

Baillie Birdathon 2000 – The Reunion

- Lisa Takats and Jason Duxbury

This year's Baillie reunion of the Chair, Jason Duxbury, and Vice Chair, Lisa Takats, of the Beaverhill Bird Observatory was a great adventure. As you may recall, Jason, Lisa and Josh Bilyk had conducted a [Baillie in 1997](#) and counted 151 species, and we were eager to match this total or beat the one day Alberta record of 156 species.

We headed up to Lac La Biche again (to continue the tradition) on May 27 and arrived about 10:30 p.m. We would start at midnight and go to midnight (12 hours of birding!!). After we pitched our tents, we strolled along the roads and beach in Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park just after midnight. We heard Western Grebes, a Mallard, and a late night Clay-colored Sparrow, and Least Flycatcher. We were also fortunate to see an incredible display of Northern Lights over the lake. After a short snooze to 5:30 a.m. we awoke to the sounds of an incredible number and diversity of birds, and we counted 30 species easily from the confines of our tents: American Robin, Swainson's Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, Western Tanager, White-throated Sparrow, Western Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, and the list goes on. A total of 83 species were counted in the Boreal region. We even had the luck of hearing a Palm Warbler at our one stop in a Black Spruce Bog area along the highway.

As we continued south we observed a huge flock of passerines flying in a field. We pulled over quickly, but not quick enough. Our hearts sank, but we were determined, and started walking through the field. As we approached the area where we had seen the birds, a huge flock rose into the air right from under our feet . . . still not identifiable. We crouched down and decided to wait for their return. We were encouraged by two other new species: Savannah Sparrow and Northern Harrier. Luck was with us, as five minutes later the flock of unknown passerines came back and landed within 50 meters. We raised our binoculars only to find that we still could not see them. They seemed to just disappear into the ground. But with a little more persistence we were able to start seeing them walking slowly through the stubble and identified Lapland Longspurs and Horned Larks, two species we had not counted on.

Our next stop would be Elk Island. As we entered the park, two huge white birds were seen across a pond, one on a nest, the other in the water. With collars on their necks there could be no mistake, Trumpeter Swans. More waterfowl species were added to our list and a Wilson's Phalarope pair circled in the water dredging up food. A short walk near Astotin Lake proved worthwhile as we added Pileated Woodpecker, Blackpoll Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Warbling Vireo. We continued our journal south by 2 p.m.

Tofield Cemetery would be our next stop, and with ease we added a Great Horned Owl to the list (a previously known nest). The Tofield Nature Centre bird condos were home to Purple Martins and we were also amused to see House Sparrows sharing the accommodation. As we pulled in to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory lab, Tyler Flockhart greeted us and pointed out the Pine Siskins that had recently joined the goldfinches at the feeders. A walk to the weir provided us with Marbled Godwit, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Marsh Wren. Finally, as we departed the BBO a House Wren bid us farewell.

The south and supper beckoned us, and Jason knew of a great Greek restaurant in Stettler. We stopped en route to listen and look for birds and were successful in adding Common Snipe. At the small town of Andrew, we were elated to find the world's largest Mallard, although Jason and I agreed it was difficult to identify. A quick stop at produced little, so we pushed onwards and added Loggerhead Shrike to the list. As we drove through Stettler, Jason remarked that the restaurant was no longer there. We stopped for gas and it was suggested we eat at a hotel restaurant down the road. With Greek on my mind, I had to order the spinach and feta stuffed chicken. We were disappointed at having no birds added in a while, but as if to lift our spirits, a Herring Gull sat atop a light standard right outside the restaurant!!

We continued our journey heading east, as we wanted to make it to Chip Lake to visit Dave Stepnisky's study area for owls and woodpeckers. No birds for the whole trip to HW2, and just north of that, I had to stop for a potty break. We were of course fortunate for this stop, because two Sandhill Cranes flew over as we headed back out onto the highway. The next challenge would be to miss Edmonton, and we agreed on the Devon route. This was fortunate because Mourning Dove was added to our list. A quick stop at Wabamun Lake also proved successful, as a Pied-billed Grebe floated around in the water, and a Peregrine Falcon nest box on the power plant contained a female incubating her brood.

At 10 p.m. we pulled in to Chip Lake to find a group of wayward biologist- and photographer-types sitting around the campfire drinking scotch and talking shop. Of course Gord Court and Wayne Lynch were part of the party, but we also saw Warren Fleming and Steve Glendinning, who came to greet us. These people along with Dave's crew of four made for a cozy welcome, and we were tempted not to go for any more birds. But, we took a deep breath and pushed onwards. A short drive from camp we were able to call for and hear Northern Saw-whet and Great Gray Owls. We returned to the campfire to hear an Alder Flycatcher call from a distance . . . and with that we called it a day.