

Birding Classic Big Day Regional Tournament Strategy

By John Arvin

There are very different strategies involved in competing in the Statewide Weeklong tournament versus one of the Regional Big Day tournaments. Most of my advice is about planning your route and timing based on over a dozen years participating in the Regional Big Day tournaments. [Bill Baker's Weeklong Tournament tips](#) covered those considerations that require thought and are true for any type of birding competition – choosing your team mates, hotel reservations, meals, vehicle, optics, field guide(s) and other reference materials, so review those tips well before your Big Day. Good luck, and have a fun day.

1. Scout, scout, and scout some more!

No matter how many times you have visited a location in your life, there is no substitute for having been there yesterday. Also take advantage of whatever information is floating around, be it from chats with other birders, the internet, or telephone Rare Bird Alerts (RBAs).

2. Review and practice your team's route.

Go over your route as many times as possible, visiting the places at the same time of day that you will be there on the day of competition. You can always find a singing Botteri's Sparrow on the coastal prairie in the calm just after sunrise, but try it at 3:00 on a hot, windy afternoon.

3. Weather happens – be prepared.

Don't worry about the weather because it is beyond your control, but do be prepared for it. Monitor the last available forecast and be sure that all team members have the required clothing and other gear necessary to keep going through whatever weather you are blessed with. Weather can also affect your schedule. For example, if a windy day is forecast, try to arrange your itinerary so that you are at places where trees break the wind at the time of day when birds are most vocal and winds are usually the lightest. If your team is flexible on tournament dates, you can also now change your tournament day on the fly and choose a different day if the weather changes suddenly. Your tournament day must happen within the April 15 – May 15 dates.

4. Learn your birds.

If there are species on your route with which you have little experience, be sure to learn as much as you can about them well before hand, and that includes listening to recordings of their voices until it is well engrained in your memory, being familiar with your field guide(s), and reviewing all available resources available online.

5. Remember that every bird counts as one on your list.

It is tempting to put extraordinary effort into seeing the rare and special, but if the time invested causes you to miss 3 or 4 more common species then that special bird actually lowers your total score.

6. Cell phone and contact numbers are incredibly useful.

Have a cell phone and be sure to have the numbers for every birder friend you know in the area in case you need to ask directions, gate combinations, order food ahead so you can pick it up on the fly, etc.

7. Start with a hit list of species for your region.

Make a checklist of every species that you think there is a realistic chance of finding on your route. Rank the “cannot miss” species as 1, the “probably get” species as 2, the “what luck!” species as 3, and the “wildcards” (very outside possibility as 4). Then plan for groups 1-3. By its very nature Group 4 cannot be what you use to plan your day.

8. Make the night hours count.

The long hours of darkness between midnight and sunrise must produce or they waste a large portion of your day. You need to get the nightbirds during this time because you are unlikely to have sufficient time after dark in the evening. Also you are likely to end your daylight hours at a location far from where nightbirds that you haven't seen might be found (often on the other side of your region from where you started the day).

9. Make the night hours count, part II.

Those hours between midnight and first light can produce more than nightbirds and this is important. Any species normally active during daylight hours that can be picked up in the dark at roost sites or wetlands (waterbirds frequently forage nocturnally), even common species, will reduce the time you would otherwise have to spend on them during the day, which is rushed enough as it is. Don't spend your nighttime hours sitting listening, drinking coffee, and waiting for daylight.

10. Maximize the most important time of day.

The most important hour of the day is a half hour before sunrise to a half hour after. You must plan your day to be at a really prime location where bird diversity is high. Observers with a good knowledge of the bird songs of the area can easily pick up a significant portion of their total day's list in that hour. The two following hours are important also, especially for land birds, so don't plan extensive travel during this period.

11. Plan your route carefully to coincide with typical bird activity.

Plan your route so that you are traveling during the slow hours of the early and mid afternoon, but plan it so that you can pick up species along the shortest route between your starting and ending points with little or no deviation from that straight line.

12. Make the most of the second most important period of the day.

Maximize the time from about 4:00 p.m. until dark. For the three coastal regions (Upper, Central, and Lower Texas Coast) – Most routes, regardless of which section of the coast teams compete, end the day on the immediate coast. If your day has been spent birding for landbirds and fresh water waterbirds your list will surge forward when you arrive on the coast so be sure to leave as much time as possible. Plan on arriving by 4:00 at a minimum, but 3:00 is better. These can be very full hours indeed with the coastal species plus this is the time of day that trans-Gulf migrants typically arrive on the coast.

13. Utilize the twilight hours to their best potential.

Twilight can be important, especially for nocturnal or semi-nocturnal species like night-herons, bitterns, and rails. If you do happen to be in a location with nightbirds they are typically most vocal just before total darkness.