, by 4:00 a.m., the first voices of the dawn chorus were beginning to be heard. We sorted out the song sparrows, various thrushes and warblers, and by 5:00 a.m. we had a goodly list. This was followed by a futile search for an upland sandpiper, which managed to escape visual identification, but which made our list (Harold's, at least) because his very sensitive ears detected its distant song, which the rest of us couldn't hear.

I will not bore you with a full account of the day's activities, which covered some two hundred miles of driving and eighteen or nineteen of the twenty-four hours allotted. From Ithaca, we drove north along the east shore of Cayuga Lake to a state preserve called Howland's Island, then to the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, and back down the west side of the lake to Ithaca. I was not keeping a life list at that time, so I can't tell you how many birds I saw or heard for the first time, but there were many. My personal list was 116 species, and I'm sure Harold's was a good bit more.

Among my memories of that day, one of the most vivid was of a bird I didn't see. Along toward evening, we stopped beside a wet field where, Harold had been told, a sedge wren, then called the short-billed marsh wren, might be heard. We pulled off beside the road and parked, and from somewhere off in the field came an undistinguished series of chirps and chatters which Harold assured us was the desired species. We all dutifully checked it off on our lists, but

it was many years before I could honestly place it on my life list. From time to time I heard one again, but I was nearly eighty years old before I actually saw one well enough to identify it without being told what it was. That occurred when a colony of several pairs was found in two adjacent fields only a couple of miles from my home.

It was after ten p.m. when Harold dropped me off at my rooming house, exhausted but happy after my first experience with that particular rite of passage. Six months later, I would be in the Army and off to the war, and it was five years before I could participate in another century run: one in which Harold Axtell also participated, but which is the subject of another chapter.