

The Birder's Eye

A Not-So-Ill-Wind Blows into Town

We knew it was on the way, a slow moving storm named Florence that we watched creeping ever so slowly towards us here in Western North Carolina. Sometimes we thought that it would never get here, but eventually the rain started and the soaking began. Luckily the strong winds never really materialized, so driving around the area was mostly uneventful.



Photo by Tim Carstens

So what do birders do when there's an impending spate of bad weather? Go birding of course! When Irma came through last year, I remember being drenched to the skin as we hiked the muddy paths along Hooper Lane. I was determined to be more prepared this time. Armed with mud boots, a better raincoat, and a couple of umbrellas, I set off for Beaver Lake. It was super quiet with only a Pied-billed Grebe in view on the rain-spattered lake. Lake Julian is usually a better bet, and we certainly can't forget the adult Sooty Tern

that graced the lake last year. With no driving wind and rain this time, and a very slow-moving system, we didn't expect a lot, so a circling flock of terns was a nice surprise – all Common Terns with one Black Tern appearing from time to time. A phone call prompted us to head to Lake Junaluska where over 100 terns were feeding over the lake. Some were resting on logs, while others circled high into the sky, probably eager to continue their southbound migration. An Osprey passed overhead, making the terns leave their perches, only to roost again shortly afterwards. Again, most seemed to be Common Terns, probably brought down as they headed south from their breeding grounds in the Great Lakes. A real surprise was an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull that had been found a short time earlier and was now roosting on a boat dock and allowing for some great photos.



Photo by Tim Carstens

The rain was still coming down, but not the downpours that were predicted, so it was off to Hooper Lane to see what shorebirds had been grounded. Again we were not disappointed, as a large mixed flock of birds was resting in the flooded fields. A flock of Black-bellied Plovers sat nearby like a line of soldiers and several of the shallow pools had delightful Red-necked Phalaropes spinning in circles. Pectoral and

Semipalmated Sandpipers were everywhere and the more one looked, the more species were involved. We soon added Least, Western and White-rumped Sandpipers and 2 beautiful Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

By now I was quite wet, although nothing like during Hurricane Irma in 2017. It was back to Lake Julian to get Bob's car and to check the lake for new arrivals. Jay was already there checking out the Common Terns when an all dark tern appeared amongst them. It was a little tough to identify due to the distance across the lake, but it soon swept a little closer and we could see the plumage details – another Sooty Tern, but this time an immature bird. This was a real surprise from this very slow-moving storm and the perfect end to a great day of birding. Thanks to everyone who texted and called to make sure all of us out there heard about all the sightings – and braved the rainy conditions.

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