

Alberta Big Day Report: June 1st, 2005

On Tuesday May 31st, Jody Allair and myself made our way to Cold Lake P.P. for our second "Big Day" attempt. The initial plan was to spend a day scouting and birding the Cold Lake area and to do the big day on Thursday June 2nd. The forecast however, left us with no choice but to do it the following day (June 1st) hoping that we could work around the storms that were developing all over the province. We made slight route modifications and a stricter schedule, which meant we should hit all 3 eco-regions in the province. Easier said than done.

We arrived in the park campground at 23:30 and set the tent up on a warm, clear, and calm boreal evening (ideal for owling). With headlamps and a lantern we made last minute plans for the following morning route. Just as we wrapped up the maps and details a distant Northern Saw-whet Owl began calling. Both of us immediately checked our watches to find it was 00:02 and our big day had begun. It was as if the owl was wishing us luck, and reminding us we needed to get some sleep. We added a further 4 species from the tent before dozing off to the Saw-whets's lullaby.

2.5 hours later found us in the car at exactly 03:00 on our way to our first location, a fen along Ethel Lake Rd., west of the park, for rails, owls and pre-dawners. The spot did not fail us and at least 3 Yellow Rails were already clicking away when we got out of the car. It wasn't long before a Sedge Wren called just once, our cue to move on. We worked our way north on the Primrose Highway stopping at various locations picking up American Bittern, Connecticut Warbler (several), Virginia Rail and others. We stopped at a location where we had Nashville Warbler the previous year but it did not show. The consolation prize was Gray Jay and Orange-crowned Warbler both of which were missed last year. A Barred Owl also started calling at 04:30 for our 40th species. As light broke, we made our way to a yard where Evening Grosbeaks were supposed to be coming to a feeder. The grosbeaks didn't show but we did collect a Cape May Warbler along route as well as a surprising Sprague's Pipit calling overhead.

It was time to head back to the park for the remaining warblers and waterfowl. The weather conditions were absolutely ideal with no wind and a clear sky. We racked in all the regulars one by one trying to save time by listening while scoping the lake from the boat launch. Both of us got onto 3 flying Greater Scaup, which made the distant identification possible. A short walk through the trail from the boat launch parking lot gave us looks at a stunning Blackburnian Warbler, one of the few we actually got a visual on. Another stop at Hall's Lagoon gave us Pied-billed Grebe (big miss

last year) and a Red-breasted Merganser on the lake. We left the park at 06:30 with 86 species.

A drive-by to our Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeder failed us and it was time to gas-up and coffee-up in town. We made our way to Jessie Lake in Bonnyville for shorebirds. The water was too high and the spot that made our big day last year looked like it would break us this year. We collected some waterfowl and Purple Martin then made our way south. Our spirits were rejuvenated with 3 Sandhill Cranes flying low over the highway just as we left Bonnyville. A stop north of the intersection of 28A and 41 produced Merlin and our only Bonaparte's Gull of the day. Our scouted Olive-sided Flycatcher was sleeping in this morning.

We pulled into Kehewin Lake area for our parkland birds with continuing ideal weather conditions. The lake had Osprey, Common and Forster's Tern and Great Blue Heron. A drive around the west side of the lake produced everything expected. The Great Crested Flycatcher was calling exactly where he was supposed to be and 2 Philadelphia Vireos were spotted while listening to him. The drive out produced great looks at a Broad-winged Hawk and we left the parkland with 118 species just after 09:00.

The long drive south on Hwy 41 was the chance for one of us to catch some much needed sleep as there was only two of us for driving. We pulled into Gooseberry Lake P.P. (north of Consort) at around 11:30. There were hundreds of shorebirds on the mudflats but most were too far to see and the heat haze was beginning to accumulate. The majority of the birds were Sanderling with a few Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers that were close. It would take too much time to access other parts of the lake and we had to abandon. We knew that shorebirds would make or break our day but wouldn't give up so easily. There was still a chance we could catch some migrants on the drive west. The woods around the park produced Lark Sparrow, Gray Catbird, Downy Woodpecker and a Yellow-breasted Chat at the park entrance, which lifted our spirits.

The weather seemed to be deteriorating with scattered showers visible in the distance. A bonus was a Short-eared Owl sitting on a fence post as we approached our prairie stop. We took secondary 884 to a location where we had Upland Sandpiper and Ferruginous Hawk on the drive up. We arrived just after a small shower passed through and the sun was just coming out leaving us in a windless prairie landscape. The birds were singing all over the place. At one point the Sprague's Pipits were so numerous and loud that we could hardly hear anything else. The Ferruginous showed on cue and we scoped the fields picking up McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs displaying. The sandpiper was not re-found however.

We took Hwy 9 west towards Drumheller for badland birds. It was our second long stretch of drive and it was my turn to nap, waking up only for a Loggerhead Shrike. We pulled into Horsetheif lookout where we heard Rock Wren, Spotted Towhee and Ring-necked Pheasant. A Turkey Vulture was spotted as we pulled into McMullen Island for Wood Ducks that Jody had staked out. We headed to his neighborhood where House Finch, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Western Wood-Pewee were all much needed additions. We scanned desperately for Say's Phoebe on the drive out of the canyon but didn't luck out. We left

Drumheller at exactly 16:00 with 153 species. We decided to add a last minute drive through the Irricana area for possible shorebirds and missed prairie birds. A set of sloughs west of Beiseker added lingering Stilt Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher. We speeded through the Irricana sloughs adding Horned Grebe, Red-necked Phalarope, Gray Partridge and Grasshopper Sparrow.

We worked our way west along secondary 567 to the foothills finally adding Cinnamon Teal in a pothole north of Airdrie. A much needed coffee and gas at Cochrane and we were on our way to the mountains with less than 3 hours of light left. Although we didn't find any late migrant waterfowl on Ghost Reservoir or Lac Des Arc, the weather seemed to be in our favor when we arrived just as the rain left. A productive stop in Harvie Heights gave us a number of new birds including Sharp-shinned Hawk, Townsend's Warbler, Purple Finch and Hairy Woodpecker. Rufous Hummingbird at a feeder was our 164th species beating our previous record.

Entering Banff National Park, we made a quick stop at Vermillion Lakes for Bald Eagle and Violet-green Swallows. A little persistent scoping on the lake produced 2 Northern Rough-winged Swallows breaking 170. With time ticking away now, we had to really move and make quick functional stops. Muleshoe added Hammond's Flycatcher and Belted Kingfisher but other targets were not seen or heard. We strained to listen for either Mountain or Boreal Chickadee but neither showed. Johnston Canyon did not have an American Dipper for us and it was beginning to rain. One final check on the river west of Castle junction and Jody spotted a magnificent male Harlequin Duck sleeping under the bridge in the fading overcast light. Although we listened desperately for a Varied Thrush, the Harlequin would be our last bird.

Absolutely drained but satisfied we set up our tent at the Lake Louise campground in a semi-conscious state ending the effort at 23:30. Overall, we were a little unlucky with shorebirds, and we could have used more time in the mountains. Some other upsetting misses include Great Horned Owl, Blue Jay, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Thrasher, and Western Tanager. On the other side, we did get 21 species of warbler, 20 species of duck, all 7 species of swallow

and all 3 rails. No recordings or playback were used to entice bird response and both observers identified all but 2 species. Following is a total list of species in the order they were counted.

-Yousif Attia, Calgary

- 1 Northern Saw-whet Owl
- 2 Red-necked Grebe
- 3 Common Loon
- 4 Sora
- 5 White-throated Sparrow
- 6 Common Nighthawk
- 7 Yellow Rail
- 8 Swamp Sparrow
- 9 Lincoln's Sparrow
- 10 Common Yellowthroat
- 11 Wilson's Snipe
- 12 Le Conte's Sparrow
- 13 Sedge Wren
- 14 Clay-colored Sparrow
- 15 American Bittern
- 16 Canada Goose
- 17 American Robin
- 18 Hermit Thrush
- 19 Chipping Sparrow
- 20 Ovenbird
- 21 Swainson's Thrush
- 22 Connecticut Warbler
- 23 Dark-eyed Junco
- 24 Ruffed Grouse
- 25 Winter Wren
- 26 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 27 Song Sparrow
- 28 Northern Waterthrush
- 29 Eastern Phoebe
- 30 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
- 31 Virginia Rail
- 32 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 33 Pileated Woodpecker
- 34 Tennessee Warbler
- 35 Gray Jay
- 36 Blue-headed Vireo
- 37 Rose-breasted Grosbeak
- 38 Barn Swallow
- 39 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 40 Barred Owl
- 41 American Crow

42 Wilson's Warbler
43 Cape May Warbler
44 European Starling
45 Savannah Sparrow
46 Tree Swallow
47 House Wren
48 Black-billed Magpie
49 Vesper Sparrow
50 Sprague's Pipit
51 American Kestrel
52 Mallard
53 Northern Shoveler
54 Alder Flycatcher
55 Chestnut-sided Warbler
56 American Redstart
57 Canada Warbler
58 Red-eyed Vireo
59 Magnolia Warbler
60 Least Flycatcher
61 American Coot
62 Red-tailed Hawk
63 Common Raven
64 Black Tern
65 Bay-breasted Warbler
66 Mourning Warbler
67 Pine Siskin
68 Common Goldeneye
69 Bufflehead
70 American Wigeon
71 Common Merganser
72 Greater Scaup
73 Common Tern
74 Western Grebe
75 Franklin's Gull
76 California Gull
77 Black-throated Green Warbler
78 Blackburnian Warbler
79 Black-and-white Warbler
80 Double-crested Cormorant
81 Blue-winged Teal
82 Canvasback
83 Yellow Warbler
84 Ring-necked Duck
85 Red-breasted Merganser
86 Pied-billed Grebe
87 House Sparrow
88 Black-capped Chickadee
89 Cedar Waxwing
90 Sandhill Crane

91 Cliff Swallow
92 Red-winged Blackbird
93 Brewer's Blackbird
94 Spotted Sandpiper
95 Northern Harrier
96 Ring-billed Gull
97 Purple Martin
98 American Avocet
99 Lesser Scaup
100 Redhead
101 Killdeer
102 Rock Pigeon
103 Common Grackle
104 Bonaparte's Gull
105 Merlin
106 Brown-headed Cowbird
107 Osprey
108 Gadwall
109 Great Blue Heron
110 Forster's Tern
111 Baltimore Oriole
112 Warbling Vireo
113 Veery
114 Northern Flicker
115 American Goldfinch
116 Great Crested Flycatcher
117 Philadelphia Vireo
118 Broad-winged Hawk
119 Eastern Kingbird
120 Horned Grebe
121 Ruddy Duck
122 Wilson's Phalarope
123 Marbled Godwit
124 Swainson's Hawk
125 Northern Pintail
126 Green-winged Teal
127 Mountain Bluebird
128 Mourning Dove
129 Western Meadowlark
130 Sanderling
131 Semipalmated Sandpiper
132 Least Sandpiper
133 Willet
134 Lark Sparrow
135 Gray Catbird
136 Downy Woodpecker
137 Yellow-breasted Chat
138 Horned Lark
139 Western Kingbird

140 Short-eared Owl
141 Chestnut-collared Longspur
142 Ferruginous Hawk
143 McCown's Longspur
144 Loggerhead Shrike
145 Rock Wren
146 Ring-necked Pheasant
147 Bank Swallow
148 Turkey Vulture
149 Spotted Towhee
150 Wood Duck
151 Western Wood-Pewee
152 Red-breasted Nuthatch
153 House Finch
154 Long-billed Curlew
155 Stilt Sandpiper
156 Long-billed Dowitcher
157 Grasshopper Sparrow
158 Gray Partridge
159 Yellow-headed Blackbird
160 Eared Grebe
161 Red-necked Phalarope
162 Cinnamon Teal
163 White-crowned Sparrow
164 Rufous Hummingbird
165 Sharp-shinned Hawk
166 Townsend's Warbler
167 Purple Finch
168 Hairy Woodpecker
169 Violet-green Swallow
170 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
171 Bald Eagle
172 Hammond's Flycatcher
173 Belted Kingfisher
174 Harlequin Duck