

The Peregrines Tear Apart the Competition with 129 Species



The Peregrines (AKA Ventures Birding guides) have been incredibly busy this spring with tours and private day-trips, but we managed to patch together a moveable team for the annual Birdathon, with team members Aaron Steed, Kevin Burke, Clifton Avery and Simon Thompson arriving and leaving throughout the day.

It's always a quandary to know whether to start high and then travel low or vice versa, so this year we decided to do the former.

Thankfully it wasn't windy as we prowled the higher elevations for owls and nightjars before sliding down towards Sandy Mush and a date with a Whip-poor-will. We then found both orioles in one of the local parks and dropped into Lake Julian to see what was still hanging around. We missed the lonesome Coot, but a Bald Eagle giving a fly-by was nice.

Some of the best birds included a Dickcissel in Henderson County, several Common Nighthawks along the French Broad River and the long-staying Connecticut Warbler in Sandy Mush. We finished with 129 species, so not as good as back in 2019 when we hit 136! Still, we had a good day and were pretty tired by the time the last owl hooted!

See the Peregrines' complete bird checklist on page 5

The Not-so-Common Loons Go Crazy and Tally 127 Species

In our fifth year of birdathoning, the Not-so-Common Loons covered 160 miles in Western North Carolina in over 14 and one half hours of birding. We chose yet another route this year and ended up observing 127 species of birds. The team, consisting of John Koon, Tom Bush and Jay Wherley, started out before sunrise in the Sandy Mush Game Lands along Bear Creek Road. Our early start was rewarded with the expected Eastern Whip-poor-will calls and a bonus Great Horned Owl



hooting. The Norco tract providing us with a good daytime start, highlights being Blue-winged Warbler, Great Crested Flycatcher and many Yellow-breasted Chats. Our plan to snag the recently observed Connecticut Warbler fell through – it seems the bird may have left the night before.

We left the game lands heading to Asheville and picked up both Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows on the drive through Leicester fields, along with American Kestrel, arriving at Beaver Lake thereafter. We added both Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, along with Black-throated Blue and Yellow-throated Warblers. Another flycatcher species – Acadian – showed up here too.

We now started up the Blue Ridge Parkway, hoping to add as many higher altitude birds as possible – and we just about aced this task. Canada and Chestnut-sided Warblers were in the Craggy Gardens vicinity, and while picking up Red-breasted Nuthatch and Ruby-crowned Kinglet near Walker Knob, a Ruffed Grouse flushed – always a good find. A Peregrine Falcon was seen while approaching Potato Knob, and our goal of Winter Wren was achieved very shortly after turning onto 128. While still hoping for Red Crossbills (which we dipped on), we did pick up Brown Creepers, Blackburnian Warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Common Ravens at the Bald Knob Ridge trailhead.

So far, we had hit just about every target bird and were still on track for a good day...Our luck continued coming down Curtis Creek Road – with our targets of Swainson's Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush both singing in their habitat along the creeks towards bottom of this road. While no kite species were seen over Irma's Produce Fields, we did add Killdeer and Blue Grosbeak, keeping our streak alive of every stop producing new species. At Lake Tomahawk we added Fish Crow and Coopers Hawk and proceeded to Owen Park where we added Green Heron and Yellow Warbler. At Azalea Road we had hoped for Great Blue Heron, but settled for Wood Duck and Belted Kingfisher.

At Biltmore, we missed Bobolinks – again by only one or two days – but did add Cedar Waxwings and Red-tailed Hawk. We were now narrowing down the possible remaining species we could see and picking spots specifically for those birds. At Lake Julian we added the guaranteed now nesting Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Heron (finally!), Red-breasted Merganser(!), a late-hanging American Coot, and an Osprey. Westfeldt park in Mills River gave us our first Blackpoll Warblers of the day. Hooper Lane/Mills River Park produced the expected Willow Flycatcher, and happily, a single Least Sandpiper.

On the way back North, we did a quick drive-by of N. Rugby Road marsh – and really had great luck with Great Egrets and a Blue-winged Teal – both unusual additions, especially late in our outing. We now knew we had our personal team record beat and hoped to push even higher back in Asheville. A last minute stop at UNCA Botanical Gardens really paid off, adding Swainson's Thrush, Northern Waterthrush, and finally, Brown-headed Nuthatch. Back at Beaver Lake, we were still unable to find our main misses for the day: Bald Eagle. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Palm Warbler. That left us shy of the 130 level, our goal for next year.

Beaver Lake Bluebirds Sing the Blues with 124 Birds

After a bit of a disappointing count in 2019, and the even greater disappointment of the pandemic-cancelled 2020 Birdathon, the Beaver Lake Bluebirds set off before dawn full of hope and excitement. The team was headed by Tom Tribble and loyal birders Nancy Casey, Jamie Harrelson, Marianne Mooney and Joe Sasfy.



It seems likely that Birdathon teams experience similar patterns as the day moves on. At 5:54 a.m., we heard our counter-singing Whippoorwills and Chuck's-will-widows. Almost immediately afterwards, the morning began in earnest with a flurry of team member shouts – Hooded Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, Yellow-throated Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Cape May Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler and more as the tally mounted. At one stop, we hear a Brown-headed Nuthatch before we can get out of

the car, followed almost immediately by a Yellow Warbler, then an Orchard Oriole and an Eastern Kingbird. The team was giddy with excitement.

We were disappointed not to find a pair of Bald Eagles that were hanging out a couple of days earlier. The disappointment quickly faded as we gazed upon 6 striking male Bobolinks side by side on a fence line. Just then, a buzzy song alerted us to a Grasshopper Sparrow, followed by perhaps the find of a day, a Dickcissel – wow!

In the early afternoon, we pull into the driveway of a team member's house to switch cars and restock and, to our great relief, find a dozen Pine Siskins mobbing the feeder. Shortly after leaving, we get species number 100. It is not often that birders cheer for a Rock Dove. And then the grind starts, long drives with quick stops to find one or two birds or to experience a disappointment. At Lake Julian, the Cormorants are there and a coot. But no Eagle.

We pass an isolated wetland, debate over stopping, but decide to pull in hoping for the odd shorebird – none, but a Northern Harrier flies over. Another stop – “Is that a Ruddy Duck? Yes, look at that tail.” We found an unexpected pair of Great Egrets and a Great Blue Heron rookery with dozens of herons present. But no Eagle. Finally, the birding gods reward us with a pair of Bald Eagles soaring high above us. Why are they in this habitat? Someone remarks “Don't question the birding gods.” Someone else remarks “The birding gods couldn't find us a Turkey?”

The slow grind continues as stops yield a Golden-crowned Kinglet, then a Winter Wren, a Brown Creeper and a Veery. At Devil's Courthouse, we slowly get out of the car, not hopping out as earlier in the day, and we immediately spot a Peregrine Falcon standing next to her nesting spot on the rock – so majestic! Driving down the Parkway as the light fades, birders on both sides of the car simultaneously emit a shout – finally a Canada Warbler, the last of a 25-warbler day. We think the day is over but make one final stop and a deafening roar erupts in the car – we hear the peent call of a Woodcock right outside. There are at least 3, faintly visible on the ground and disappearing into the sky above us on their display flights. Species number 124!

What the Hoot!

"What the Hoot" completed its first Birdathon with good success! We pulled a team together at the last minute because we... gave a Hoot... supporting BRAC in reaching its 2021 fundraising goal. The team consisted of Danielle DiBella-Lenaway, a BRAC Board Member, Doug Lockhart, who recently moved to Asheville from Seattle, and Paulina Jones, a UNCA environmental management student, who is working with Danielle and two fellow students on an Asheville Lights Out ordinance. We stayed local and were able to count almost 60 species. We first started at our famous and beautiful Beaver Lake Bird Sanctuary, which provided us with an abundance of species. We then continued to the UNCA botanical gardens where we received a lot of interest from visitors including their resident Red-Shouldered Hawk. Unfortunately, we had to cut our day in half due to seasonal hay fever for a couple of us. We may not have seen as many species as the other teams, but we had a lot of fun and learned from each other and had some great bird sightings. We tallied 58 species, not bad for first-timers, but we gave it a good try and will be back next year on allergy meds!

Birdlist for Birdathon; 5/16/21

American Robin
Gray Catbird
Barred Owl
Ovenbird
Northern Saw-whet Owl
Dark-eyed Junco
Eastern Towhee
Canada Warbler
Veery
Winter Wren (10)
Common Yellowthroat
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Hermit Thrush
American Crow
Indigo Bunting
Song Sparrow
House Wren
Field Sparrow
Black-throated Green Warbler (20)
Brown Thrasher
Blue-headed Vireo
Northern Flicker
Black-capped Chickadee
Least Flycatcher
Cedar Waxwing
Alder Flycatcher
Pine Siskin
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper (30)
Carolina Wren
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Red-eyed Vireo
Black-and-white Warbler
Carolina Chickadee
Chipping Sparrow
American Goldfinch
Pileated Woodpecker
Eastern Bluebird
Hooded Warbler (40)
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Chimney Swift
Eastern Phoebe
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Scarlet Tanager
Eastern Kingbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

White-breasted Nuthatch
Wood Thrush (50)
Blackpoll Warbler
Worm-eating Warbler
Acadian Flycatcher
Northern Parula
Tufted Titmouse
Louisiana Waterthrush
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Blue Jay
Northern Cardinal
Red-bellied Woodpecker (60)
Downy Woodpecker
Osprey
Swainson's Warbler
Brown-headed Nuthatch
Pine Warbler
Northern Mockingbird
Hairy Woodpecker
Bay-breasted Warbler
American Redstart
Kentucky Warbler (70)
Cerulean Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Yellow-throated Vireo
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Wild Turkey
Cape May Warbler
Red-shouldered Hawk
House Finch
Turkey Vulture
Great Crested Flycatcher (80)
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Canada Goose
Tree Swallow
Yellow-throated Warbler
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Mallard
Green Heron
Barn Swallow
Red-winged Blackbird
Common Grackle (90)
Mourning Dove
Northern Waterthrush
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Rock Pigeon
European Starling
House Sparrow
Orchard Oriole

Baltimore Oriole
Yellow Warbler
Belted Kingfisher (100)
Spotted Sandpiper
Wood Duck
Fish Crow
Bald Eagle
Double-crested Cormorant
Egyptian Goose
Cliff Swallow
Blue Grosbeak
Savannah Sparrow
Eastern Meadowlark (110)
Killdeer
Willow Flycatcher
Black Vulture
Purple Martin
Least Sandpiper
Dickcissel
Red-tailed Hawk
Eurasian Collared-Dove
Common Nighthawk
Bobolink (120)
Grasshopper Sparrow
Palm Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
White-eyed Vireo
Prairie Warbler
American Kestrel
Yellow-breasted Chat
Connecticut Warbler
Great Blue Heron (129)