

# 2001 Baillie Birdathon in Ft. Liard, NWT

## - Jason Duxbury

Minus the mosquitoes, black flies and no-see-ums, this year's Baillie Birdathon may have been one of my favourites. This year, a songbird survey contract required me to leave for Ft. Liard, NWT before the end of May. This meant that I had to conduct my birdathon earlier in May than I would have liked, or conduct it in the Ft. Liard area. I opted for the latter.

Ft. Liard is a small settlement on the Liard River, just north of the B.C. border and just east of the Yukon border. It is referred to as the tropics of the NWT, as the weather there is relatively temperate. In fact, it is believed that Ft. Liard has more frost free days than Edmonton. Many of the trees in the area reach to 30 m in height, with some outstanding individuals stretching to nearly 50 m. The largest Trembling Aspen in the world can be found just north of the town.

Within 30 minutes of town, there are a wide variety of habitat types that support a wide diversity of bird species. There are White Spruce dominated forests, pure aspen stands, mixed-wood areas, Black Spruce - sphagnum bogs, clear cuts, rivers, marshes and lakes. The watershed that feeds the Liard River forms a natural migration route to the Arctic along side the eastern slopes of the Mackenzie Mountains. Along with over a the 80 or so species that get recorded during the study, migrant raptors, shorebirds and other songbirds can be found in late May - early June. Therefore, the potential to see a great many species for a birdathon is why I decided to do it here in 2001.

I conducted my count in the evening of May 30 and into the afternoon of May 31. My first stop took me to the southern portion of the study area, and into the Black Spruce – sphagnum bogs. Here I picked up the usual species for this habitat: Hermit Thrush, Palm Warbler and Fox Sparrow. I also heard a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-throated Sparrows, a Boreal Chickadee, a Gray Jay and I flushed a Spruce Grouse. It was a great way to start the count.

My next stop was a young stand of White Spruce mixed in with some Poplars. I knew from last year's work that this would be an easy place to find Bay-breasted Warblers. Sure enough, the warblers were there along with some Magnolia and Tennessee Warblers, a couple of Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and a Northern Waterthrush that may have been around some nearby water.

Moving on, I stepped into some older aspen forests that had some brushy undergrowth. This place was American Redstart heaven. Their buzzy-squeaky calls echoed everywhere. The only species that drowned them out were the Ovenbirds with their very loud "teacher-teacher-teacher" songs. White Spruce infiltrated this pure aspen stand farther down the trail. In this mixed wood area, the first Cape May Warblers were recorded. I then heard some Swainson's Thrushes, a Red-breasted Nuthatch, the ratt-a-tat-tat drumming of the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and the familiar song of an American Robin. In the distance, I heard "the call of the wild", a Common Loon was announcing itself at the lake I was visiting next.



The loon was an easy sighting at the lake. Not hard to miss, these large birds have become familiar to most Canadians as long as the "Loonie" has been around (You can also see them on the back of the \$20 bill). Also on the lake, I found the common boreal lake species such as Buffleheads, Horned Grebes, Red-necked Grebes, Lesser Scaups, Ring-necked Ducks and a pair of Mallards. However, there were some surprises at the lake too. There were Barrow's Goldeneye males mixed in with some Common Goldeneye females, a pair of Surf Scoters, two pairs of White-winged Scoters, and a Long-tailed Duck. In the cat-tails along shore, Red-winged Blackbirds, Soras, Common Yellowthroats, Pied Billed Grebes, Swamp Sparrows, and a lone Marsh Wren signed off for the day. Just as I packed up and was about to return back to town, a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew across the path in front of me! A great way to end the day.

Early the next morning, (before official work had to be done), I drove out to check out some specific spots where certain sightings were made a day or so before. In town, I found a Northern Hawk-owl and a Short-eared Owl. Just outside of town, I found a Great-horned Owl sitting where it was supposed to be, and just down a certain cutline, the Great-Gray Owl was sitting where I was told I would find it. A very successful morning!

During official work hours, I was to visit a mixed-wood area that had a creek running through it. Near the creek I heard a Hammond's Flycatcher. Deeper in the woods I could hear another flycatcher, but this one was a Least Flycatcher. Some of the bark of a White Spruce in the forest had been flecked off that suggested a Three-toed or Black-backed Woodpecker had been at work on the tree. Both species are found in the area, but the patterns left by the bird along the trunk indicated that a Black-backed could be in the area so I kept my eye out for it. As I walked through the forest, some Pine Siskins and White-winged Crossbills flew over going in opposite directions. I then caught a glimpse of a wood-pecker flying by, so I chased it down. Sure enough, the Black-backed Woodpecker was now on my list. Having finished my work in the area, I headed out of the forest to the truck.



To get to the truck, I had to walk through an old burn. Some of the charred trees were still standing, but most had fallen over. The only vegetation in the area was some young saplings that had started to replace the old, burned ones, and some moss. I was not expecting many species in this area except for the odd woodpecker. To my surprise, I flushed a Common Nighthawk off her nest! These nests are normally impossible to find. Nighthawks nest on the ground without building a nest, and their eggs look like stones. This was not only a great bird to get for a birdathon, but the nest was a personal bonus. I started for the truck again, in high spirits after my discovery.



In the warming sun of the morning, the right-of-way along side of the highway had come alive. As I walked back to the truck from the edge of the forest, a Connecticut Warbler burst into song, filling the air with its "Chippy-Chory-Chippy-Chory" song. I then heard a Lincoln's Sparrow and a LeConte's Sparrows. These are not typical roadside sparrows in this region, but the wet spring of the area had produced some suitable habitat for these two species.

"The Job" next took me to a couple of clear-cut areas, one recent and one older. The more recent of the two clear-cuts was open enough to attract some Clay-colored Sparrows. Many other species were repeats; however, a small flock of Cedar Waxwings were kind enough to fly over. In the older clear cuts, there were some small remnants of forest that had attracted a Black-and-White Warbler, a Red-eyed Vireo and a Yellow-rumped Warbler. From the edge of the clear-cut, a Mourning Warbler sang out. Deeper in the forest a Western Tanager sang like a Robin with a sore throat.

Next, I was asked to stop by another lake to see what other waterfowl were in the area. Most of the species were similar to the first lake; however, there were some nice surprises. A Red-throated Loon was drifting in the wavelets in the middle of the lake. This is definitely a species that I would not have seen in central Alberta! Off in another corner, a Canvasback paddled and a male Ruddy Duck displayed for two females. These species would have been seen in Alberta, but in the Liard region they are thought to be rare, so another two great finds!



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I was told that a great place to end my count was to walk around the town's airstrip. During migration, many shorebird species use the wet grassy areas to load up on the insects before continuing their journey to their Arctic breeding ground. On my walk out to the strip, I was investigated by an American Kestrel, a mini version of a Peregrine Falcon. There is a good chance that it had a nest at the edge of the clearing. Out near the airstrip, I was pleased to see that there were many shorebirds to identify. There were some large loud critters; they turned out to be Whimbrels. Other species



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were American Golden Plovers, Black-bellied Plovers, Buff-breasted Sandpipers, a single Ruddy Turnstone, Semi-palmated Plovers, Killdeers, Least Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers, and a White-rumped Sandpiper all together in the same area. Thanks to the airstrip tip, my birdathon list grew by many species!



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It was a great way to get reacquainted the Ft. Liard area before getting to work conducting songbird surveys. I was also reacquainted with some of the other wildlife in the area. During the birdathon, I have already started my bear count with a sighting of two youngsters on the side of the road. Last year I personally had 20 bear sightings in a 23-day period. I also managed to get "nose to nose" with a beautiful Grey Wolf. I hope for another great month of wildlife viewing.

In the end, I saw 131 species. Ft. Liard is a great place to see birds because it is the place where the east meets the west. There are plenty of eastern wood-warblers that are migrating across Canada as they move to their northern breeding grounds (Bay-breasted Warbler, Canada Warbler, Magnolia Warbler), and they mix with some western birds, extending their ranges passed the mountains (Varied Thrush, Hammond's Flycatcher). The region boasts the highest diversity of bird species north of 60°; a great place to conduct a birdathon!



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