

Not-so-Common Loons

Blue Ridge Audubon Chapter Birdathon 2023

In our seventh year of birdathoning, the Not-so-Common Loons hit over 20 different locations in Western North Carolina during 15 hours of continuous birding. We deviated slightly from our previous route and observed a new team high of 132 species of birds on 8 May 2023.

The team, consisting of Casey Girard, John Koon, and Jay Wherley again started out before sunrise, meeting in an Ingles parking lot. Birds were already busy and we had five species right away, including flyover Northern Rough-winged Swallows. Were they attracted to insects in the parking lot lights? Once at Sandy Mush Gamelands along Bear Creek Road, birding began in earnest. The expected Eastern Whip-poor-wills piped up, but not too vociferously and only two birds. Once again, we added Yellow-breasted Chat here as the daylight arrived. At 19 species total, we were behind our 2022 mark of 33 species at this point, but birds awaited along our route.

The next-door Norco tract proved productive with ten warbler species and more Yellow-breasted Chats. Three vocalizing vireo species (we still did not have Blue-headed), and a fly-over Great Blue Heron were nice to fill in on our list.

In our drive to Beaver Lake via the farm areas of Leicester we added our first raptors (American Kestrel and Red-tailed Hawk) along with both Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeak. Also, along the way, the water treatment plant had dozens of active Purple Martins, and a Double-crested Cormorant in the river. At Beaver Lake, John hit a bonanza of thrushes, picking up Veery, Gray-cheeked, and Swainson's. We also added two warblers (Northern Waterthrush and Yellow-throated).

Up to the Blue Ridge Parkway – where a Cerulean Warbler again was vocalizing just before Ox Creek Road. Other breeding birds on territory were observed in this general area including Black-throated Blue and Green Warblers, Scarlet Tanager, and Ovenbirds. The reliable spot for Least Flycatcher (Craggy Gardens Picnic area) again paid off. Higher up, Balsam Gap gave us almost every high-altitude species we wanted: Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

On Curtis Creek Road we again were able to hear Swainson's Warbler, Acadian Flycatcher, and Louisiana Waterthrush. At the produce fields in Old Fort, Casey picked out a lone Killdeer to add to the list. We now made a tactical field decision to skip Owen Park and Biltmore and go straight to Lake Julian before hitting Henderson County. At the lake, we picked up our Bald Eagle for the day, along with a distant Cooper's Hawk. The surprise appearance of both Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup were bonus rarities for this time of year.

At Hooper Lane, we were able to snag a real rarity – Upland Sandpiper – which had been seen earlier in the day/previous day. Savannah Sparrow would seem to be the last sparrow species we would get for the day here – but that was proven to be wrong shortly thereafter.

At nearby Mills River Park, we picked out an expected Willow Flycatcher, along with a surprising White-crowned Sparrow! We could not locate a Eurasian Collared Dove here – that would require a backup stop later. We also missed a day-before/day-after Snow Goose at the Mills River Water Treatment Plant.

Our next stop at Kings Bridge Conservation Area was very useful with Bobolinks, Swamp and Field Sparrows, Merlin, and a Northern Flicker which had eluded us until this time of day (5pm). On the track of a possible Prothonotary Warbler, we did discover great Conserving Carolina bird habitat, but were unable to add any species to our total.

Sitting at 129 species as our energy was running low, we picked up Eurasian Collared Dove near the Mills River Ingles. We had hit 130. Was any other addition possible this late in the day? We joked about a flyover Common Nighthawk – just before one actually did scoot over near the Asheville Airport! Casey added a vocalizing Eastern Screech Owl after dark to bring our final 2023 total up to 132 species.

Main misses for the day were Kentucky Warbler and Osprey.