

## Raising the Big Day Bar

By Yousif Attia & Stuart Mackenzie

Long-time friends Stu Mackenzie (Port Rowan, ON) and Yousif Attia (Calgary, AB) attempted a 5<sup>th</sup> Alberta Big Day on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012. We learned so much in 2011 that we wanted to try again while all the details were still fresh in our heads. After two days of scouting the province in the rain we set up camp around 1600 in the Cold Lake Provincial Park on June 03, 2012. A substantial weather system that moved through the area that day had rendered our scouting efforts fruitless; we were going to have to rely on knowledge obtained from previous visits. There was also a glimmer of hope that the weather would work in our favour by grounding much needed migrants. More importantly we needed the forecasted calm sunny morning to come through. The same day a year previous we awoke to sub-zero temperatures (low -6°C) which crippled night time exploits and the morning chorus. This year however, we couldn't have asked for a more perfect night and dawn.

The Big Day – June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012.

When we started at 00:00, there wasn't a cloud in the sky or a breath of wind and the temperature was a perfect 10 C. We began in the Provincial Park listening for owls and other nocturnal sounds over a still Cold Lake where we first heard distant Bonaparte's Gulls on the lake accompanied by the distinctive calls of Red-necked and Western grebes. We hoped that the glass calm surface of the lake would facilitate distant calling owls but no such luck. On our way out of the park we picked up our first singing warbler at 10 past midnight, a Connecticut. Our second stop was near Grand Centre for a scouted Long-eared Owl pair. The rest of the morning hours were spent carefully listening at numerous wetlands allowing us to hear Yellow and Virginia rails as well as American Bittern, LeConte's and Nelson's sparrow and numerous Sedge Wrens. It wasn't long after that we also heard a couple Northern Saw-whets and no less than 5 Barred owls. Common Nighthawks called at numerous locations, and a nocturnal migrating Gray-cheeked Thrush overhead was a treat before light crept up on the short boreal night around 0330. Shortly thereafter we observed a very large owl, likely a Great Gray, fly across the road. We were torn to call it, as the look was poor, but our hesitation was short lived as at our next stop we heard a clearly calling Great Gray along the Primrose Lake Highway.

As the dawn chorus began we quickly tallied many of the boreal specialties of the region. We heard two Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and Olive-sideds were found at numerous stops. Depending on the year, both those species can be difficult to find early in the breeding season. With a bit of patience both Palm and Nashville warblers were heard in muskeg habitat, the latter increasingly more abundant than in previous years. A single American Three-toed Woodpecker was the first of many "gifts" we would receive throughout the day. We rounded up all the regular boreal species in short order and were excited knowing that our efficient day-break birding would buy us time down the road. As it turned out though, this calm warm night contrasting the waters of Cold Lake created an impenetrably thick fog over Cold Lake and surrounding waterbodies. The fog was so thick that we couldn't see the contents of ponds and lakes along the roadside let alone scoping the lake proper which is a critical component of the day. It really was too good to be true. Despite the fog, we

carried on and made the best of the early morning birding. We noticed a light breeze beginning to move the fog farther offshore and found a sweet spot between the Provincial Park and the Marina and started tallying close to shore waterfowl and waterbirds. Diligent scoping turned up a pair of Hooded Mergansers close to shore, which had been all but a mythical big day species in the past. A small flock of Red Crossbills alighted the nearby spruces and a Belted Kingfisher relieved our fear of missing this species 2 years in a row. While giving the lake a final scan, we both heard a distinctly familiar, but entirely foreign, sharp burry chink from the heavens above. We both stopped in our tracks and had a simultaneous “what the heck is that?” moment. It took a moment to locate the bird, but the lightly coloured, large finch type bird with a dark bib quickly confirmed it to be a DICKCISSEL! With only five documented records for the province, Dickcissel was rare enough to be virtually unrepeatable on subsequent big day attempts, a much needed edge. Hi-fives ensued.

Although the fog was slowly clearing, the clock was ticking. To make matters worse, our scouted Bald Eagle at Muriel Lake was also fogged in. We had to cut our losses and move on. Luckily our scouted Ross’s Goose and 8 Snow Geese at Sandy Lake were still around although the Greater Yellowlegs was not. We continued on to Bonneyville where a few more shorebirds remained from the previous day. We left the Cold Lake area with well over 100 species, and we knew that we were on track for a promising daily total.

The parkland took some hard work, but did not disappoint. Habitats surrounding Kehewin Lake produced Great Crested Flycatcher, Veery, Philadelphia Vireo and our second Broad-winged Hawk. The lake itself was surprisingly quiet; in contrast to 2011 when we were surprised with both White-winged and Surf scoter. Leaving Kehewin we were greeted by an adult Bald Eagle cruising over the highway – what a relief and the only one for the day.

Being slightly ahead of schedule, we agreed to capitalize on a quick stop in Vermilion to find one of three documented Red-headed Woodpeckers in the province this spring. We scoured the neighborhood and before long we heard the distinctive calls of a Red-headed - another bonus species that will be difficult to repeat.

A long drive south found us at a “backpocket” slough scouted on our way up to Cold Lake. There were a couple lingering shorebirds two days previous, but as we had hoped the weather had grounded a few more: a flock of 20 Red Knots, a couple Semipalmated Plovers and a single Black-bellied Plover greeted us soon after arriving. We continued south.

Many roadside species kept us awake as we crossed into the prairies. In 2011, Short-eared Owls were observed at many locations, but were completely absent this year. Unlike last year however, Lark Buntings were much more abundant - a testament to the great amount of variation you can experience along the same route from year to year. Prairies can be notoriously windy but the winds remained light throughout the afternoon. A wonderful string of luck allowed us to pick up most of the specialties at a one-stop-prairie-shop. A gorgeous expanse of short-grass prairie yielded a couple Baird’s, a single Grasshopper sparrow, numerous Sprague’s Pipit, as well as both Chestnut-collared and McCown’s longspurs. A scan of the area produced a pair of Burrowing Owls and a distant soaring Golden Eagle. Never underestimate the scan!

Our badlands stop was well scouted and we quickly found the predicted Prairie Falcon, Say's Phoebe, Rock Wren, Violet-green Swallow, Spotted Towhee and a Yellow-breasted Chat. We also found a few migrants; our only Blackpoll Warbler and a singing Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Late arriving Western Wood-pewees were also back on territory. We were still ahead of schedule and the prospect of catching up to the record was starting to become a reality, but we had a long way to go. We picked up a few more birds in the Brooks area, but we missed our back up White-winged Scoter.

For some time now we had been watching a very ominous dark sky toward our destination in the southwest. The storm warnings over the radio followed, and we watched as the storm erupted over the mountains out of the driver side windows. What a shame we thought, to maintain a record pace only to meet a storm in the final part of the day. We had come this far and had no choice but to carry on. We decided to stop keeping count at this point and just bird like it was our last day on earth. We knew we were on a record pace and didn't want our number to either discourage us or give us false hope that we had sealed the deal. As we neared the gates, we noticed that the storm had miraculously stopped short of our destination. Beams of sunlight shone through illuminating the rolling grasslands of Mountain View, and the snow-covered peaks of Waterton Lakes National Park.

Great Horned Owl, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Bobolink and House Finch, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and an Upland Sandpiper on a fencepost were new additions. With quickly fading light we entered Waterton. A quick scout of the town and surrounding area a few days prior had helped and we quickly found many mountain specialties like Barrow's Goldeneye, Cassin's Finch, Lazuli Bunting, Black-headed Grosbeak, MacGillivray's Warbler, Red-naped Sapsucker and Rufous and Calliope hummingbird in town. A pair of Harlequins were easily found, but we couldn't find any American Dippers. Our scouted Dusky Grouse was also missing in action. We climbed in elevation adding Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Townsend's Solitaire, Varied Thrush, and Townsend's Warbler. The storm had caught up with us at this point and as light faded our desperation for more species grew. Light drizzle gradually turned into steady rain. We had now been birding/driving for 22 hours solid, exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, we decided that we would go until the end.

During some downtime earlier in the day, we had compiled a list of last ditch nighttime efforts we would execute in the last hours. A Trumpeter Swan was reported by locals to be lingering at a nearby pond at a golfcourse. After a 15 minute hike in, we spotlighted the pond in hopes it was still there. No sign. Plan B was to find a dipper in the dark. We had somehow missed them during our time here but we knew that they nest under bridges and we had a chance at finding them in the dark. Despite a valiant effort, we did not find our last ditch effort birds and we called it quits at the park gate at 23:50. Although we didn't add any species in our after-hours foray, we felt guilt-free in that we tried everything possible. We knew we had done well but had stopped counting species hours ago. We tallied the day's species count on our drive to the motel in Cardston, and were astounded when a number of recounts revealed a new Alberta and Canada record of 226 species beating the previous national record by eight species! This total also represents the highest June Big Day in North America.

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