

the WILLET

Beaverhill Bird Observatory

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**March 12-14 at the
University of Alberta
Earth Sciences Building 3-27**

This is the first announcement of
COMOCO '04.

If you would like to present at the
conference, please contact
Chuck Priestley at: charles@ualberta.ca

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Banding at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory – 2003

- Matt Hanneman

The 2003 field season brings a close to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory's 19th year of songbird monitoring. The season went by successfully and as usual, with many lasting memories. The staff was kept busy with very strenuous work, which involved watching birds, listening to birds, counting birds, and most importantly banding birds. It's a hard life when your job description is related to your passion for birds.

The spring migration began with cold temperatures, strong winds and snow as it was still trying to shake off the relentless grasp of winter. Banding was relatively slow with only 546 birds banded and 755 caught resulting in capture rate of only 34.03 birds/100 net hours. There was a total of 45 species captured in the spring with the Myrtle Warbler being the top most banded species.

July and August was completely opposite to spring and temperatures rose to unbearable heights. There were 104 birds banded and 255 birds captured over all stations with the Least Flycatcher easily being the most banded species. Maps point counts also recorded 55 species across all three stations.

The summer also entailed many afternoons of Tree Swallow nest monitoring. Over the nesting period the staff caught 80 adults, banding 35. There were also 137 young banded from 29 successful nests.

Fall Migration coverage ran from August 1 – October 10 with 59 days of coverage. There were a total of 1039 birds banded and 1315 birds caught during the fall migration and showed relatively low capture rates with only 34.4 birds caught per 100 net hours. There were 57 species caught with the Least Flycatcher dominating as the number one species banded.

As for raptor banding, Northern Saw-whet Owl monitoring had another fantastic year with 151 Saw-whets banded and 155 caught. There were also 2 Long-eared Owls caught and 1 Boreal Owl using the audio lure. During fall migration there were also 10 birds captured using the raptor traps, the most exciting being 3 Great-horned Owls. The strangest capture of the year was the hand netting of a juvenile Bald Eagle that wandered onto the site.

In total we caught 2294 birds of 63 species from spring to fall. The above are only the highlights for the 2003 season, but there were many other experiences that would take a novel to tell in full detail. The BBO always holds great adventure and excellent bird watching experiences for me. Banding birds is an added bonus and working out there has been a delight.

2003 Baillie Birdathon

The following are the long awaited reports from this year's birdathons as conducted by the Beaverhill Bird Observatory's executive. This year, Birdathons were conducted by three teams; the "Birding Buddies", the "Birdathon A-Team", and the "Backyard Birders".



2003 Birdathon - The Birding Buddies

- Lisa Priestley

Our goal was to top the 100 species mark. There were four people in our Birding Buddies team, Bryn Spence, Juanita Mumby, Chuck Priestley, and yours truly.

Our first stop was Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park. We arrived the evening of May 24, set up camp, and started the count at 9 p.m. A few late evening callers announced their presence: White-throated Sparrow, Yellow Warblers, a Hermit Thrush and a Chipping Sparrow. Driving the Loop Road, we stopped at a lake lookout point observed a group of Double-crested Cormorants flying across the sky. We headed out along the road off the island an American Widgeon was spotted, and we were surprised to see a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers floating along the edge of the lake. A species we had not expected, so this was encouraging. As we turned to head into Lac La Biche to get some gas, an Osprey flew over, species # 12 and our first raptor of the trip. A great pull out spot along the lake produced: Gadwall, Canvasback, Mallard, Bufflehead, and Red-necked Grebe. A Great Blue Heron was also spotted lurking in cattails, and along with Red-winged Blackbirds.

With a full tank of gas, we headed up the Shaw Lake Road to try and hoot for some owls. Our first stop gave us two new species: Solitary Sandpiper and Common Snipe. No owls here. Two more stations of calling and we were all getting tired. Time to hit the hay and get some sleep for tomorrow's birding marathon.

The morning arrived quickly (6:30 a.m.), and judging from the moans and groans when the alarm went off, everyone wanted to play turtle and bird from the comfort of the tents. The birds were calling from everywhere, making it a challenge to pick our different species. As we packed up camp at 7 a.m., I picked out a Blackpoll Warbler, Common Yellowthroat Black-capped chickadee, Winter Wren, and an American Robin. We checked out the lake again, and scanned the shoreline and the trees. We then we spotted a white head, which could only belong to one thing, Bald Eagle!! Some White Pelicans foraged on fish at an eddy at the end of the point, and Mourning Dove cooed softly to us as we headed on to the Boardwalk Trail, the next stop on our search.



Species number 34 was the Least Flycatcher, and the species just started adding up. As we walked the trail through the dense forest we heard and saw: Magnolia Warbler, American Redstart, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Black-throated Green Warbler, Boreal Chickadee, Red-eyed Vireo, and Blue-headed Vireo. The sound of 'pitapek' gave us the Western Tanager, and a Hairy Woodpecker was heard drumming and then seen along the trunk of an aspen tree.

It took us till 11:30 a.m. to get to Lac La Biche, as the birds all seemed to jump out to be counted: Clay-colored Sparrow, Barn Swallow, Savannah Sparrow, Western Grebe, White-winged Scoters, Killdeer, Blue and Green-winged Teal. We hit mainland, and we added American Kestrel and Brewer's Blackbird before we reached Subway for some sandwiches before heading to Elk Island National Park.



By the time we reached the gates of Elk Island National Park we had added Eastern Phoebe, Red-tailed Hawk, Cliff Swallow, and Mountain Bluebird. We thought about counting the Ostrich at a roadside farm, but we figured no one would believe we saw a wild one. Ah well, it was something to consider if we were stuck for species 100.

Once inside the park, we drove to the west side of Astotin Lake. Chuck thought he knew of a place we might see Trumpeter Swans, but no luck. Though we did add Warbling Vireo and Northern Shoveler. Final stop in the park was Tawayik Lake. A short walkabout netted us Downy Woodpecker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, American Goldfinch, Marbled Godwit, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Stilt Sandpiper.

We drove out of the park towards Beaverhill Lake. We saw a Merlin perched atop a fence post near Tofield, and as we headed down Rowan's Route we observed the ever-present Swainson's Hawks near Francis Point. Great Horned Owls were on a nest along the road. At Amisk Creek we added Wilson's Phalarope, Spotted Sandpiper, Yellow-headed Blackbird, American Avocet, Willet, Pied-billed Grebe, Western Meadowlark, Pectoral Sandpiper, and a nice adult male Northern Harrier.



At the weir in the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area an Eared Grebe gave us our fourth grebe species of the count. We arrived at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory to take a peak at a Long-eared Owl nest and listened to the House Wrens chattering away. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was species number 110!! Western Wood-Pewee and Sharp-tailed Sparrow added another two species.



It was then back into Tofield for "dinner" at Mom's Ice Cream Corral, banana splits all around (it has fruit and milk in it). We then went to the Beaverhill Lake Visitors Centre to check the Purple Martin house which appeared empty . . . but we lucked out to see one flying around. We then headed to the Strathcona Wilderness Center for our final species . . . a Northern Saw-whet Owl in a nestbox. A total of 114 species were observed, not bad day of birding!

The Birding Buddies (Lisa, Chuck, Bryn, and Juanita)

Birdathon 2003 – Birdathon A-Team

- Geoff Holroyd

Relaxed was the key word of the day on our 2003 Baillie Birdathon with no pressure to set records. After all, we were birding in June, well after the peak of migration. With few migrant shorebirds and warblers left in the area, we were not going to set any records. In fact could we see 100 species this late in the spring?

We did not get going until 7am, two hours later than our usual start. Our first stop was Whitemud ravine. The warm morning air gave no warning of the weather ahead. Pat and Geoff flung our coats in the car at the trailhead - big mistake. Before long we looking at each other from under spruce trees providing protection for the morning downpour that was trying to turn the aspen parkland into rainforest. Eventually, the rain let up and a Western Tanager, an Ovenbird, and a late Yellow-rumped Warbler, sang as we retreated from the wet valley. When we left the valley we had recorded 30 species.

Off to Bretona Pond where we added lots of waterfowl, and a late Tennessee Warbler. An even colder stop at Cooking Lake had us checking the calendar to see if it was June or March! As we left Cooking Lake we had our 60th species, a Savannah Sparrow. Last year we had 80 species by this hour, were we in trouble? Was our new relaxed approach to be our undoing? Would we be able to hold our heads high on Monday morning? It became apparent that we did not care as we leisurely headed east along highway 13.

At a random stop at a small slough we found a Common Loon to our surprise and delight. Finally at 11am we saw our first Red-tailed Hawk, mobbed by blackbirds. On the way north to Islet Lake, we found 5 Trumpeter Swans hanging out on a small pond. A Great-crested Flycatcher called and a Downy woodpecker flew across an opening. In the Blackfoot Reserve a Goshawk soared over the road, for our 85th species, but it was 1pm. The afternoon is typically slow for birds. What should a now desperate birding team do? We headed for lunch at the Trefry's!

We then headed to Francis Point where we did not have a chance of seeing the shore of the receding Beaverhill Lake. No Bobolinks at Kallal field, but we saw Cliff Swallows and a Marbled Godwit at Amisk Creek. We were now at 95 species, but it was 3:30 already. Time to pull out all stops to reach our goals - so Pat and I slept as Gerry drove on to their cabin!

A late White-fronted Goose and Pectoral Sandpiper helped us by remaining visible long enough for us to wake up and count them. Pat's sharp eyes spotted a male Northern Harrier - species 99!! Suddenly one goal was within reach. Gerry heard, and then saw an Eastern Kingbird. We could now relax, 100 species at 4:20.

A few species *en route* helped with our total; a Solitary Sandpiper flyby and a late drumming Ruffed Grouse added to our list - 105 species. Stops at ponds before the Yellowhead Highway, yielded Sora and Cinnamon Teal, - 107 species.

Later as we were trying to find Peregrine Falcons, we added Gray Partridge, Nighthawk and Great Blue Heron - 110 species. As we congratulated ourselves, we spotted a kestrel that was being mobbed by a blackbird - 111 species for the day!

Your 2003 Birdathon A-Team:

Pat Crossley, Gerry McKeating, Helen Trefry, and Geoff Holroyd.

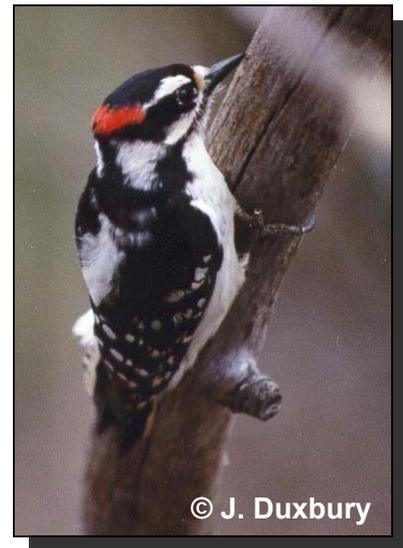
Birdathon 2003 – Backyard Birders

- Jason Duxbury

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 94 species. So you see, I was confident we would get a good start for a birdathon.

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. Way off in the wetlands, the cry of a hidden Sora intermingled with faint song of a distant Northern Waterthrush. 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.



© J. Duxbury

Now it was time to actually go beyond the footprint of our house and see what else could be found nearby. Therefore, I threw on some hiking boots and headed "across the street" to the spruce forested woodlot. As I approached the woodlot, the bubbly song of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet greeted me. 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.

Not content yet, I climbed into a car and headed out towards Elk Island National Park. 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. Flying over the water were multiple Black Terns and a single Killdeer. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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 and along the way 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. It is an area where you are guaranteed to find Western Meadowlarks, Vesper Sparrows and Sprague’s Pipits, species that are associated with the prairies. 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. 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. 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 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.

NEXT WILLET ISSUE

Material for the forthcoming newsletter should be sent to: Jason Duxbury, editor, The Willet, 146-52512 RR 214, Ardrossan, Alberta, T8E 2H1. Phone: 780-922-3326, Email: sjdxbury@telus.net. Next newsletter deadline: Jan 1, 2004. Articles can be on bird banding, bird watching, wildlife viewing, etc.