

1999 Baillie Birdathon

- Jason Duxbury

The previous few Baillie Birdathons involved trips covering major portions of our province. During this years birdathon, the only trip on my mind was that of my up and coming wedding and honeymoon! But like the dedicated birder I am, an effort to see as many species as possible had to be made!

The last two days of May were chosen for 1999's event. The route this year would mostly follow that of my 1996 birdathon, and talk about consistency! Like the birdathon three years ago, 118 species were spotted again. My birding companion for the second year in a row was Sandra Nydokus. Like myself, she also had a wedding on her mind, but she still wanted to help the cause!

It all started again in Edmonton's little piece of boreal forest; Whitemud Park. This year, the count started at 8:30 pm. Escaping the noise of traffic and the sights of civilization, the sounds of the woods started to become clearer and clearer. The first songs and calls were of birds commonly seen and heard in the Edmonton area. The trill of a chipping sparrow, the sweet song of the yellow warbler, the tinkling song of the myrtle warbler came from the tree tops. The long drawn out whistles of the white-throated sparrow filling the air from underneath the low lying brush.

The sounds of a Lincoln's sparrow and a song sparrow intermixing were heard near the slow moving Whitemud Creek. Lazily floating down the creek were a pair of American wigeon and pair of mallards. On the other side of the creek, deeper into the woods, new sounds were heard. A purple finch seemed to be dueling with a warbling vireo over who had a more bubbly song. Not to be outdone, the excitable little house wren entered the competition. Deeper into the depths of the park, the sky began to fill with the park's specialty. One of the few places one can find northern rough-winged swallows happens to be in Whitemud Park, and now that they were spotted, other areas of Edmonton needed searching!

The route back to the car from the park retraced the same pathway, however, new species presented themselves on the second time through. A pair of western tanagers were calling, a yellow-bellied sapsucker was drumming, and a common raven was making sounds only a raven can make. By the end of the trip through the park, 26 species were added to the list. It was time to see a peregrine!



A few more stops had to be made before darkness fell. The closest pair of nesting peregrine falcons in Edmonton was at the Clinical Sciences Building on the University of Alberta campus. This had to be the easiest bird to add to the list. The car was parked on the side of the road, the nest box on the side of the building was scanned with binoculars, and with the appearance of the back of a falcon the species was added to the list. The last stop of the evening was in the Pleasantview district of Edmonton, where the location of a nesting pair of merlins was known. Surrendering to darkness we had a tally of 28 species. It was time to get ready for the next day of searching.



In the early morning, 40 minute drive towards Beaverhill Lake provided numerous species. Ponds along side of the highway added duck species such as redheads, canvasbacks, buffleheads and northern shovellers. The odd telephone pole was the perch of a Red-tailed Hawk or a Swainson's Hawk, and fence posts were the perches for Mountain Bluebirds and Tree Swallows.

The first stop of the morning was Francis Point, a viewing blind on the south shore of Beaverhill Lake, just east of Tofield. From the parking lot to the blind is a walk that takes about 5 minutes, but along this walk more species revealed themselves. Three eastern kingbirds fluttered alongside the path, red-eyed vireos sang from the aspens and alder flycatchers called out for "free-beer" from the willow bushes. Closer to the blind, a great blue heron could be seen flying low over the lake. American white pelicans were slowly paddling along close to the shore, fishing for their breakfasts. The long drawn out "per-willet" call of the willet could be heard near the shore, along with the pumping sounds of an American bittern coming from some cattails. In the blind, three or four pairs of barn swallows had started building their mud nests in the rafters. It wouldn't be long before they would be laying their 4 or 5 eggs. The swallows seemed to be agitated, so the stay in the blind was kept short. Off to the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area!

The Natural Area was alive with sounds of the birds flittering about in the trees, brush and long grass. Sharptailed sparrows were calling from the damp meadow grass. Black terns flew over the marshes with their cousins the white and relatively larger common terns.

Red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds were singing and aggressively defending their territories in the cattails. From some willows came strange jumbled songs of buzzes, trills and calls. With some bushwacking, the source of these strange songs were confirmed as two gray cat-birds, a relatively uncommon find in the natural area.

Out on the mudflats of Beaverhill Lake the white-faced ibises and the snowy egret seen earlier in the spring were nowhere to be found, as were most shorebird species normally seen in the area at this time of the year. There were no yellowlegs, godwits, dowitchers or small species of sandpipers. Killdeers, common snipes and American avocets were the only shorebird species seen at Beaverhill Lake that day. Also seen was another great-blue heron, another American Bittern and a black-crowned night-heron. Wading birds seemed to be plentiful. The water near the shore also contained 14 western grebes. The relatively high numbers of wading birds and grebes may indicate high populations of small fish species in the lake.

In the woodlands around the lake, many migrating species of birds returning from spending the winter in the tropics were spotted. An American redstart, many myrtle and yellow warblers, a blackpoll warbler, and hermit and Swainson's thrushes filled the woods with song. A rose-breasted grosbeak and an American Robin started a duet with their similar songs. The walk in the woods was very enjoyable, but time was a ticking!



A short drive of around 20km can take you to the northern shore of Beaverhill Lake. Along the way, a tip provided by the crew at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory led the way to a great horned owl nest. No longer sitting in the nest, the young of the year were easily spotted sitting in large spruce trees near the nest. They were old enough to look similar to their parents, but still retained their fluffy nestling appearance.

The north shore of Beaverhill Lake is known for its unique prairie-like species composition. In southern Alberta prairies, the tinkling song of the Sprague's pipit and the liquid call of the western meadowlark are very common. To walk through this little area in the central Alberta parkland, one could almost believe he or she is out on the prairies! Out on the lake more western grebes and another great-blue heron were seen. The walk back to the car from the

lake provided the opportunity to add a northern flicker and American goldfinches to the growing list.

From the north shore of Beaverhill Lake, it is only a short drive to Elk Island National Park, a place where the sight of cowbirds picking insects off the back of bison provides a glimpse to what would have been very common in the past when bison covered the prairies. A quick visit to Tawasik Lake was timed perfectly to see two Trumpeter Swans just lifting off the water and fly north into the park. Short hikes into the woods, added species such as ovenbirds, dark-eyed juncos, Tennessee and orange-crowned Warblers, and ruby-crowned kinglets. The next stop was Astotin Lake, but during the drive a hawk flashed across the road and landed in a tree. It was hoped that the hawk was a northern goshawk, however, upon closer inspection it turned out to be a broad-winged hawk; a great sighting! Finally arriving at Astotin, a walk along the shoreline added four new species: ring-necked duck, bank swallows, a lone common loon, and from the woods nearby, a drumming ruffed grouse and a singing magnolia warbler.

The sun was starting to set. With 113 species on the list the journey turned back towards Edmonton. A stop at the Strathcona Wilderness Centre was made on the way back home. A tempting feeder lured a white-breasted nuthatch on the list... 114. From the top of a metal storage shed a common grackle called... 115. An abbreviated hike into the wilderness of Strathcona County was rewarded with the songs of a mourning warbler and a veery... 116 and 117. Time was running out...

Back in Edmonton's river valley, we tried one last time to find any new species. Perhaps a merganser flying down the river or the drumming of a pileated woodpecker. With time running out nothing new to the list could be found. However, just before the clock ticked 8:30, a pair we spotted two spotted sandpipers... 118 species and we were done!

Another spring and another fun birdathon. I must admit that the wedding planning and then the subsequent wedding have wonderful and exciting interruptions to birding. I appreciate everyone for their sponsorship. I also appreciate everyone's tolerance and understanding when I say that I have no idea what everyone has pledged as the past hectic period has led to the misplacement of my pledge sheets! Therefore, please send me a cheque for any amount you wish. Please make out your cheques to Birds Studies Canada. On behalf of the birds you are helping to research and conserve, I thank you for your support in 1999. See you next year when I come-a-knock'n!