

## The Birding Buddies Baillie Birdathon, 2003

*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 I. We made a pact that as least three of the four team members would have to identify (by sight or sound) each species before it was counted. We wanted to make the count a challenge.

We arrived the evening of May 24, set up camp, and started the count at 9 p.m. Looking above the campsite, we observed [Franklin's](#) and [Ring-billed Gulls](#) hawking midges that had recently hatched. Then a few late evening callers announced their presence: [White-throated Sparrow](#) (right), [Yellow Warblers](#), a [Hermit Thrush](#) and a [Chipping Sparrow](#).

Driving the Loop Road, we stopped at a lookout point to the lake and observed a group of [Double-crested Cormorants](#) flying across the sunseting sky. Two [Common Goldeneye](#) males were courting a female, and an [American Crow](#) croaked as it flew over. 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](#) (left) 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 bay that neared the road had a great pull out spot, and we pulled out the scopes to look at a number of waterfowl species, including: [Gadwall](#), [Canvasback](#), [Mallard](#), [Bufflehead](#) (right), and [Red-necked Grebe](#). A [Great Blue Heron](#) was also spotted lurking in cattails, and a [Red-winged Blackbird](#) yelled "eat my cheezies" (we always have a paraphrase for all the bird calls, helps you remember them). The Boreal Chorus Frogs were also calling from their breeding site across the road in a marsh. The wind was picking up, which may affect our owling, better get a move on.

Just as we were packing back into the vehicle, the RCMP pulled up. An officer walked up and asked how we were, and what we were up to. Try explaining that you are counts birds for 24 hours, as many species as possible, with a straight face. He asked what species we had seen and we listed a few, he looked at us as if we were nuts. He let us on our way, and we could see him telling his fellow officers the story. This was probably a new one for their files.



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: a [Solitary Sandpiper](#) called and a male [Common Snipe](#) performed his territorial flight, diving down through the air causing the outer tail feathers to vibrate, producing a hollow whistling sound. No owls here. Two more stations of calling and we were all getting tired. Playing calls this late in the season was a stretch, but we had to try it. Fortunately we had some owl nests lines up for tomorrow, so we would be able to count a few species. 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](#) and [Common Yellowthroat](#) (right) calling in the shrubs next to the campsite. A nice male Blackpoll Warbler



came in closer as we squeaked it in. Some [Ravens](#) flew through the canopy of the old spruce forest and the distinct ‘here sweet-ty’ call from a male [Black-capped Chickadee](#) was added. An [American Robin](#) sung its flutelike song, ‘chirrup cheree, cherio’.

We headed over to the Lookout Point again to see what new species might be out, while a [Tennessee Warbler](#) called ‘tikka, tikka, tikka, swit, swit, swit, chew chew chew chew.’ We checked out the lake, we scanned the shoreline and the trees at the point, and then we spotted a white head ... which could only belong to one thing, [Bald Eagle](#)!! We had two in our sites (an adult over 5 years old with a white head, and a younger one, probably 3 years old) and watched them as they surveyed the lake for fish. While looking through the binoculars a bird flew through our site, and we pulled away from our lenses to see a [Bank Swallow](#) dive down into a nest site. As we searched the shrubs along the edge of the lookout, a [Myrtle Warbler](#) (left) was also spotted. Another gull made its way lazily across the sky and landed in the water below, dark eyes, red and black on the bill, this was a [California Gull](#). 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](#), [Winter Wren](#) (my favorite bird pictured right), [Boreal Chickadee](#), [Red-eyed Vireo](#), and [Blue-headed Vireo](#). A [Ruffed Grouse](#) drummed on a log in the distance. Next we heard a [Brown-headed Cowbird](#), then a [Baltimore Oriole](#), and then the faint sound of the [Golden-crowned Kinglet](#). The [Swainson’s Thrush](#) not only called, but jumped out along the trail to show its all brown back with the spotted chest to us. 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. As we came out to the lake, Bryn and I both heard a wail in the distance, and Chuck put the scope on a [Common Loon](#), which really is never very common in my opinion.



We returned to the vehicle and all agreed that breakfast was needed to keep the energy going. But 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](#), [Killdeer](#), [Blue and Green-winged Teal](#). We bumped into fellow birder Stan Gosche who was helping with the May Species Count and he pointed out the [White-winged Scoters](#) way out on the lake. A

[Tree Swallow](#) and [Black-billed Magpie](#) were seen as we hit mainland, and we added [American Kestrel](#) (above) and [Brewer’s Blackbird](#) before we reached Subway for some sandwiches.

## #2 – Lac La Biche to Elk Island

We finished lunch quickly, and as we hopped back in the truck we heard [House Sparrows](#) chirping across the street . . . yep they count too. Over to a spot Stan suggested along the south shore near an old ice cream shop, and we added [Black](#) and [Common Terns](#), [Canada Goose](#), [Redhead](#), [Ruddy Duck](#), and [Sora](#). From there, we headed out of Lac La Biche along Secondary Highway 663 towards Boyle. A few ponds along the route produced [Bonaparte’s Gull](#) and [Ring-necked Duck](#). I was suggesting we should keep an eye open for [Gray Jay](#), and one flew out along the side of the highway. We had to turn around, because we needed at least three to see it, when what should we see ... a [Gray Catbird](#)!! Another species we did not anticipate.

I was keeping track of number of species, but everyone agreed to wait until we reached Beaverhill to find out how many we were at. By the time we reached the gates of Elk Island National Park we had added [Eastern Phoebe](#), [Rock Dove](#) (better known as pigeon to most people), [European Starling](#) (yes they count too), [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.



At the gate of the park, we asked the attendant where the Trumpeter Swans were, and he provided us with a location. But we drove the stretch of road three times, with no luck at all. I was frustrated, as I've counted them for the past four years . . . and where the heck was a 'friggin' coot?? As if on cue, Juanita jumped in and said, "There's the 'friggin' [American Coot!!](#)" And there it was in all its glory, finally. We drove on to the west side Astotin Lake as Chuck thought he knew of another place we might see the swans. No luck there either, but we added [Warbling Vireo](#) and [Northern Shoveler](#).

Our time was dwindling, and we had to hurry. Final stop in the park was Tawiyik Lake (where there is a tribute to Pope John Paul's visit). A short walkabout netted us [Downy Woodpecker](#), [Rose-breasted Grosbeak](#), [American Goldfinch](#), [Marbled Godwit](#), [Lesser Yellowlegs](#), [Stilt Sandpiper](#), and back at the parking lot a cute little Tweetie Bird checked us out from under a vehicle.



We drove out of the park counting a [Northern Flicker](#) as we turned towards Beaverhill Lake and headed down the west side. 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. The [Great Horned Owls](#) were on a nest along the road, and as we scanned the fields for any other species as [Sprague's Pipit](#) called its descending song.

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](#). Another species we thought we would get earlier, but had to wait until A-lake was the [Northern Pintail](#).

At the weir an [Eared Grebe](#) gave us our fourth grebe species of the count. And a [LeConte's Sparrow](#) also advertised its presence. We arrived at the lab to take a peak at the [Long-eared Owl](#) nest and listened to the [House Wrens](#) chattering away.

The [Yellow-bellied Sapsucker](#) was species number 110!! And it was a surprise as it was in the grazing field on a fence post away from the forest. [Western Wood-Pewee](#) added another, and [Sharp-tailed Sparrow](#) another. It was then in to Tofield for dinner at Mom's Ice Cream, banana splits all around (it has fruit and milk in it), then over to see the [Purple Martin](#) house which appeared empty . . . but we lucked out to see one flying around. No new species at Hastings Lake . . . and finally 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 at all.

