

Baillie Birdathon 2003

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Greetings Bird Lovers!

This was the first time I've done a birdathon in the Edmonton area in a few summers. The last few years I've found myself in the North West Territories or Arizona. This year, I wanted to stay close to home. Sandra and I moved into our new home in February so I wanted to see what our new "yard" could produce for a birdathon. We had an idea that our place would provide us with numerous species. Ever since we bought our land during the winter of 2001, I have been keeping a running tally of the species seen or heard from our property. As I write this, the list sits at 93 species. So you see, I was confident we would get a good start for a birdathon.

You may be amazed that I've seen 93 species on our property. However, we are surrounded by multiple habitats that each attract a suite of bird species. Our house sits on close to 4 acres of land. Our front yard consists of an aspen/poplar woodlot, with a few birch thrown in for diversity. "Across the street", there is a white spruce dominated woodlot where the sphagnum moss is calf deep in some areas. However, it's the "backyard" where most of the birds are. Our property backs onto 60 more acres of reserve. Out back there is an expansive willow wetlands, some grassy areas, some marshes, and another large woodlot that is divided into sections of larch dominated, spruce dominated and aspen dominated forests. Throw in the spring migration when anything is possible, and there is the potential to see many species just in our "backyard"

So that's where the birdathon started. I was up at 5:30, grabbed a bowl of raisin bran and took a seat on the back deck. I was immediately greeted by the willowy sounds of snipes diving in display over the wetlands. As the early morning fog evaporated from my mind, more sounds became apparent; the insect-like call of the LeConte's Sparrow, the long drawn-out repetitive song of the White-throated Sparrow, and the chatter of some Red-winged Blackbirds. Next, the constant singing of the Song and Lincolns Sparrows commenced. Way off in the wetlands, the cry of a hidden Sora intermingled with faint song of a distant Northern Waterthrush and the soft chirp of a male Green-winged Teal. In the morning sky, a flock of Ring-billed Gulls flew over in one direction, and in the other flew pairs of Canada Geese and Mallards. Bobbing its tail at the edge of our pond a single, Solitary Sandpiper stood. Just by sitting on the deck, I managed to start the birdathon with an amazing 28 species.

I decided that I should get moving so I finished my breakfast and went back inside. I then grabbed a cup of tea walked out the front door... and sat back down. (Tough work these birdathons.) From the front step I watched our feeders where our regular Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches and Chickadees had their breakfast. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was bent on disturbing the morning peacefulness by either harassing the birds at the feeders or hammering out Morse-Code on our neighbours' metal-roofed shed. Also at the feeders were American Goldfinches, Purple Finches, and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Singing and calling in the trees were Myrtle Warblers, Least Flycatchers, a Black-and-White Warbler, a Swainson's Thrush and a House Wren. The total from the front step was an additional 16 species.

Now it was time to actually go beyond the footprint of our house and see what else could be found nearby. Therefore,



Downy Woodpecker

Photo - J. Duxbury

I threw on some hiking boots and headed “across the street” to the spruce forested woodlot. As I approached the woodlot, I was greeted by the bubbly song of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Nearby, the similar sounding Chipping Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco were involved in a confused dialog between each other. Clumped high in the canopy I first heard a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks, but then saw them fly from the protection of the spruce and head towards the temptation of easy food of our other neighbour’s feeders. In total, the number of species I saw or heard while keeping my house in view was 44 species. (Recall that last year I descended and climbed back up 3000 feet in and out of the Grand Canyon and only saw 26 species!)

Not content yet, I climbed into a car and headed out towards Elk Island National Park (now only minutes away from where we live). Around the corner from our subdivision, a rather large wetland added many new species to the birdathon list. There were a few Red-necked and Horned Grebes, some Buffleheads, Lesser Scaups, and American Coots. Sitting in the cattails around the edge of the large pond were Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Other duck species seen this pond and at the next few ponds were Redheads, Ring-necks, Ruddy Ducks. Flying over the water were multiple Black Terns and a single Killdeer. Another stop near a farmyard produced House Sparrows, Rock Doves, American Crows, European Starlings and Brewer’s Blackbirds. Along Highway 16, I drove by both Red-tailed and Swainson’s Hawks sitting on posts waiting for the warm thermals of the day to develop. The trip between home and Elk Island brought the total up to 62 species.



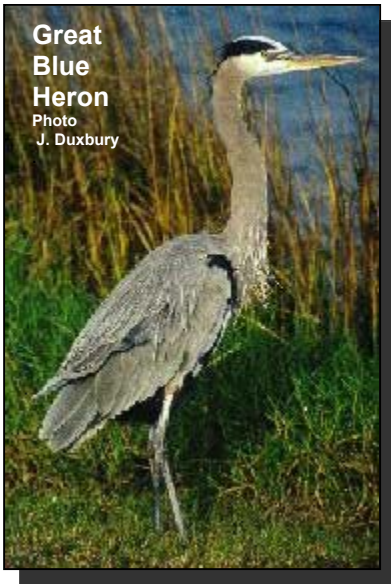
I suspect that I arrived at the park gates of Elk Island before the “Gate Keeper” was even awake for the day. With no traffic on the road, I was able to drive slowly with my windows down, listening for species to add to the list. Before I arrived at my first stop at Tawasik Lake, I managed to hear a Blue-headed Vireo, a Hermit Thrush, Orange-crowned Warbler, an Ovenbird, a White-crowned Sparrow and a saw Merlin streak across the road. At the lake, I walked to the shore and picked up species such as Northern Pintails and Franklin’s Gulls. My next stop was the main lake of the park, Astotin Lake. Out on the lake I heard the kreek-kreek of the Western Grebe. There were also multiple

small flocks of American Pelicans scattered across the large expanse of the lake. At the shore, a lone American Wigeon contemplated his day and a small group of Common Goldeneyes walked to the water and swam away. As I stood at the shore, a very loud trumpet signalled the presence of one of the parks famed Trumpeter Swan. However, before I managed to get around a corner to bay of the lake, the swan was gone. Satisfied that I had all of the species at this location, I headed back to the car, but as I reached the car, a lone Barn Swallow came to check out the early morning park visitor.

When I reached the highway from the now occupied gate kiosk, I turned east towards Beaverhill Lake. The north end of Beaverhill Lake is only a few miles south of Highway 16. To get to the lake, you have to pass the “Stone House”, an old abandoned farmhouse built out of fieldstones that has stood the test of time. The area between the Stone House and the lake is an interesting piece of prairie landscape that seems to have been plunked down in the parkland of central Alberta. Not only does the landscape appear to be prairie-like, but it



is also an area where you are guaranteed to find Western Meadowlarks, Vesper Sparrows and Sprague's Pipits, species that are associated with the prairies. In the trees along the trail towards the lake, a Western Wood-Pewee sighed and a Northern Flicker called. Further along the trail, Mountain Bluebirds were like blue runway lights as they sat and on the barbed-wired fencing on both sides of the trail. Beaverhill Lake is now over a kilometre distant from the parking area. The walk to the lake included expanses of mud that has become exposed over the last few years. It is now relatively easy to find petrified bones from unlucky Bison that became mired in exposed mud before the arrival of settlers. Once I arrived at the lakeshore, I was treated to the sight of three Sandhill Cranes standing in the shallow waters. Nearby, Sanderlings, Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Wilson's Phalaropes were picking insects out of the mud. Overhead, California Gulls and Common Terns circled with curiosity. The remaining species at this location I had already seen that morning, so it was time again to move on.



The second to last stop of the day was the western bay of Hastings Lake. From the road by the bay, it is possible to scan the rookeries on an island in the bay. Sitting in the trees and on nests were Double-crested Cormorants and Great-blue Herons. Flocks of gulls also sat on the island. Amongst the gulls were Herring Gulls another new species for the day. I then headed north towards the final site of the day, the Strathcona Wilderness Centre. However, before heading to the preserve, I swung by home and picked up my birding partner for finishing the birdathon. Sandra and I drove the two miles to the wilderness centre and walked the ski trails around the site. After a short walk through swarms of mosquitoes, we ran back to the car without adding any new species. However, as we approached the car, a lone Ruffed Grouse hen casually strolled by. As we left the centre it seemed that the count was finished, however the sharp eyes of my partner spotted a hawk flying low over the canopy at the gates of the centre. This hawk turned out to be a Broad-winged Hawk, a great species with which to end the 2003 version of the Baillie Birdathon with 108 species.

Thanks again for supporting bird research in Alberta and Canada. Please send your pledge to me at 146-52512 RR 214, Ardrossan, Alberta, T8E 2H1. (Cheques should be made out to Bird Studies Canada.) Donations over 10\$ will receive a tax refund from Bird Studies Canada. If you've already sent your pledge, thank you very much and stay tuned for next year's birdathon adventure!

Yours truly,
Jason

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