

BIRDATHON 2020—"ONLY IN MY DREAMS"

We had been scouting all week to see what birds were back on their usual territories and to see if we could locate any active owl or hawk nests. I was happy with what we had found and was looking forward to to-day's Great Canadian "Birdathon" with excited anticipation. As usual we had planned to start our "Birdathon" at the Old Cut banding lab, a great place to find migrating birds that had just crossed Lake Erie. We were going to bird from 10 am to 10 am the next morning with 4 or 5 hours for sleeping. A violent storm had developed during the night but was gone by morning and skies were bright and blue. There was little or no wind and the temperature was nearly perfect, light jacket or sweater weather.

We picked up our food from Heather at the Blue Elephant restaurant,(she always donates more than enough for the 4 of us on our "Birdathon" days), and headed for Long Point. I have lost the ability to hear most bird songs so was wearing my special " Bird Song Finder" device that reduces the pitch to a level that my ears can hear and occasionally I would roll down the car window to see if any birds were singing. I was surprised at the activity that seemed to be taking place and was getting more and more excited about the prospects of our big day. When we parked the car my excitement only grew, bird songs were everywhere. We headed for the banding lab and visitor centre as we still had a half hour to kill before 10; however when they heard we were starting our "Birdathon" the volunteers suggested that we start immediately as the storm the previous night had created a massive fallout and the trees were literally dripping with birds. We started counting and our 2020 "Birdathon" had officially started.

Birds usually migrate at night. They will often wait for several days on the south side of Lake Erie, building up fat reserves and waiting for the right weather conditions before attempting to cross such a wide expanse of water. Often they migrate in great waves of birds of many different species. If on their journey they encounter severe storms with high winds they are forced to land (eg a fallout). If they happen to be over water when such a storm happens they have no choice but to continue flying until they reach land, or perish in the lake. In all my forty or so years of birding I have only witnessed a massive fallout once and that was the first time we went to Point Pelee in the late 1970 s to see what birding and bird migration was all about. I have never again seen such a display of birds but that experience hooked me on birding. Now we were on a "Big Day" in the midst of a fallout.

Old Cut and Long Point Parks

Our first bird a Red-headed Woodpecker, a hard bird to find in our area, landed in the big tree in front of the visitor centre, a Green Heron flew overhead. In the willows a Black and White warbler, a Buff-breasted warbler and a Cape May warbler foraged for food. A Blue-headed Vireo and a Red-bellied woodpecker were in the big tree, House sparrows chattered in the bushes and we saw a Golden crowned kinglet. We were surprised to see a pair of Red Crossbills under the feeder, our first real rarity. I remembered when a pair nested here years ago. Tree swallows swooped overhead, a Cardinal sang. A Palm warbler joined the others in the willows and we saw a late Northern Junco. Yellow warblers seemed to be everywhere and we heard a House wren singing. Someone pointed out a Yellow-throated vireo in a maple tree. A Catbird meowed and we saw it in the bushes. Ruby-crowned kinglets were abundant. A Ring-billed gull flew overhead and an unexpected and very late Fox sparrow scratched the ground. We were over twenty species and still hadn't left the Visitor centre parking lot.

A Blackpoll warbler hunted at the top of a pine tree, and a group of birders were enjoying a LeConte's sparrow in the long grass by the canal, another rarity. Across the canal we saw our third fairly rare bird a Yellow-headed blackbird. In the woodlot we quickly added an American Redstart, a Gray-cheeked thrush, a Philadelphia and Red-eyed vireo, a Chestnut-sided and Magnolia warbler. At one point in time we stood still along the fence line and in less than ten minutes added Black-throated blue, Worm eating. Nashville, Tennessee, Black-throated green and Blackburnian warblers, Red-breasted nuthatch, Common grackle, Rose-breasted grosbeak, Brown creeper, Ruby-throated hummingbird, Blue Jay, Song sparrow, Robin, White-crowned sparrow, and Brown-headed cowbird. By the green gate and along Lighthouse Crescent we found Canada and Yellow-rumped warblers, American goldfinch, Baltimore oriole, Black-capped chickadee and a very rare in our area Carolina chickadee (We likely would not have identified it but it had been around for a few days and we were on the alert), Lincoln's, Chipping, White-throated and a very late Tree sparrow, as well as a Starling, Pine siskin Yellow-bellied and Least flycatchers. Our lists were growing at a phenomenal rate and it was apparent that we might be heading for a record year. We headed for the New and Old Long Point Provincial parks. They were just as productive and besides birds already mentioned we had soon added Mourning and a rare White-winged dove (which had also been around for a few days), Swainson's, Wood and Hermit thrushes, a Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwings, and a Veery. Pine, Parula, Wilson's and fairly rare Kentucky and Yellow-throated warblers all put in an appearance and we were amazed to see a female Kirtland's warbler.

Long Point

Overhead Turkey vultures were common but the Black vulture was another bonus bird. Willow Flycatchers with their “fitz-bew” song were common and in the willowy marsh area of the new park we heard the “Weeb-eo” song of an Alder flycatcher, the unmistakable “Quick-three beers” song of an Olive flycatcher and the chattering of a Sedge wren. Someone flushed a Woodcock and we heard the winnowing of several Common Snipe. A Northern flicker landed in a tree where a Warbling vireo sang and in some low bushes we found a White-eyed vireo and a Carolina wren serenaded us with his “Tea kettle” song. A Summer tanager had been around for a week or more but was right where it was said to be. A Common Night hawk was heard before we saw it. We decided to check the beach and were rewarded with very rare sightings of Piping and Snowy plovers, an American Oystercatcher, a Red Knot and a sanderling. As we drove out of the park towards the causeway we found an Evening grosbeak, a Common Redpoll and an incredible juvenile Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and we wondered “How this can be?”

Causeway.

By the time we reached the causeway and the Big creek marshes we were way ahead of our usual schedule and our lists were reaching 100 or so birds, far ahead of usual. The causeway was very active and birds in the marsh were still singing and noisy. A Great Egret, a Brant goose, a pair of White Pelicans and a Thayer's gull were all rare and unexpected. I probably would not have identified the Thayer's gull on my own. Sandhill cranes, Canvasbacks, Moorhens, Coots, Mute and Tundra swans, Forester's and Black terns and Canada geese were not great surprises nor were the Great Blue Herons, Virginia rail, Red-wing blackbirds, Common yellowthroat warblers, Swamp sparrows, American bittern or Marsh Wrens but the Fish Crow with its very nasal “Ca-ah” call was.

Birds Canada Property, Old Lagoons & Lee Brown's Sanctuary

When we left the causeway area we checked out the wetlands at Birds Canada and then the new wetlands constructed where the former Port Rowan sewage lagoons used to be. More surprises awaited us. At Birds Canada we found Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Barn Swallows, Purple Martin, a Least Bittern and Double crested Cormorant and both a Tri-coloured and little Blue Heron. I could hardly believe my eyes. Then at the restored wetlands we added Horned, Pie-billed and a surprise Eared Grebe. Redheads, Ruddy, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Northern Shovellers and Blue-wing teal were expected in the duck family but then someone spotted a Snowy Egret and a Yellow-crowned heron and someone else found a Red-necked phalarope. At nearly every stop we were adding incredible Long Point rarities. From the wetlands it was only a few minutes to the Lee Brown sanctuary where we were greeted with Ring-neck ducks, Hooded mergansers, Green-wing teal, Black ducks, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon and a rare Eurasian Wigeon. Snow geese were a surprise as were a pair of Cinnamon teal and a small flock of Marbled Godwits. We saw a Killdeer and across the road could hear the tingling songs of Horned Larks.

Back roads and Feeders, St William's Forest and Turkey Point

At a feeder near Clear Creek we found Orchard Orioles and a rare Harris's Sparrow. Upland sandpipers called from a former known breeding spot. A rare Dickcissel sat on a wire and in a brushy field we saw a Bobwhite quail. A Cattle egret was still at a local cattle farm. We saw a displaying wild turkey and by a small rain puddle found a Least sandpiper and Lesser yellowlegs. A Bald Eagle flew overhead. A grassy field where we often stop was good for Bobolinks, Grasshopper and Savanna sparrows, a rare Brewer's blackbird, and Eastern phoebe, a Rusty blackbird, an Eastern Kingbird and a very rare Western kingbird. Another feeder at Walsingham centre had Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, White-breasted nuthatches, Purple and house finches, Indigo buntings and both a Clay-coloured sparrow and Tufted Titmouse. An Eastern Screech owl watched from a hole in a tree and we caught a fleeting glimpse of a rare Golden Eagle. In a conservation field we saw an Eastern bluebird and a Cooper's hawk that was eating a cottontail and along the side of a wet woodland we heard the long trill of a Winter wren. American crows were common but a Loggerhead shrike was very rare, as was the “Disney land” coloured Painted bunting that was at a feeder. Overhead someone spotted a Swallowtail Kite and we all rubbed our eyes in disbelief, wondering what in the world was going on. A Wood duck hid in the reeds of a small irrigation pond and overhead a late Rough-legged hawk hunted for prey. We saw a Ring-necked pheasant and an American kestrel and on the hydro wires a tiny Bank swallow. A Sharp-shinned hawk flew out of a wood lot and close to a bridge over Big creek we found both a Cliff and a Rough-wing swallow and a Belted Kingfisher. In the Rowan wood sanctuary we heard and then saw a beautiful Golden-wing

warbler, the first I'd seen there in several years. We saw a Broadwing and Red Shouldered hawk overhead, and heard Ovenbirds, Vesper and Field sparrows and Eastern Towhees. We checked out a Northern Goshawk nest and were soon being dive bombed by the birds, a very frightening experience. Near Turkey Point we saw one of the Northern Ravens that seems to be calling this part of Southern Ontario home and along the Turkey Point beach we were rewarded with good views of an American Pipit, a Willit, a Ruddy Turnstone, a Golden Plover, a rare Lesser Black-backed gull and an amazing Glossy Ibis. sparrows sang from a fence along a gravel road. In a low area of a field that is often filled with water we saw a Semi-palmated Plover, a Solitary and Spotted sandpiper, a Short-billed Dowitcher and a White-rumped sandpiper. We stopped along Gibson road on our way to Turkey Point and were rewarded with a Black-backed woodpecker which may have only been recorded one other time in the month of May in the Long Point area. Previously, when we drove through the St William's forest we found a Prairie Warbler that hadn't been seen at that spot for several years.

Port Dover to Nanticoke.

It was just mid afternoon when we arrived in Port Dover. We were well ahead of our usual "Birdathons" and already we had tallied over 200 birds, far beyond our normal Big days of 120 to 160 species. We were thrilled and still hoped to find a few more species. Little did we know what the Pt Dover pier was about to offer. A beautiful Red-throated loon in breeding plumage swam in the harbor, Whimbrel sat on the break wall rocks, a Black-headed gull, with Bonapartes gulls sat on the pier. Someone pointed out a rare Mew gull and Franklin's gull. Common and Caspian terns flew overhead or sat on the beach and to our amazement a Sandwich Tern had joined them. There were Glaucous gulls, Great Black-backed gulls, Herring gulls, a lone California gull and a single Laughing gull. I was glad we had some gull experts with us to point them out. We were just hi-fiving each other over our good fortune when a Brown Pelican landed on the pier. Wow!

Port Dover to Nanticoke

We stopped at Tim's for a break and then headed east along the lake towards Nanticoke. We had missed the usual Chimney Swifts in Dover but weren't complaining. Along the lake we picked up a young Red-tailed hawk, a Common loon, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Greater Scaup, a Surf Scoter and a Long-tailed duck, both very good Lake Erie birds. We saw a Great horned owl in the Stelco property and a Peregrine falcon in the Ont Hydro property. In the Nanticoke harbor we found both Black-crowned Night heron and a Red-necked grebe. This area of Lake Erie had always produced a few birds that we never seemed to find around Long Point and once again it was proving productive. We saw a flock of White-wing Scoters and a Common Goldeneye and near Stelco a Northern mockingbird sat on a fence post and an Osprey scanned the lake for fish. A Short-eared owl was a surprise as were a pair of Trumpeter swans in the Nanticoke harbor but the real surprises were the pair of Pacific loons and the White-wing tern that we saw from the harbor parking lot.

Townsend Lagoons

We reached the Townsend lagoons sometime after 5 pm. On the way a strange looking hawk turned out to be a beautiful adult Swainson's hawk, the only other one I had seen in Ontario was a young bird. A Meadowlark greeted us to the lagoons where more surprises awaited. An American Avocet and Stilt sandpiper were unexpected and the rare Arctic tern was a real gift. Pectoral sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers and Dunlin were somewhat expected.

Townsend back to Long Point

It was sometime after 6 pm when we left the Townsend lagoons. Historically we had always returned to Long Point to check the marshes and pick up birds missed during the day; however we had already "ticked" all the expected Marsh birds but we still needed Whip-poor-will and owls. On the way we encountered a small flock of Lapland longspurs in an old corn field. They reminded me of the time John Miles and I had seen a similar sight during his "Haldimand County Birdathon". There was a single Snow bunting in this flock, both birds were an amazing May sight. Someone spotted a Pigeon and we realized we hadn't counted one yet. In Spooky hollow we called in a Barred owl and spotted a light coloured dove that turned out to be an Eurasian collared dove. Our incredible streak of rarities was continuing.

Back At Long Point Marshes

Our time back at the long Point causeway and marshes was uneventful. There were virtually no birds that we expected with the exception of Whip-poor-will that we always heard in the St William's forest. However this year we missed them completely. We returned to Simcoe for a few hours sleep before finishing our birdathon in the morning.

Backus Woods

Before day break we were in the middle of Backus Woods. This was always my favourite part of our "Birdathon". It was still dark and all was quiet; then just at the first hint of light in the eastern sky the birds began to sing. We heard a Ruffed Grouse drumming and a scarlet tanager singing its metallic Robin-like song. A Pileated woodpecker drilled loudly on the trunk of a tree, a Hooded warbler sang as did a Prothonotary warbler. A Great crested flycatcher called with its loud "Weep" call and an Acadian flycatcher, another good bird, was busy singing its loud and abrupt "Pee-Sup" song. In the distance we heard the unmistakable Rat-ta-tat-tat drilling of a Yellow-bellied sapsucker and we could hear the "Pee-a-Wee" song of an Eastern Wood Pee-wee flycatcher. From the back of the woodland pond came the loud emphatic rapid song of a Northern Waterthrush and overhead the soft buzzy song of a Cerulean warbler. I wished that I could photograph one of these warblers as the only photo I've ever been able to get was of a hand-held freshly banded bird. We left Backus to the very soft "Bzzz-Bzzz" of a Blue-wing warbler and 12 more "ticks" to our incredible list.

Final Two hours

When we left Backus woods we still had a couple of hours before we were officially through, so we decided to check out a couple of long shots. Someone had reported seeing a Barn owl in a farm barn a few miles west of highway 59. The farmer gave us permission to check and sure enough a Barn owl peeked out from the upper rafters. Another incredible tick. Driving over the St Wm's forest sand road we found a Black-billed Cuckoo and an amazing Western or Spotted Towhee in the Manaster tract. We also found a Mourning warbler along this road and in a stand of pine trees a Long-eared owl was sitting on a nest; We had been told where a Sawhet owl had been roosting and sure enough it was there; another six birds when normally we would be adding none.

When I added up my thumb nail photos they came to 284 far more than I figured on.

Although many of my thumb nail photos were taken in the Long Point counting area or at least in Norfolk county, others have been taken while traveling or on birding tours to such places as Florida, Colorado, Costa Rica, Belize, Guyana and even countries in Europe, where rarities in Norfolk might be common and easy to photograph. Although the above is virtually impossible and a dream only, it does show the incredible diversity of birds that have been seen in the Long Point counting area during the month of May—and there are over 40 more species that have been identified duDon Daleyring that month that I have never been able to photograph. Not all my photos of the birds mentioned are good ones. Many have been cropped so much that only a thumb nail image is possible, but they are identifiable.

My thumb nail photos take up nine pages and a lot of space. I will try to include one page with my e-mail, if I can figure out how. I'm happy to send them all so if you would like the others just let me know. Your job, will be to match the photos with my fictional story. They are more or less in the same order, but not quite.

This was a fun project during these strange times, I hope you are keeping healthy and safe and thanks again for sponsoring me. Your donation will help to make our natural world a better place.

Sincerely George Pond

OLD CUT

