

BIRDATHON TEAM ACCOUNTS

The following are the complete team accounts submitted by several teams after the 2009 Birdathon. Abbreviated versions were available in the September / October 2009 Kestrel.

Get Seiurus!

By Ken Burdick

(Team consisting of Ken & Rose Burdick, Dave Graham)

Even though the weather was not great, it was another good year for us, and our improved route gave us the boost that we were hoping for. Sticking to Skaneateles and adjacent towns, Dave Graham, Rose and I were able to top our previous high count with 91 species.

There were really no exceptional birds for us this year. It was good luck getting a Yellow-billed Cuckoo at Gully Road in Skaneateles and a Hooded Warbler at Carpenter's Brook Fish Hatchery, but the most unusual birds were actually two ducks – a Bufflehead and a male Common Goldeneye – both usually gone by Birdathon day. The goldeneye, found by Dave on Otisco Lake, sported an all white back and mostly white wings, but otherwise had correct coloration and shape. It is amazing how wrong something like that looks! We missed on a scouted Skaneateles Lake Gadwall – probably due to the stiff southerly winds and high waves – but the winds gave us back a male Bufflehead and a pair of Bonaparte's Gulls in exchange. Other goodies during the day included a Northern Parula, and our namesake, the three species of Seiurus warblers.

With a 5:00 AM start, our first woodland stop on Gully Road in Skaneateles, surprisingly, was a bust for both Ovenbird and Louisiana Waterthrush. Getting all three species of Seiurus might be a bigger challenge than originally thought. But things evened out on the third stop when we easily picked up a scouted Northern Waterthrush in the swamp near the north end of Rte 321. Later in the morning, we found Louisiana at our back-up location on Fish Gulf Road in the Town of Otisco as well as Ovenbird, making it a complete set. As a bonus, we got real great looks at one of the Louisiana's feeding in the stream.

In the early morning we had a small mishap when Ken misplaced the species list for the fen on Gully Road. So, we re-constructed it best we could, and moved on. No big deal. Unfortunately, in mid afternoon, we noted that we were way down at 72 species. We had a big donation dependent on finding at least 87, and, and it was raining! Things went extremely slowly, and by 6:00 PM we were still at 81. Ripley Hill Road in Spafford was our only chance! On the way there, we got Northern Rough-winged Swallow and the only Red-tailed Hawk for the day. Finally, the sun was out and there was hope. On the hill, Purple Finch, Hermit Thrush and Black-throated Blue Warbler were singing at dusk, getting us to 86.

We needed just one more bird, and in an act of desperation we went to the causeway on Otisco Lake where we found only four fishermen and two bats. Resigned to our near miss, we sat in the parking lot to transfer the rest of the working list to the checklist, added them up, and to our great surprise, we were suddenly at 91! Some of the easy birds from Gully Road like Chipping Sparrow and Eastern Bluebird had made it onto the checklist but never made it onto the working list. It only became apparent after the lists were combined.

Being exhausted but happy that we had made our goal, at 9:00 PM we decided to call it a day.

Team Ovenbird

Jeanne and David Ryan

Our favorite bird was the Canada Warbler who sat in a shrub right in front of us at Labrador and sang. We also got to see an Ovenbird singing out in the open. Particularly fun for us because we are the Ovenbirds. The Golden-winged Warbler was probably the most uncommon bird. He was found at Jones Road on the way to Labrador. It might be in Apulia? We haven't heard Grasshopper Sparrow at the Dewitt Marsh since 2001, so that was pretty cool, too. The winds were horrible starting late morning, which made things more difficult. We had to take a 2-1/2 hour rain break from 3:30 to 6:00 pm. We did add 2 more species to the list from our front porch during that time. It was still raining at 6:00, but we decided to finish in the rain. We only had 92 species and we wanted to finish with at least 100. So off to Oneida Lake and the Dewitt Marsh. We had a better day than last year in spite of the weather, so we were very happy. Hope you had a great Birdathon too!

Woodcocks Birdathon Recap

By Chris Spagnoli

Team consisting of Kevin McGann, Bill Purcell, Chris Spagnoli

Bill Purcell, Kevin McGann and I met in Central Square at 2:45 a.m., a departure from our usual strategy of starting at midnight; this year it had been decided to take a more "laid-back" approach to the Birdathon. Another departure for us was not to start with Peter Scott Swamp...a significant decision this year!

At our first few stops we turned up some night birds like Virginia Rail and Sora readily enough, but Eastern Screech-owl was a frustrating miss. The night was reasonably warm and very still, which we had found in the past to keep birds quiet. We struck out on Least Bittern and had a hard time getting even Barred Owls to call. After missing Whip-poor-will at a few stops, in Gayville we managed to get one going pretty quickly.

Usually by dawn we were chilled and already somewhat tired, but the later start and the warm night found us in pretty good shape as we ran down the road to Phillips Point, picking up American Bittern, and made our way to the point to greet the sunrise. Although there were not large numbers of birds moving past Phillips Point, Bill and Kevin's expertise and sharp binocular skills helped us add a fair number of tough waterfowl - White-winged Scoter, Common Loon, Red-breasted Merganser, Bufflehead (pointed out by Judy Thurber), Long-tailed Ducks, American Black Ducks - and we had some other good birds like an Osprey hovering over Frenchman's Island, a Bonaparte's Gull I found hovering in front of the island, and a Great Black-backed Gull Kevin spotted.

Walking back from Phillips Point we picked up Cerulean Warbler and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher easily enough, as well as other common birds. Bill went against his better judgment by having us run out to Toad Harbor to look for the Prothonotary Warblers. The Prothonotaries did not show, but we did net our only Pileated Woodpecker for the day. At Depot Road as we were walking in I noticed a tent caterpillar nest and remarked that we should be on the lookout for Black-billed Cuckoos, at which point a cuckoo sang twice and sang no more; it was the only one of the day.

On we went heading north, looking in a few spots for Winter Wren and missing, another difficult bird we would not find. Grasshopper Sparrow sat up nicely for us in Carley Mills but we had no luck with Vesper Sparrow on French Street. On Baratier Road we had our only Bay-breasted and Canada Warblers for the day. We then headed west, checking a few wet spots along the way, with little in the way of waterfowl to show for it. Kevin was the only one of us to see Vesper Sparrow fly briefly back and forth at a field where we stopped for it, but a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker kept hammering in the woods beyond the field for a good bonus bird. Barnard Road easily yielded up a staked-out Golden-winged Warbler that was on territory right by the roadside.

The next major stop was the County Route 6 mucklands, where we hit the jackpot in terms of shorebirds - Least

Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers, a Dunlin with a nicely developed belly patch, Lesser Yellowlegs, and a real surprise, a Semipalmated Sandpiper. The latter prompted some debate. When we first viewed it the bird was noticeably lighter and larger than the Least Sandpipers, but a real depth of detail could not be observed. However, when the bird moved and we relocated it a good deal closer, our doubts were emphatically laid to rest.

We next headed to Great Bear, where Brown Thrasher was a no-show but we almost immediately had Mourning Warbler song. On to the Fulton Airport, where the Upland Sandpipers were not in evidence; we did not spend very long there. Instead we headed north and east, staying ahead of a line of thunderstorms, and found a small kettle of raptors that were doing the same, including multiple young Bald Eagles and a Broad-winged Hawk. At Sunset Bay we hit the trails and found Swainson's Thrushes and some warblers. The thunderstorms hit in earnest just as we got back to the car, and we waited some twenty minutes until the worst of the rain had passed.

This time the harsh weather had been our ally, as the birds came out in force once the rain had passed - warblers were singing everywhere and dripping from the trees. It has since been noted by others that this year's Birdathon saw one of the most notable songbird migration spectacles seen in recent years along the lakeshore. We filled most of the holes in our list, including an Orange-crowned Warbler that Kevin located. As we were wrapping up there I noted aloud that we could still use Northern Parula, and on cue a bird across the entrance road spoke up with the alternate "zhree-zhree-zhree-zhree-up" song followed by the good old-fashioned classic song. Following up with Nine Mile Point Road, we did well, with Joe Brin assisting us in finding a Cape May Warbler, and also turning up a singing Wilson's Warbler in a corner patch of shrubs.

Next we hit Derby Hill, where at last we picked up White-breasted Nuthatch - a bird that would have been an embarrassing miss - but were unable to find any Lincoln's Sparrows. White-crowned Sparrows were also here. We left at approximately 3 p.m. and I had a few moments to tally our score so far; I was amazed to find that, despite the several misses in the morning, we were already at 145 birds! The warblers at Sunset Bay and our good showings on shorebirds and waterfowl so far had served us well.

Next we went to Selkirk Shores, where we immediately found a Black Tern sitting on a log, and turned up a pair of Common Mergansers swimming near the far shore. We were just about to head up to the next entranceway to look for Pine Warbler when I suddenly thought I heard the song. It sang again and then a bird flew into the top of a dead tree right above us - sure enough, it proved to be the warbler. This piece of luck saved us several minutes' time and effort which, at that point, was pretty critical.

We continued east with more bad weather behind us, along the way finally finding American Kestrel. Kevin pulled over to look at what he thought might be a Brown Thrasher on a wire; we found it to be a Northern Mockingbird, notably scarce as a find in Oswego County. We were heading toward Happy Valley - boreal forest country - with 147 birds by this time, and the reasonable prospect of finding twelve different species there.

Unfortunately, we had barely tallied Golden-crowned Kinglet when the rain really settled in, at a volume that made seeing or hearing birds impossible. We lost about an hour waiting out the rain in the car. When the rain passed, almost nothing in the area was singing, and we were blocked from one route by a fallen tree that would not be moved by hand. We managed to get Hermit Thrush, but Blue-headed Vireo and even Red-breasted Nuthatch would not cooperate. A Hairy Woodpecker sang once but Bill and Kevin did not hear it. Still, we reached the magic 150 mark and shared a few handshakes with constant dripping from the trees in the background.

By the time we left Happy Valley it was well past dinnertime. We headed toward Peter Scott Swamp, which we had so fatefully chosen to skip as our first stop, never dreaming that a pair of King Rails would be found there that day. At the swamp the rails soon vocalized quite well. Unfortunately, Kevin and Bill had a hard time hearing them, but the rails came in closer and they were able to pick the birds up.

That made 152 birds, and we decided to call it a day at around 8:30 p.m.

Demented Dendroica Denizen of Derby Hill

by Kyle Wright

The day started at four listening for Bitterns, Rails, and Pied-billed Grebe in Sage Creek Marsh - all without success. First bird of the day was the ubiquitous Red-winged Blackbird, and Marsh Wren was a nice pre-dawn addition to the list. I decided to take a drive down to the South Lookout to take a listen for pre-dawn grassland birds, and at quarter to five, got the first big surprise of the day. The dawn chorus had already started up in the woods west of the south lookout, and amidst it was a wonderfully faint, high pitched, thrush-like song. The bird let out a few phrases, allowing me to first rule out the possibility of the tail end of a distant singing Robin or Hermit Thrush, which left me with the two possibilities I had first suspected - Bicknell's and Grey-cheeked Thrush. After listening to another few phrases, I came to the conclusion that it was the latter of the two species, a nice bird to add to the list.

With that, I headed up to the hedgerows for some neotropical passerines. I was not expecting to find much with the east winds overnight likely not having inspired much new movement - I could not have been more wrong! I came up with twenty-two species of warblers, three vireos, and five flycatchers among others. As is typical of any Birdathon, there were some big misses of birds that had been there every day for the past week, namely Black-throated Green Warbler and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, but all in all, I could not complain.

I headed up to start the hawk count around nine in a light, lake-enhanced drizzle. Few hawks were moving, but the diurnal passerine migration was amazing. Dozens of Hummingbirds, American Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, Eastern Kingbirds, and Baltimore Orioles were flying by, and two Orchard Orioles and a Greater Yellowlegs made nice additions to the fly-over list. A brief burst of hawks before the day's first line of thunderstorms added such half-hearties as Bald Eagle and Merlin.

With the hour and a half of early afternoon heavy rain, I had a wonderful Birdathon first - an hour-long power nap! After the passage of the line of rain, there was a second dawn chorus, adding Blue-winged Warbler and Black-billed Cuckoo to the day's list. I ended up with a third dawn chorus at about six in the evening after another band of heavy rain. While birding in this wave of activity, I heard the second big surprise of the day - an Eastern Screech-owl. I did a quick run around the property looking for other birders or their cars who might be whistling a Screech-owl whinny, but with none found, I returned to the location I had heard the owl, whistled out a little quiver, and the bird spoke again.

I ended the day with a walk up and down Sage Creek Rd, adding a fly-over Double-crested Cormorant to the list, and seeing a third Orchard Oriole perched in a tree near the blind at Sage Creek Marsh. While it is just the species that officially count on Birdathon, numbers like three Orchard Orioles in a day are well worth mentioning. My goal for the day had been eighty species, and I thought that I had broken that, but really didn't know having done a big day in New Jersey a few years back with someone who vehemently insisted that counting the list during the day is bad luck. When I tallied the list at nine at night I was shocked at the total. I re-tallied to make sure there were no errors and came up with the same number, an impressive 113. Not a bad day at all.