

June 3, 2009

Dear Birdathon supporters:

The skies were threatening to make my first Birdathon a rainy one as Rodger Titman, my best buddy and fellow professor of Ornithology, drove down Highway 401 toward Prince Edward County. But I have always been a lucky fellow when it comes to enjoying good weather on my travels and this trip was no exception.

At 14:00, we arrived promptly at Rosemary Kent's beautiful and spacious home to meet our hosts, Ricky Dunn, David Hussell and their sharp-eyed son, Jeremy. Within minutes my graduate student, Kristen Keyes, and her summer assistant, Catherine Doucet, who are working on short-eared owls on Amherst Island, predictably pulled into the driveway right on time. After brief introductions and a bathroom stop, the Birdathon was underway!

The first order of the day was to nail down the ruby-throated hummingbird frequenting Rosemary's feeder. A number of other obvious backyard species, e.g. common grackle, American robin, tree swallow, etc., were quickly tallied without even getting into Rosemary's car. Things were off to a good start!

Things got even better when I spotted the mandatory American kestrel, at least for me because I have studied this bird all of my professional life. Not far from Rosemary's house was an extensive marsh which produced another amazing bout of species. Rodger's aging ears, at least at the high frequencies, picked up a gallooming American bittern and Jeremy miraculously spotted a northern harrier likely feeding on a mouse and just peering over the tops of the reeds. Red-winged blackbirds, grey catbirds, a belted kingfisher, a red-tailed hawk, and a dozen other species soon joined the list.

Before I go any further, allow me to explain the rules of the game. Since Rodger and I are virtually joined at the hip when it comes to birds and hockey, we agreed that birds seen or heard by either one of us along with one other person accompanying us could be counted officially. To be honest, only a handful of species were seen by just Rodger or me on the 24-hour trip.

Okay, back to the hunt. We next visited the home of Terry Sprague, a naturalist icon in Prince Edward County, to locate sandhill cranes that had been hanging about his neighbourhood, but no luck that day. But as the late, great Roger Tory Peterson once said, "Birds have wings and can go anywhere they damn well please!" or words to that effect. But Terry's home did produce another half-dozen species like northern cardinals, a hairy woodpecker, a phoebe and black-capped chickadees.

The next several stops are somewhat of a blur for my failing memory, but suffice to say, Rosemary, Ricky and David had us visit a number of good "birdy" habitats and we continued to rack up species everywhere we went. But most notable on that first day was the "bird of the trip", at least in my opinion and that of Rodger's. Our hosts had been advised of a red-headed woodpecker hanging about the entrance to the Sandbanks Provincial Park. Rodger and I had not even got out of the car when Jeremy shouted, "There it is!" as it flew off into the woods. I was able to relocate it soon after however, and we got great looks. What a breath-taking bird!

At that point, David, Ricky and Jeremy left us, but Rosemary took us to some more spots in the park, including a rugged Lake Ontario shoreline being pounded by fairly heavy surf. Rodger's "duck eyes" spotted a lone common merganser motoring along above the water. Another productive place

was a small marsh where we racked up wild turkeys, black terns, northern shovelers, mute swans, and a Virginia rail which surprisingly responded to my clicking two stones together (an old trick to smoke out yellow rails). We rounded off the daylight hours with a trip to Nan Fox's amazing feeder set-up, one of the best I have ever seen. We counted at least a half-dozen new species there, the red-bellied woodpecker winning "best in show". I also snagged a big, fat jar of Nan's homemade raspberry jam!

And speaking of food, after scarfing down a delicious lasagna, a glass of wine or two, and some wonderful homemade pie thanks to Rosemary, we made a brief trip in the dark out to a wooded area not far from her house. No owls, but we did hear a whip-poor-will and a common snipe. We hit the sack at about 22:45 and got up at 0400 to catch the dawn chorus. We met Ricky, David and Jeremy in downtown Picton at 05:00 to add chimney swift to the list. Several productive stops were made on the way to the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory (PEPBO) where we tallied a whack of warblers and a surprising brant!

We were at about 100 species when we left the PEPBO and Ricky and David informed us that if we ended up with about 115 to 120 for that time of year (we had missed the main migration of waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors), this would be a respectable number. And it is true for birdathons and similar 24-hour counts that those last 20 or so species usually involve some fairly hard slogging. And we were no exception. I did announce to the group that I did not want a round number, say ending in 5, because it would always sound like an estimate rather than a definitive number.

It was beginning to look bad for us until we met Don Chisholm, a well-known birder in the area. We were stalled at just over 110 when we came across a flooded field loaded with late-migrating shorebirds affectionately known as "peeps". Our eyes feasted on dunlin, black-bellied plover, ruddy turnstone, short-billed dowitcher, semipalmated sandpipers and a small flock of Bonaparte's gulls, and our list finally settled at 117. Rodger valiantly tried to add a black duck decoy to the list, but no go. The full list of species is given below.

One quick comment on the value of Conservation Areas in Ontario. During our travels, we stopped by at least two of them. In the Beaver Meadow Conservation Area, we got terrific looks at an olive-sided flycatcher, a bird that was a new species for me and the "bird-of-the-trip" for others. At the Macauley Mountain Conservation Area, we got indigo bunting, scarlet tanager, and mourning warbler among other birds. Without these special reserves of habitat, who knows how small our list might have been?!

After a quick visit to see my sweet Mom in Belleville and borrowing a pair of shoes from Don for my evening talk, Rodger and I were treated to a tasty dinner and great company after which I launched into my presentation on "How Birds Do It". Thankfully, no one walked out in disgust.

All in all, it was a memorable experience and the event raised over \$11,500 for the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory and a wee bit for the McGill Bird Observatory. Rodger and I gratefully acknowledge the kindness and help from the following: Ricky Dunn, David Hussell and Jeremy Hussell, Rosemary Kent, Terry Sprague, Don Chisholm, Kristen Keyes, Catherine Doucet, Janet Scott, two U.K. banders at the Point, Cheryl Anderson who provided a sumptuous breakfast/lunch on the road, and finally, and by no means least, all of the generous sponsors of my effort.

Best wishes to all,
David M. Bird

Falcon-Duck species list, 29-30 May, 2009

Canada Goose
Brant
Mute Swan
Mallard
Northern Shoveler
Lesser Scaup
Common Merganser
Ruffed Grouse
Wild Turkey
Common Loon
Double-crested Cormorant
American Bittern
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Northern Harrier
Broad-winged Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
Virginia Rail
Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Dunlin
Ruddy Turnstone
Short-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Bonaparte's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Common Tern
Caspian Tern
Black Tern
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Black-billed Cuckoo
Whip-poor-will
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Alder Flycatcher
Willow Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Eastern Phoebe
Great Crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
Warbling Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Blue Jay
American Crow
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
N. Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
House Wren
Marsh Wren
Eastern Bluebird
Swainson's Thrush
Wood Thrush
American Robin
Gray Catbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Nashville Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Blk.-throated Green Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
Canada Warbler
Scarlet Tanager

Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-coloured Sparrow
Field Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Bobolink
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Baltimore Oriole
House Finch
Purple Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

117 species

