

# The 1997 Baillie Birdathon - Alberta Blitz

## - Jason Duxbury

Hours of planning and now its over. It seems to have come and gone so quickly. Another Baillie Bird-a-thon has been completed in Alberta, but what an experience! Last year's count of 118 species seemed to have been a warm up for what Lisa Takats, Josh Bilyk and I achieved this year. Not content with just travelling around the Edmonton area, we decided to go all out and visit some other regions of Alberta as well. We were told that what we had planned was not possible, however with a little work and even less sleep we pulled it off!

Our mode of transportation was Lisa's trusty '88 GMC 4 x 4 pick-up truck, with cruise control and air-conditioning (I know, I know, life is rough). We met at 9:15 and after packing up bikes, tents, backpacks, and bug dope, we were off to Lac La Biche by 10:10.



It all began in Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park just outside of Lac La Biche. After getting a feel for what birds were in the area, we synchronized our watches at 1:32 pm and set off down the Boardwalk Trail on our mountain bikes. Peddling up and down the hills along the trail we listened to the songs of the wood warblers such as Black-throated Green Warblers, American Redstarts, Black and White Warblers, Cape May Warblers, Tennessee Warblers and Orange-crowned Warblers. These songs were occasionally interrupted by the sporadic songs of Red-eyed and Solitary Vireos, and the Morse code drumming of the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. It was also at this site where

we managed to pick up a Winter Wren, Lisa' favorite and a "lifer" for Josh, whose beautiful drawn out, tinkling melody echoed throughout the old forest. Such a strong song for such a tiny bird! The paths of the park occasionally reach the shore of Lac La Biche, and it was at these vantage points where, through clouds of mosquitoes and midges, we were able to find American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, Red-necked Grebes and White-winged Scoters. Watching pairs of Western Grebes intertwine necks and dance on the water during courtship displays was a real treat. As we packed up the bikes at the end of the trail we managed to tick off an Ovenbird. Grabbing a cool drink in Lac La Biche and checking off House Sparrow at the same time, we started off down the highway. As we drove out of town we pondered, "Where were the Western Tanagers?" Next site we supposed.

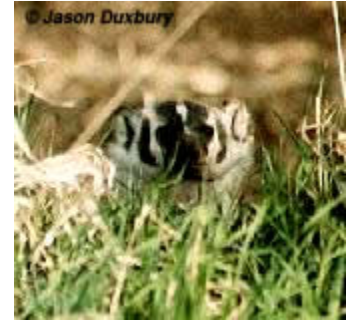
At around 5:00 pm we pulled up to the park gates of Elk Island National Park. Astotin Lake was sure to provide us with some new species. It was in the small ponds along the roadsides that provided last year's count with Ring-necked Ducks, and they did not disappoint us this year. We also managed to get a great look at a "Black-night Crowned Heron" or more commonly known as a Black-crowned Night Heron (and we were not even tired yet!) There had been reports that Barrow's Goldeneye have been seen in the area, and sure enough the larger of the two Goldeneyes was floating around with some of its smaller cousins Common Goldeneyes. Also making their first appearances for listing were Spotted Sandpipers and Common Yellowthroats. The boreal forest of the park was sure to contain Western Tanagers, but alas, still no sign.





During the short drive from Elk Island through the back roads surrounding Beaverhill Lake, we heard the first cries of Marbled Godwits (a "lifer" for Lisa) and the crystal clear song of the Western Meadowlark at 7:31 pm. This is a tremendous year for Short-eared Owls in Alberta, and we were quick to add one to our list. Driving near the west shore of Beaverhill Lake, we were witnesses to a Short-eared Owl give chase to a Red-tailed Hawk. Like the hawk, we too were probably close to the nesting site of the owl. Other birds in the field were Black-bellied Plovers, Savannah and Vesper Sparrows, Eastern Kingbirds and Killdeers. And as we watched birds, a curious

badger watched us. Too bad we were not counting mammal species as well!



After picking up a single Bobolink at "Bobolink Corner", we soon found ourselves at the gate to the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area, but we were running out of daylight! On our bikes again, and we rode off in search of a few more species before dark. Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens singing on Lister Lake were the first birds to greet us to the natural area. Our route along the marsh took us within yards of two American Bitterns as they glugged out their pumping noises seemingly right beside us. The mad dash to the natural area's weir was disappointingly unproductive, but we did manage to find some Wilson's Phalaropes. Lisa was quick to remind us how it is the male of the species that stays home and incubates the eggs! With the sun gone for the day, we made tracks to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory for a rest. Sitting on the veranda watching Barney the Barn Swallow roost, the night air was filled with the tinkling sound of the Hermit Thrush; species number 101. Still no tanagers.

Call it a day? Never! After a brief rest, we were on our bikes again heading back to the truck. The sneaky Sharp-tailed Sparrows who were not singing on the way in, let us know they were available for counting on the way out. En route away from the natural area we made one stop where Long-eared Owls have been reported as possibly nesting. With a little patience, we were able to confirm both a male and female of the species, another great find for the team!

Hunger pangs led us to find pizza in Camrose. Camrose was chosen for a good reason. As we approached the lake in the town and as I had just said, "Watch for a Trumpeter Swan", Josh immediately picked one out on the lake, faintly lit by the street lights of the neighbourhood. Now we could eat!

By the time we left Camrose full of pizza, it was 1:00 in the morning, dark and a good time to get to southern Alberta. Our route took us through Stettler and near Hanna. By 3:30, the sun was making its presence known once again, letting us know that soon we would be out picking up species once again.

At our first few stops, in the dim light of the early morning with the songs of Horned Larks and Sprague's Pipit hanging above our heads, we came across the endangered Burrowing Owl and group of Sharp-tailed Grouse on what might have been a possible dancing ground (lek). Not a bad way to start a day! With increasing kilometres on our odometer and light to the day, our drive took us on a secondary highway heading towards Dinosaur Provincial Park. Along the way we added Swainson's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Baird's Sparrow, McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Mourning Dove and Ring-necked Pheasant. While combing the thorny buffalo-berry for Loggerhead Shrikes (which we never did find), we did manage to scare up some Brown Thrashers and a Great Blue Heron. Unfortunately, the clock never stands still so we pressed on to the provincial park.



We were relying on the park for 4 species: Rock Wren, Say's Phoebe, Violet-green Swallow and Lark Sparrow. Standing at the look-out point above the badlands of the park we were surprised to get everyone of those species within a ten minute time period! And, singing in the only aspen tree in the whole valley, we were delighted to finally pick up a seemingly lost Western Tanager! This fortunate luck gave us back some precious time lost along the way, and so, at 6:30 in the morning we started off for Waterton Lakes National Park.

The drive to the national park took us near southern Alberta prairie lakes, ponds and sloughs. Species found in this area were the large Caspian Tern, the elegant American Avocet, a calling Willet and the small black-headed Bonaparte's Gull. We arrived at the park gate at 10:48 in the morning. Our first stop was productive as we added Red-naped Sapsucker, Mourning Warbler, and Northern Waterthrush to the list. Sitting in the sun on a power pole near the park kiosk, was both a Bald Eagle and an Osprey. Just whom the nest actually belonged to was unclear, as they did not seem to mind each other's presence. Up to the still frozen Cameron Lake we drove to find some jays. However, there was not a single Gray Jay or Steller's Jay to be found. Although, having the mountain air filled with the songs of the Varied Thrush (a "lifer" for me), Wilson's Warbler and Fox Sparrow more than made up for the lack of jays.

With the clock ticking off it's final few minutes, we rushed back to Pearl's Restaurant in the town site to watch a hummingbird feeder. As we approached the restaurant, a Vaux's Swift, a species reported to be nesting in the chimneys of the grand old Prince of Whales Hotel, flew with some swallows allowing for a nice comparison of wing shapes. Our last hope for a few more species was fulfilled with Black-chinned, Rufous and Calliope Hummingbirds.

At 1:32 pm, 24 hours and 1120 km later we crashed at Pearl's Restaurant. Our grand total for the trip was 151 birds! The carefully planned trip added 33 species to last year's total of 118 species. Was it worth it? Seeing Alberta's boreal forest, parkland, prairies, uplands, wetlands, small towns, and mountains all in one day is an adventure that all three of us will never forget!

- June, 1997