

The Crossley, McKeating & Holroyd Birdathon of 2001

- Geoff Holroyd

Our 2001 Baillie Birdathon started with a new strategy - start at the new McKeating/Crossley cabin to save travel time during the 24 hour time limit and begin the count closer to the songbird haven of Elk Island National Park. While the plan did have some advantages - wine with supper and birding with breakfast in the woods, the nighthawk flying over the city had to be ignored since it was heard before the start time and the team was not assembled. Never mind, we would see other birds. Would this new strategy help increase our species total? It certainly allowed us to be birding earlier in the morning.

We gathered at the cabin to enjoy an Australian red and burgers, oops, I mean to begin birding at 6pm. Almost immediately, a Mourning Warbler sang, we were off to a good start. About 14 feeders around the cabin added Purple Finch, chickadee, and Hairy Woodpecker, but the previous weekend's Evening Grosbeaks were too shy to get counted. By 9pm we had recorded 45 species. Gerry and Geoff headed out on the local roads to bird (honest we were not avoiding dishes:) When we returned we had added lots of waterfowl, our count stood at 57 species, and the dishes were clean (thanks Pat and Elisabeth). A pretty good start to the Birdathon.

The now famous rooster alarm went off at 5 am. We sprang from our beds to listen to the dawn chorus, which it would appear is best heard from the outhouse, judging by the direction of travel of the birders. A Black-and-white Warbler and Ovenbird greeted the early risers. After breakfast we walked over part of the quarter section and heard Philadelphia Vireo, Yellowthroat and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. By 7am with the dishes done and the car loaded we had 66 species on our list.

Elisabeth joined us for the night but had botany plans for the day, so she stayed behind to look for flowering plants (she later admitted that she visited the pillow too).

By 8 am we were at the south gate of Elk Island National Park and had 75 species. Warblers were hard to find along the parkway, but we did pick up Tennessee, Yellow-rumped and Redstart. By the time we left Astotin Lake three hours later, we had our benchmark of 100 species. Now the tough part. Each species after 100 comes only from sharp watching though drooping eyelids.

A bright, male cinnamon teal was next, at its usual pond on the west side of the park. Why does this pond often have this elusive teal and not other ponds - one of life's many mysteries to be pondered over a beer, oh for a beer. Anyway back to the Birdathon!

We worked our way south and east to the north side of Beaverhill Lake only to discover that the lake shoreline has retreated a long way south. One look at the tangle of reeds that stretch to the water and we declared it lunch time. It was 1pm after all, and we had 109 species.

At Mundare Beach we had a three-fer: Snow Geese left over from the festival, a California Gull just over the horizon (well almost), and a pair of Eared Grebes, which seemed exciting until we stopped later at Cooking Lake and saw 1000's, maybe 5,000-10,000. However a pair was fine for now. But it was 3 pm. Our 24 hour deadline was drawing close and we were at 112 species.

A few Golden Plovers at a pond near Ryley, gott'em. Gerry jumped up and down on the Amisk Creek bridge - no cliff swallow!! So Geoff went out, just need more weight and three cliff swallows flew out. We wondered why the large colony had shrank so drastically, but no time to ponder, it was 4 pm.

No Bobolinks, so off to Tofield for ice cream, err, I mean Purple Martins and Grackles. Stops headed into the city did not help, but a recount by Gerry found we were really at 117. Obviously he is used to bigger numbers than Geoff.

One last try for additional birds, so we swung by Whyte Avenue and saw a male Merlin, then over to the university to have a Peregrine fly to the nest on cue. 119 species and it was 6 pm. Not bad. We can't have a record every year.

Your 2001 CWS Birdathon A-Team:
Gerald McKeating, Pat Crossley and Geoff Holroyd.

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