

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	White-breasted Nuthatch	Baltimore Oriole
Gray Catbird	Wood Thrush (50)	Yellow Warbler
Barred Owl	Blackpoll Warbler	Belted Kingfisher (100)
Ovenbird	Worm-eating Warbler	Spotted Sandpiper
Northern Saw-whet Owl	Acadian Flycatcher	Wood Duck
Dark-eyed Junco	Northern Parula	Fish Crow
Eastern Towhee	Tufted Titmouse	Bald Eagle
Canada Warbler	Louisiana Waterthrush	Double-crested Cormorant
Veery	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Egyptian Goose
Winter Wren (10)	Blue Jay	Cliff Swallow
Common Yellowthroat	Northern Cardinal	Blue Grosbeak
Golden-crowned Kinglet	Red-bellied Woodpecker (60)	Savannah Sparrow
Chestnut-sided Warbler	Downy Woodpecker	Eastern Meadowlark (110)
Hermit Thrush	Osprey	Killdeer
American Crow	Swainson's Warbler	Willow Flycatcher
Indigo Bunting	Brown-headed Nuthatch	Black Vulture
Song Sparrow	Pine Warbler	Purple Martin
House Wren	Northern Mockingbird	Least Sandpiper
Field Sparrow	Hairy Woodpecker	Dickcissel
Black-throated Green Warbler (20)	Bay-breasted Warbler	Red-tailed Hawk
Brown Thrasher	American Redstart	Eurasian Collared-Dove
Blue-headed Vireo	Kentucky Warbler (70)	Common Nighthawk
Northern Flicker	Cerulean Warbler	Bobolink (120)
Black-capped Chickadee	Blackburnian Warbler	Grasshopper Sparrow
Least Flycatcher	Yellow-throated Vireo	Palm Warbler
Cedar Waxwing	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Tennessee Warbler
Alder Flycatcher	Wild Turkey	White-eyed Vireo
Pine Siskin	Cape May Warbler	Prairie Warbler
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Red-shouldered Hawk	American Kestrel
Brown Creeper (30)	House Finch	Yellow-breasted Chat
Carolina Wren	Turkey Vulture	Connecticut Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler	Great Crested Flycatcher (80)	Great Blue Heron (129)
Red-eyed Vireo	Yellow-rumped Warbler	
Black-and-white Warbler	Canada Goose	
Carolina Chickadee	Tree Swallow	
Chipping Sparrow	Yellow-throated Warbler	
American Goldfinch	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	
Pileated Woodpecker	Mallard	
Eastern Bluebird	Green Heron	
Hooded Warbler (40)	Barn Swallow	
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	Red-winged Blackbird	
Chimney Swift	Common Grackle (90)	
Eastern Phoebe	Mourning Dove	
Eastern Wood-Pewee	Northern Waterthrush	
Scarlet Tanager	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	
Eastern Kingbird	Rock Pigeon	
Brown-headed Cowbird	European Starling	
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	House Sparrow	
	Orchard Oriole	