

ANoUS Ontario BIG DAY 2009 – 2009-05-BD

One of the greatest things about Birdathon is that can be whatever you make of it. A quiet walk through your favourite forest, a relaxed day of birding through your old stomping grounds, or a chance to push yourself to the extremes of physical, mental, and yes, even spiritual birding . No matter the motivation, participants and sponsors can be proud that their efforts have gone to support conservation efforts across Canada. In our case by supporting the ongoing research, education, and training programs of the Long Point Bird Observatory.

Collectively our team was comprised of Jody Allair (Outreach Coordinator for Bird Studies Canada), Yousif Attia (Landbird Programs Coordinator of the Long Point Bird Observatory and Stu Mackenzie (LPBO Volunteer and graduate student at the University of Western Ontario) had 26 years of Birdathon experience and were ready to test it. We decided early on that we had to push ourselves to the edge and document as many species as possible in a single calendar day. Therefore, the only logical thing to do was to begin our day in Algonquin Park (in the centre of the Canadian Shield), and finish up in the heart of Carolinian Canada on the shores Lake Erie at Long Point.

The trick to a successful Birdathon or 'Big Day' is knowing where the birds 'should be' and applying that knowledge using a delicate balance between an efficient route, a strict time schedule and LUCK! Luck with the birds and weather is one thing, but we also needed to get from Algonquin to Long Point without getting slowed down in traffic.

Our quest began on May 30th, 2009. The weather was best described as uncooperative. The temperature approached zero overnight and stayed cool until late-morning. By mid-day strong winds began to blow through province and intense thunder showers were building in the south. After a brief night's sleep at the Algonquin Wildlife Research Station we found ourselves in a sleep deprived but excited state. Our first bird of the day was the result of a hunch. We took a look under the rafters of a maintenance building to find the tail of a sleeping Eastern Phoebe. We stopped periodically as we worked our way south to Highway 60 and eventually heard a distant Northern Saw-whet Owl calling. A night long search for other owls was unsuccessful until we finally come across a Barred Owl an hour before dawn along Arrowhon Rd.

We decided early on that the black spruce swamps along Opeongo Rd. would be the best place to be for the dawn chorus. The period an hour before and after sunrise is a unique opportunity to hear numerous bird species in relatively small areas. It is here that we began to build our list in earnest: Common Loon, American Woodcock, Hermit and Swainson's thrush, Nashville Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Ovenbird, Lincoln's Sparrow. We then made our way to the Spruce Bog trail where we were greeted by a magnificent male Spruce Grouse. The air was still brisk and the cold kept things quiet. The overbearing chorus of Spring Peepers also made hearing incredibly difficult, but

never the less; the diagnostic cackles and grunts of Gray Jays were heard briefly across the marsh before we dashed to our final big stop in Algonquin.

We put a lot of trust in the Wolf Howl Pond, a sliver of the boreal forest within the park, and it did not disappoint. Both Cape May and Black-and-white warblers were found. A pair of Hooded Mergansers courted on the ponds while Common Ravens soared above. To our surprise we found not one but three Black-backed Woodpeckers, two of which aggressively surveyed their nesting cavity. We desperately hoped all morning that a group of Boreal Chickadees would come across our path but they obviously had other priorities that day. On our way out of the park we made a quick stop for Canada Warbler, American Redstart and an Alder Flycatcher, but the Mourning Warbler had apparently slept in. Our love and fascination for the north kept us engaged longer than we had planned, a decision we would later regret. We left Algonquin a good hour behind schedule with just over 100 species.

It was a 2.5 hour drive to the Carden Alvar, but we managed to find a highly sought after Red-shouldered Hawk along Hwy . We arrived at the Carden Alvar near noon to find a windswept landscape. Nevertheless we found a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes work their way across a pasture, we mustered up Sedge Wren in the wet meadows, found Golden-winged Warbler in the scrubland, and managed to squeeze Vesper, Clay-colored and Grasshopper sparrows out of the grasslands. On the drive out of Carden we passed a Broad-winged Hawk and Osprey sitting atop their respective nests.

Now mid-day we headed toward Hamilton with a quick stop to check out some flooded fields in Mississauga where we turned up White-rumped Sandpiper, Dunlin and Semi-palmated Plover. Twenty minutes later we were on the shoreline of Lake Ontario enjoying a pair of Red-necked Grebes at Bronte Harbour in Oakville followed shortly thereafter by Trumpeter Swans at La Salle park in Burlington. High winds made scoping the lake frustrating and few waterfowl were observed, but we did pick up the last of the six swallow species; a Cliff Swallow. Upon our arrival at the lift bridge into Hamilton Harbour, the male of the resident Peregrine Falcons was surveying his domain as a Black-crowned Night-Heron flew by. At Windemere Basin, in Hamilton, Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Canvasback and Lesser Yellowlegs made their way onto the list. On our way out we stopped where a Short-eared Owl was observed the previous day, but blustery winds must have kept it out of sight. We didn't have too much time to waste as the Carolinian paradise surrounding Long Point still awaiting us.

Already feeling the effects of the long drive and hectic birding pace we stopped at Townsend and Jarvis sewage lagoons about an hour away from Long Point. The winds had peaked at this point and the promised Wilson's Phalaropes were a no show. As we looked west toward our next destination, a sinister darkness was looming. The storm had just passed as we visited St. Williams forest. Though we did pick up a few expected species such as Hooded Warbler and a pair of Northern Goshawks, the forest was surprisingly quiet.

A brief walk through Backus Woods where we had staked out Yellow-throated Vireo, Cerulean Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush was a bust. Everything was completely quiet. On our way out of Backus however, a familiar 'chip' stopped us in our tracks. A Prothonotary Warbler was working its way through the sloughs of Backus. With our new found turn of luck we rushed to Big Creek Marsh to find some wetland specialties such as Least Bittern, Common Moorhen and Black Tern, check, check, check! As the night crept in on us there were only a few remaining species we could score. All we had to do was stay awake! A stop near the marshes in the Long Point Provincial Park produced the snarls of a Virginia Rail and a reliable Eastern Screech-Owl nearby did not disappoint. In a last ditch effort before midnight we drove through the sand plains of Norfolk County and heard our last species fill the night air with echoing 'Whip-poor-wills'; number 173.

Regardless of the weather and the sheer exhaustion caused by the scope of our endeavor we had a fantastic day covering nearly 700 km and observing 173 species. So why would someone do this themselves? The best answer we could muster is why not? The gracious support of our sponsors, like you, help to ensure that organizations like the Long Point Bird Observatory, continue to thrive.