

the WILLET

Beaverhill Bird Observatory



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Special Birdathon Issue

In the last issue of the Willet, it was announced that there would be four official Baillie Birdathon teams comprised of directors and members from the Beaverhill Bird Observatory. Within this issue, you will find out how each of the teams did and where their travels took them.

More than 500 people from across Canada (and from several countries around the world) participated in a Birdathon this past May. More than 7000 Canadians from coast to coast sponsored them!

Once again the hot bird spots around Edmonton were scoured for those rare birds to add to the lists. One difference this year was one Birdathon took place in the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

The BBO would like to take this opportunity to thank those who either participated in a Birdathon or who made a pledge to our hard working birders. Your support keeps the BBO in operation!

For those who would like to participate next spring, the Birdathon takes place near the end of May. We look forward to hearing from you next year!

For more information from the national headquarters, call Bird Studies Canada at 1-888-448-BIRD, or visit them online at:

<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/organization/brdathon.html>

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Edmonton's Night Owls

I am an Owler! I get some of the strangest looks from people when I tell them that. Many people don't even realize that we have a good population of owls in our river valleys. Even after I have explained what it is exactly that an Owler does people always ask how far they would have to drive to help. When they realize that we go to the outskirts of the city they are usually shocked.

Richard Krikun and I have been owling in the Edmonton river valley for the past few years as part of a project that Chuck and Lisa Priestley, Jim and Barb Beck and Tyler Flockhart initiated. We head out about 2 hours after dark and call for owls using a CD player. By using recorded owl calls we cause the owls in the area to respond to us and sometimes if we're really lucky they even come in to investigate. We usually head out to the west end about two hours after sunset and call for about two or three hours. We have detected several species over the years: Great Horned Owls, Saw-whet Owls, Barred Owls and Long Eared Owls just to name a few.

If this sounds like something you would like to do please give me a call at (780) 619-9261 or send an email to:

bryn@beaverhillbirds.com

*Bryn Spence
Vice Chair
Beaverhill Bird Observatory*

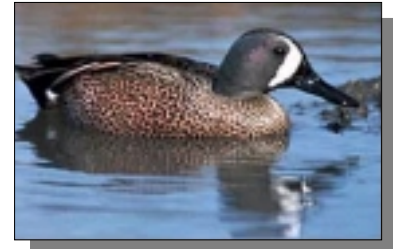
THE PRES

Lisa and Chuck Priestley

This year's Baillie Birdathon was one for unusual sightings. We decided to stick around Edmonton instead of travelling far and wide this year, as we were both busy with work and wedding plans!

We headed to the edge of the city and almost forgot to count the Rock Doves and a Black-billed Magpie; being that they are so common we tend to forget about these species. A beautiful adult Red-tailed Hawk was perched along a row of trees. It flew off just before we could drop a trap! While we were putting the trap away though, a Yellow Warbler called from the willows along the road, definitely a sign that spring was here.

We arrived at the first wetland, affectionately called Gill's Pond, after Chuck's mom. A Tree Swallow flew across the road and into a nest box along the fence line. We raised our binoculars to find a good variety of waterfowl species such as Northern Shoveler, Canvasback, Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, and American Coot. The male Red-winged Blackbirds were advertising their bright red epaulettes, trying to attract females. What really was surprising was the large number of Wilson's Phalaropes that we saw throughout the birdathon. These ones were swimming in circles churning up aquatic insects to eat.



Blue-winged Teal

Cawes Lake just a short distance from the first pond, had great mudflats along the north side, and we were excited to see shorebirds feeding along the shallow waters. We added Long-billed Dowitcher, Western Sandpiper, Semi-palmated Plover, and large flocks of Stilt Sandpipers. Chuck was able to pick a Red-necked Phalarope out of a group of Wilson's. Other species recorded included Northern Pintail, Black Tern, Green-winged Teal, Redhead, Eared Grebe, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Chuck observed a rusty looking duck with blue specula fly over the road, "I'm sure that was a Cinnamon Teal," he said, but we could not count it until I saw it as well, those are the rules we set up.



Cinnamon Teal

We drove to the south end of the lake, and as we were setting the spotting scope up, a Least Flycatcher announced its presence from the forest behind us. A Ruddy Duck was displaying his tail to a female, and we tracked down two Black-necked Stilts. The wind was strong making it difficult to hear much, but a Sora managed to call loud enough to be detected.

That mystery bird that I had not seen earlier was begging a second look, so we headed back to where Chuck had seen it fly across the road. And sure enough, a Cinnamon Teal flew up out of the marsh across the way and landed in a dugout. To add to that, as we scanned the dugout, we picked out a female Hooded Merganser.

We moved on to Hastings Lake, thinking we could find Great Blue Herons without a problem. Double-crested Cormorants were on nests, but not a single heron could be found. We saw Western Grebes, American White Pelicans, Common Terns, and Pectoral Sandpipers. Next we headed up to highway 21 and Wye Road where there had been a record of a Pacific Loon. Although the loon was not found, the lake did disappoint. We observed Horned Grebe, Spotted Sandpiper, Common Merganser, Brewer's Blackbird, Barrow's Goldeneye, and FINALLY we saw a Great Blue Heron!!

We drove through Fort Saskatchewan and up towards Opal. A pond just north of the Fort had some more species we hadn't recorded yet, Marbled Godwit and a WHIMBREL (very exciting, as it was a lifer for both of us).

In the forests near Opal, we quietly listened for begging calls, and as we tracked them down we found ourselves under a Great Gray Owl nest, the female perched about 20 feet up in a spruce tree next to it. After snapping a few dozen photos we were about to head out when a Northern Goshawk swooped down at the owl!!! As we

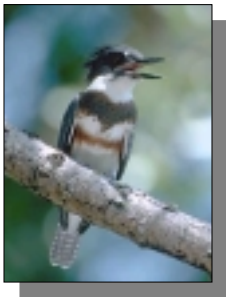


Whimbrel

made our way out we added Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-headed Vireo, and Pine Siskins to our list. A check on a second nest box revealed a Northern Saw-whet Owl female poking her head out. We ended that foray with a Tennessee Warbler near the truck.

As we arrived in Edmonton, we added Swainson's Hawk along the Whitemud freeway, one dark phase, and another regular phase. That would finish us for the day, but we vowed to add some more species the next morning, we were still missing some key species, and we were only at 82.

On Sunday we headed back to Cawes Lake to see if we could add a few more shorebirds. Chuck picked a Mourning Dove out perched in a tree. The lake was alive with birds again and with the light winds it was easy to hear a Common Snipe doing its breeding flight overhead. We added Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, California Gull, and two Northern Harriers that were flying over the cattails in search of food.



**Belted
Kingfisher**

A short time later we were in town at Tim Horton's (no not for donuts), to look for the Peregrine Falcons that nest on the Clinical Sciences Building at the University of Alberta. The female was on the nest, but the male must have been out hunting.

It was 10:00 a.m. and we rushed over to Whitemud Creek for a walk through old mixed wood forest. A Belted Kingfisher was a surprise along the creek. Our walk was fruitful as we added White-winged Crossbill, Western Tanager, Blue Jay, American Tree Sparrow, Evening Grosbeak, and Purple Finch. We were at 98 species!!! Only two more to reach 100. Chuck suggested a trip up to Jim Butler's neighbourhood; perhaps we could add a Merlin or Junco. Well, we did add a Swainson's Thrush, and can you believe we were stuck at 99 species. No luck finding another one before the end of the 24 hours. Perhaps we could add that Short-eared Owl we saw the night before we started the Baillie . . . no?? Well, that's that, another Baillie Birdathon come and gone.

The 'Old-Timers'

Elson Olorenshaw and Jim Faragini

We think 93 species is a respectable total for a couple old guys that poop out quite quickly and we freely admit that we cheated a bit by picking up 20 at the feeders I have placed at my daughter's acreage. Our route this year took us out of Edmonton east on highway 16 to my daughter Barb's acreage, then Mundare Beach, Amisk Creek bridge (always see Cliff Swallows there) and on to Hastings Lake & of course stops at all sloughs & bushes enroute.

Mundare Beach proved to be surprisingly productive this year. There were a large number of American Avocets (at least 50) and large flocks of Black-bellied and Golden Plovers along with many different shorebirds. There seems to be a real invasion of American Avocets this year.

On Rowan's Route at Kallal meadow we normally count on seeing a colony of Bobolinks but over the years the numbers have been decreasing and have finally arrived at zero. We did manage to see one lonely Bobolink elsewhere. We believe that this species is one that is fast disappearing in our area. In the opposite vein - we saw a few meadowlarks. Perhaps spring snowstorms in the south drove some up this way.

At Hastings Lake we were pleasantly surprised to see a Common Loon but were disappointed to see only a small number of Western Grebes. This is a fascinating place to watch birds - the Great Blue Herons as usual are competing with the Double-crested Cormorants for nests in the trees on the island and the Red-necked Grebes have their nests on built up mounds along the shallow shore.

To sum up we are reasonably happy with 93 species but each year we plan (and fail) to break 100 so it is starting to sound like my golf score. NEXT YEAR WE WILL BREAK 100!!!!

The Challengers

Geoff Holroyd, Pat Crossley, Sarah Trefry, and Hugo Framis

Our 2002 Baillie Birdathon was a fun day of birding with no pressure to set records. Our substitute birder was avid Spanish ornithologist Hugo Framis imported for the event, well almost. Hugo had written looking for a practical volunteer opportunity in Canada. Helen and Phil Trefry seized the opportunity to get extra help for the Birdathon and for their peregrine breeding program, and imported Hugo, just in time for the Birdathon. Our goals for the day were 100 species, lots of life-birds for Hugo and lots of laughs by supper time.

We began at 5 am on our route to Helen and Phil's Upsandowns Farms where we stopped at a few ponds that added over 30 species on our list, including a Pied-billed Grebe by 6am. Rumours of a Rufous Hummingbird at the Trefry feeders held us for a few minutes but Phil promised to watch out for the rare hummer. So we headed north to Islet Lake Staging area for Great-crested Flycatcher - it seemed like a good idea after seeing them their last June, but it was a bust this year. Hugo did spot a Rose-breasted Grosbeak much to his and our delight. So we headed north with 81 species by 10am.

Then we did the obvious and headed to Elk Island National Park. At the annual stop at Tawayik Lake we enjoyed the Avocets nesting on the mud flats. Sharp watching though drooping eyelids failed to see a cinnamon teal. At Astotin Lake we were almost skunked for new species - spring migration was over and no loon in sight. Geoff's imitation did not fool the bittern, nor Hugo. We pulled away after lunch with 92 species at 12:30, way behind last years total at this time, but way ahead on Hugo's life list.

At Stonehouse road, we did hear Sprague's Pipits and Mountain Bluebirds much to our delight. At Mundare Beach the main migration was obviously over but two Snow Geese lingered, as well as a Black-bellied Plover, a Red Knot, a few Sanderling, one peep which Gerry Beyersbergen identified as a Semipalmated Sandpiper on the next day even though he was not there (but he is a great birder to be able to identify the shorebird a day later ☺). As we headed south a Swainson's Hawk allowed us to show Hugo how to tell it from Red-tails. The colony of Cliff Swallows at Amisk Creek left us at 108 species but no Bobolinks at the usual corner.

Determined to foray on to 110 species, we headed to Mom's Ice Cream in Tofield. Why you say, well ice cream is good for your eyesight! No new species until we saw a Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Upsandowns. We were one short of our revised goal. Little did we know that Gerry Beyersbergen had identified the Semipalm for us and we were really at 110 species. We achieved our goals, over 100 species, lots of lifers for Hugo, and lots of laughs.

PS: Mammals and Amphibians seen and heard: Wood Bison, Coyote, Richardson's Ground Squirrel, Red Squirrel, Moose with two calves, White-tailed and Mule Deer, Beaver, Muskrat, and Chorus Frog.

The Traveler

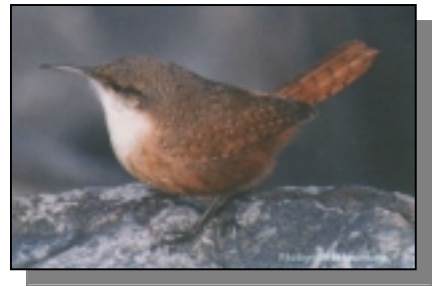
Jason Duxbury

I had the opportunity to do a hike down into the Grand Canyon, Arizona. I thought it would be a great place to see how many species I could find down there while conducting my 2002 birdathon.

A quiet empty parking lot greeted me when I arrived at around 6:00 am. The only sounds were from crows and Lesser Goldfinches that were flitting about the trees of the Grand Canyon Village.

At around 500 ft down into the canyon, I came across some bushes that had a great deal of commotion in and around their bases. As I approached, birds of many species irrupted to fly up to the protection of larger trees. One started to sing the "Drink-your-tea-hee" song that is familiar to those living in southern Alberta. This was the Spotted Towhee. However, the scrimmage under the bushes included Green-tailed Towhees and White-crowned Sparrows as well.

Then I heard the song I was hoping to hear: The extremely loud, downward spiraling song of the Canyon Wren. This song echoed throughout the chasm we were hiking down into. When it came out of a dark fissure it sat on a rock and triumphantly announced its successful food delivery to its nest. A new species to add to my life list!



Canyon Wren

Another 500 feet down the chasm and I was halted by a streak of blue flying across my line of sight. What seemed to be a large Mountain Bluebird by colouration, turned out to be larger and a great deal louder. The harsh chatter was coming from a Pinyon Jay.



Pinyon Jay

Walking away from the rants of the jay, another more pleasant song became audible. This song sounded similar to the “sweet sweet sweet” song of the Yellow Warbler, only the second half of the song accelerated quickly and trailed off. Knowing this song was too different to be a Yellow Warbler, I scanned the brush to find the song-maker. A switchback below me, singing at the very top of a tree was the source of the song; a Virginia Warbler! This species is only found in the southwest United States, so it was a treat to find a new species of warbler that I normally would not have a chance to see.

Fast forward (and down) to 3000 feet below the rim. As the grade evened off, I approached the green oasis of 40 metre high cottonwoods. Flittering among the branches of the huge cottonwoods were Ash-throated Flycatchers, a large member of the flycatcher family. Walking amongst the cacti in around the Ranger Station were Black-throated Sparrows, a stunning species of what are normally thought of drab, brown birds. In the bushes surrounding the cacti were Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Black-chinned Sparrows. A few more species added to my life list, and I was off again for the final walk out to Plateau Point.



Black-throated Sparrow

A kilometre and a half further along, I was at the viewpoint and I was not disappointed. Rumoured to be one of the best views of the Colorado River in the canyon, I could see the emerald-green river over 1500 feet below me. The river, which used to be a muddy red colour, was now green due to the lack of sediments that are being trapped by Glen Canyon Dam up river.



Flying around above the final drop to the river below were White-throated Swifts. Hopping about the rocks at the viewpoint was a Rock Wren and a Rock Squirrel, which gives you a sense of the terrain. As I turned to head back, a Turkey Vulture swooped passed.

After the vulture was out of sight and I was heading back towards the hike back up, the full 3000 feet of canyon became a harsh reality. A journey that would take over 3 hours to make, bird watching became a secondary activity while I climbed back out of the canyon. That is until a bird with a 10 ft wingspan came into view.

I was told that it was unlikely to see a California Condor, but there it was, riding the thermals of the canyon rim over 1500 above me. These highly endangered birds have been part of a release program in the canyon that was initiated to repopulate an area where they once inhabited. The release area is some distance away, however 4 condors decided to fly to this area that day. Unmistakably large, this condor soared with some ravens that were dwarfed by the large condor. An hour later, and closer

to the rim, I could see the yellow wing tags that each condor wears that are used by researchers for identifying the individual birds. What a thrill to see a bird of a species that was on the brink of extinction!

Other than some Rufous-crowned Sparrows that kept running up the path in front of me, my bird watching was officially over until I reached the rim and had a big drink of water. I now had the time to record the species I had seen in the canyon that morning; 26 in total, but ten of those were lifers!

I still had the afternoon and evening to get more species. Back in Flagstaff, I was informed of a footpath that wound its way through the city. The path went through Ponderosa Pines and ended at a small slough at the base of a small rocky outcrop. These habitats would be different enough from where I had already been. I added species such as Pygmy Nuthatches, Lewis' Woodpecker and Lark Sparrows to name a few. In all, I found 56 species in approximately 12 hours. Not the highest total of species, but at least I was in Arizona counting them!



**California
Condor**

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory will be holding the Annual General Meeting on Wednesday, November 13. The meeting will be held at 7:30 in room 802 in the General Services Building on the west side of campus of the University of Alberta.

All members are encouraged to attend and participate. The agenda will be as follows:

- 1. Business arising from previous AGM**
- 2. Annual Financial Report**
- 3. Station Reports**
- 4. New Business including election of new directors**

Refreshments and snacks will be served after the meeting. We hope to see you there!

NEXT WILLET ISSUE

Material for the forthcoming newsletter should be sent to: Jason Duxbury, editor, The Willet, 1142 Saddleback Rd, Edmonton, Alberta, T6J 4Z4. Phone: 780-433-5790, Email: jduxbury@ualberta.ca. Next newsletter deadline: January 31, 2003. Articles can be on bird banding, birdwatching, wildlife viewing, etc.