

May 31, 2005

## Scouring the county for birds

As we quietly got out of the car into the cool, dark morning, the night sounds of the University Road wetland offered up the first species of the day. A catbird was meowing, swamp sparrows trilling and tree swallows chattering in the pre-dawn darkness. Then, in response to a tape recording of a sora rail, both a sora and a Virginia rail answered back within seconds. It was only 4:15 a.m. and our 2005 Bailie Birdathon was off to an auspicious start.

Birdathons are held across Canada in May to raise money for Bird Studies Canada. The money is used to support programs that advance the understanding and conservation of wild birds and their habitat. A birdathon is also a test of a birder's skills, combining hard work, fun and an ability to ignore fatigue. For Bill McCord, Mitch Brownstein and myself, our goal was to try to see or hear 120 different species over the course of one day, May 21st, by visiting as many habitat types within Peterborough County as possible. Because the weather has been quite cool this spring, migration has been slow. We were hoping that some early-May migrants like white-crowned sparrows may still be lingering in the area. This did not turn out to be the case, however.

Heading south, our second stop was the Squirrel Creek Conservation Area. By driving with the windows down, we had been able to hear and identify a half dozen additional species. Stopping at our favorite screech owl location, Bill immediately announced "great horned owl calling." The owl was quite close and its gentle "who's awake...me too" call was quite lovely against the dim glow on the eastern horizon. In the background, the dawn chorus was warming up nicely, dominated by the voices of wood thrushes, veeries and displaying American woodcocks. Although we were unable to entice a screech owl into responding to a tape, the great horned was a worthy consolation species and an unexpected bonus to our list.

Arriving at Herkimer Point near Hiawatha at sunrise, our list stood at 36 species. At dawn, new bird calls come fast and furious as song reaches its zenith. It's hard to keep up with all the new voices. Against a raucous backdrop of yellow warblers, yellowthroats and Baltimore orioles, we strained our ears to make out the deep, pumping sound of an American bittern and the trumpeting of a sandhill crane. However, as our ears adjusted to the cacophony of sound, we quickly added species such as scarlet tanager, American redstart, magnolia warbler and chestnut-sided warbler. Leaving Herkimer, our list had grown by 19 species.

A drive through Hiawatha village also turned out to be quite productive. Warbling vireos were calling all along the main road as were orioles. We had a great look a male scarlet tanager sitting right out in the open. It had responded to the "pishing" noise I had been making to attract birds. At least four species of warbler had also come in to investigate the sound and offered up great views. It was interesting to note the number of homes with nectar feeders, many of which were attracting orioles. In fact, we must have seen or heard at least 50 orioles over the course of the day.

It was 7:00 a.m., and with 62 species under our belts, we headed northward towards Peterborough. An indigo bunting sang at the expected location on Hiawatha Line and gave us a glimpse of its radiant blue. Other "good" birds were a green heron on Bensfort Road, a solitary sandpiper at Whitfield Landing and a beautiful male harrier coursing over fields near the airport. Downtown Peterborough provided chimney swifts, and the bridge at Trent University delivered a cliff swallow. Mitch had his binoculars trained on one of the mud cubicles the birds make for a nest, when a swallow finally stuck its head out. However, despite a lot of looking and listening we could

not find a house finch anywhere. There is always at least one common bird that remains elusive on a birdathon and this one would prove to be ours.

It was now 10:15 and new birds were becoming harder to find. Over the next two hours, we were only able to add five new species. There were no lingering ducks at the Lakefield sewage lagoons and the Miller Creek wetland was almost birdless. Because of continued low water levels, black terns were nowhere to be found and will probably not nest there again this year. This is particularly unfortunate because the black tern is a species at risk .

However, some good luck at the Young's Point Conservation Area renewed our confidence of attaining 120 species and gave a boost of energy to our sleep-deprived bodies. Three new species of warblers were singing in the pines - blackburnian, black-throated green and pine warbler. Our improved fortunes stayed with us. A quick stop at an alvar-like habitat (limestone plain) on Birchview Road yielded eastern towhee and field sparrow. As we made our way northward, we also managed to check off a kestrel.

Despite cooling temperatures and the threat of rain, we knew that Petroglyphs Provincial Park would have some good northern birds to offer. Sure enough, evening grosbeaks, yellow-rumped warblers and hermit thrushes were calling, and a very vocal raven was making its presence known. We also found several pockets of warblers that were very responsive to pishing. In one location, we had 12 warblers of six species along with three blue-headed vireos no more than 10 feet away. This flurry of new birds brought our total to 100 species for the day.

With rain falling fairly heavily, we headed southeast to Havelock, hoping that the wet, cool weather would not shut down bird activity completely. A flock of turkeys was a nice surprise as was a beautiful male bluebird. The sewage lagoons at Havelock were also productive. At least 25 wood ducks, most of them males, were present along with three new species of shorebirds. But, as the air temperature dropped to 10C, our own enthusiasm for the task of finding new species declined as well. Our final bird of the day was a Wilson's snipe, calling at 7:00 p.m. from a damp meadow near Sawyer Creek wetland. Our final total was 106 species, 14 short of our objective.

You certainly have every right to wonder why grown men would put themselves through such an ordeal just to rack up a big list of birds. For me, a birdathon is a wonderful way to see and hear first hand all of the amazing diversity in our bird populations. At a time of year when we are all so busy with everything from gardening to garage sales, it's nice to simply devote an entire day to spring's finest offering - the return of our bountiful and beautiful bird life.

What to watch for this week:

When you are out in the car, keep an eye open for turtles crossing the road. June is egg-laying month for painted and snapping turtles and their wanderings in search of a nesting site often put them in jeopardy of being run over. Slow down when you see the yellow "turtle crossing" signs that have been put up throughout the County.

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