

ANoUS Ontario BIG DAY 2012 – 001-2012-05-BD

For three out of the past five years the LPBO Cygnus Crusaders have been attempting to break the Big Day record for Ontario of 200 species set in 1999 while conducting their Birdathon. Big Day rules are a little more stringent than Birdathon rules. For example, all birds have to be observed within the same calendar day, information cannot be solicited from a source outside the team, and all members of the team must see or hear at least 95% of the birds on the day. Big Days are the ultimate birding competition harnessing all a birder can muster. They require extensive knowledge of numerous habitats, natural history (past and present) of locations and bird life, physical and mental endurance, and a dash of stupidity. Despite the rules and the rigor, they're a great challenge and all the more worthwhile when combined with a fundraising campaign.

The LPBO Cygnus Crusaders rallied together in Burlington on Friday May 25 to prepare. This year's team comprised Jody Allair (Bird Studies Canada), John Brett (Canadian Wildlife Service), Christian Friis (Canadian Wildlife Service), and Stu Mackenzie (LPBO). The weather was hot, muggy, and windy. As the evening progressed temperatures cooled, the wind died, and the stage was potentially set for an excellent day. Scouting efforts throughout central Ontario came to an end shortly before midnight and we attempted to get some rest. Three of the group crammed themselves in the vehicle to sleep while the other sprawled out comfortably on the roadside.

We awoke on May 26 to wonderfully mild temperatures, zero wind, and nary a cloud in the sky. The first and second bird of the day, a Least Bittern and Sora, helped to celebrate the great conditions with persistent 'cooing' and 'perwheeping' from a nearby wetland. With some intense searching of local woodlots we managed to wrangle up a Great Horned Owl, Whip-poor-will, and American Woodcock before heading north toward our ultimate destination, Algonquin. The pre-dawn hours in Algonquin were very productive as we easily found Northern Saw-whet and Barred Owl as well as Common Merganser, a late night score. Boreal and Canadian Shield specialists began vocalizing shortly after 0400 and by 0800 we had amassed a respectable list of nearly 100 species including Boreal Chickadee, Black-backed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, numerous Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, and not one, but three Olive-sided Flycatchers, and virtually every warbler known to the park. One of these warblers was an unexpected singing Orange-crowned Warbler on Opeongo Rd. accompanied by its two close relatives, Nashville and Tennessee! On our way out of the park we made a last ditch stop at a traditionally auspicious parking lot that resulted in fly-over White-winged Crossbills and the kingpin, Evening Grosbeak! It was at this moment that the day was officially 'ON'. Setting a new Ontario record was possible, but we had a long 16 hours ahead.

We scurried south toward the Carden Alvar where we hoped to pick up most if not all the possible grassland species in Ontario. A pair of Common Goldeneye in a set of rapids en route and a Red-shouldered Hawk at 'Red-shoulder corner' put another jump in our step as we sped south. As always the time spent in Carden was brief, but extremely productive. First off the list was Mourning Warbler (the one we missed in Algonquin), followed by Clay-coloured, Vesper, and Grasshopper sparrow, Golden-winged Warbler, Loggerhead Shrike, Sedge Wren, and last but not least, Upland Sandpiper, Phew!

We were making great time leaving Carden by 1100, but were careful not to waste any time and we made our way to the 407 as quickly as possible. We briefly checked out Reesor Pond and various wetlands from the side of the expressway and continued to make our way south-east toward Lake Ontario. Finding a duck on the lake, let alone a high diversity of ducks, was difficult, but we did manage

to find a few of the targets including Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter, Surf Scoter as well as Red-necked Grebe, Black-crowned Night Heron and the usual assortment of gulls and terns.

Lake Ontario had slowed us down considerably and by the time we left Hamilton we had lost anytime previously gained. Never the less we were prepared and made our way to Haldimand and Norfolk County along a specially designed stop-light-free route. Townsend sewage lagoons produced the bulk of our shorebirds including Least, Semipalmated, White-rumped sandpiper, as well as Dunlin, Semipalmated and Black-bellied plover. With the smell of sewage still fresh in our noses we were off to Turkey Point where we arrived at the beach just as a flock of 52 Whimbrel made their way west down the shoreline. Turkey Point also provided our first Bonaparte's Gull, and believe it or not, our first purple Martin. A painstaking journey through the forests of Norfolk County eventually produced all the Carolinian passerine species such as Hooded, Prothonotary and Cerulean warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush and Acadian Flycatcher. With dusk falling upon us we visited an old friend, Long Point. The Inner Bay held Canvasback, Redhead, both scaup species, American Coot, and a surprise Horned Grebe!

With our last bit of light we attacked the beaches of Long Point to find a Lesser Black-backed Gull along the shoreline and scoped out what was now the silhouette of a Bald Eagle. Darkness fell, but we still had lots of time left and birds to find. Some big-time misses were eating at our souls and we fell even deeper into hunt mode. We had been keeping track of our species total throughout the day, but our pace coupled with fatigue caused us to lose track late in the day. No one talked about it, but we all knew we were close. A laborious search for Sandhill Crane at Big Creek marsh was fruitless, but we were persistent and finally found one in the Hahn marsh. Now time to search under the local bridges for Cliff Swallow. One bridge, two bridge, three bridge, SCORE! With barely an hour left we decided to perch ourselves atop Turkey Point and try our luck with nocturnal migrants. After about 10 minutes the silence was broken with the 'meeping' of a foraging Common Nighthawk over the marsh. Not long after we began to hear harsh hoots and a range of vocalizations from a pair of Long-eared owls as they were hunting and presumably feeding young somewhere nearby. Finally as our hopes were beginning to fade a familiar short, descending 'wheer' descended from on-high; it was a Gray-cheeked Thrush migrating overhead. Minutes later, the stroke of midnight fell and we had amassed an incredible 204 species! Five years of planning, three failed attempts, and a brilliant string of luck finally resulted in a new Ontario Big Day record.

Thank you to all of our sponsors past and present that have made the Baillie Birdathon such an incredibly important and successful fundraiser for the Long Point Bird Observatory. If you haven't yet sponsored us it is not too late. Please visit

<http://www.gifttool.com/athon/MyFundraisingPage?ID=1914&AID=1845&PID=256377>

We are grateful for the support you provide to LPBO as are the hundreds of youth, students, and researchers that make their way through Long Point every year. We hope that we can count on your support again next year.