

Gulls Gone Wild Get a WILD Bird!

By Shirley Devan, Gulls Gone Wild, with great help from Nancy Barnhart, Jan Lockwood, Sue Mutell, and Barbara Neis

Bird #69 at 12:30 pm. A bird not to be forgotten anytime soon. NORTHERN WHEATEAR!



Photo by Nancy Barnhart September 28, 2019 during Kiptopeke Challenge



Photo by Nancy Barnhart September 26, 2019 at Kiptopeke State Park

This mega-rarity was first observed Thursday, September 26 near the boat launch at Kiptopeke State Park. Birders from all over VA raced to the Eastern Shore to get a life bird, a Virginia bird, or a county bird (yes, some birders keep county lists). Would the bird hang around for the Kiptopeke Challenge?

Birders searched diligently Friday, September 27, but found no sign of the bird. Darn...was it a one-day wonder?

Eight teams of birders arrived on the Eastern Shore early Saturday morning hoping to add the Northern Wheatear to their tally. "Wouldn't it be something if we could add the Northern Wheatear to our KC cumulative bird list?" Dave Youker, Kiptopeke Challenge Coordinator, wondered at 7 am Saturday morning when we bumped into him and Brian Taber at Sunset Beach.

About 12 noon cell phones exploded with alerts that the wheatear had been re-sighted along Route 600/Seaside Road near Machipongo. We Gulls were just leaving the landfill. The Scattered Scoters – two teens with Dad as chauffeur – were at the landfill too, ready to head north. We alerted the Scoters about the location and they raced off. We arrived about 15 minutes later to find three teams peering through spotting scopes at the Northern Wheatear flycatching from its perch on a pile of Quail Cove Orchard Crates stacked near the roadside. See the photo above. Nancy and I started texting and calling other KC teams to make sure they came by to "get" this rarity. Folks started calling us to make sure we had found the bird. YES!! A life bird for four of the five Gulls! [Nancy Barnhart had added it to her life list Thursday.]

So how rare was this bird? Per Nancy: "This bird should have been on its way to Africa through Greenland and Europe. Last recorded in Virginia in 1995. By Saturday it had moved a bit north of Kiptopeke so maybe it was resetting its compass!" Only four records of this bird in Coastal Virginia before 2019 – all on the Eastern Shore.

So...who found the bird Saturday morning? Paul Nasca and wife Heidi along with their infant son – "Team Amazing Diving Mallards & Duckling" – had entered the Kiptopeke Challenge just the night before. Paul sent an email to the VA-Bird List-serve at 11:49 am: "While on the Kiptopeke Challenge, we are currently viewing a Northern Wheatear on Seaside Road just south of Machipongo Dr. He is perching cooperatively on orchard crates marked Quail Cove on the west side of the road." Less than a half hour later birders were on that bird. Isn't technology grand?

Energized by the wheatear, the Gulls headed north to Chincoteague. After adding three species at Queen's Sound on the causeway, we arrived at Chincoteague with 73 species. We all knew – the last 30 species are the hardest.

We added the usual suspects from the Beach Road and Swan Cove – Tri-colored Heron, Little Blue Heron, Greater Yellowlegs, Royal Tern, Black Skimmer and – a not so usual bird – a Black Tern resting on the sand bar with terns and skimmers.

With the tide coming in, we trekked along the beach at Tom's Cove to tally shore birds. But where were they? We teased out a lone Red Knot among the gulls at the waterline but only found a few Black-bellied Plovers wandering around up on the sand. Sanderlings and Least Sandpipers were flyovers. Strangely enough, two Piping Plovers were playing in the traffic – the tracks left by the over-sand vehicles. No Sanderlings on the beach – what's up with that?

One of the youth teams alerted us to the Blue-winged teal on the Wildlife Loop where we also observed a few Barn Swallows among the hundreds of Tree Swallows flitting above. Suddenly a Northern Harrier lifted up out of the Marsh for great closeup views.

We spent the last hour of daylight at wooded Little Island Park hoping for some warblers, owls, and woodpeckers. Two Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were welcome sights as well as the sounds of a Red-headed Woodpecker, Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl.

The teams' totals are still coming in, so we don't yet know how many total species were observed for the day. We had 98 species and felt pleased to have that many after such a struggle all day to find warblers and shorebirds. Other teams reported the same problems. What a crazy list we had for the day – no Cattle Egret for us despite ponies easily observed all afternoon at Chincoteague. A Ruddy Duck and Blue-winged Teal but no Red-shouldered Hawk or Eastern Towhee. Nothing is a given – except perhaps a Great Black-backed Gull (or two!). That's why it's called the Kiptopeke **CHALLENGE**!

The five Gulls – Nancy Barnhart, Jan Lockwood, Sue Mutell, Barbara Neis, and I – are grateful for your support of our team and Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory. The Kiptopeke Challenge is CVWO's primary fundraiser each year and funds raised by all teams immediately go to provide financial and logistical support for songbird, raptor, and Monarch Butterfly research and education on the lower Eastern Shore and Virginia's Coastal Plain.

2019 Kiptopeke Challenge will be recalled for decades – "Remember when the Northern Wheatear showed up for the Kiptopeke Challenge?"

Thank you so much!



Gulls Gone Wild – best accessorized team with our team backpacks: (left to right): Jan Lockwood, Barbara Neis, Nancy Barnhart, Sue Mutell, Shirley Devan