


THE LINNAEAN
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LETTER

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MY 2014 GREAT GULL ISLAND BIRDATHON

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Late in the morning on May 16, Ann Shaw, Sean Sime and I drove up from Manhattan to Wurtsboro in Sullivan County to do some scouting for our annual Great Gull Island Birdathon. Since Ann is still recovering from knee replacement surgery last year, we checked in to the Days Inn motel in Wurtsboro as soon as we got there. Sean and I left Ann there icing her knee while we went scouting. There wasn't a lot of scouting because of rain and fog. On the way back to the motel we did some final grocery shopping for supplies for the weekend. When we got back to the motel Ann told us there had been a power failure, apparently caused by the rains, and only some lights were on, powered by the motel's back-up generator. We went to dinner at Danny's in Wurtsboro and came back to a still partially blacked-out motel. Ann took a picture of Sean and me making sandwiches for the next day by the light of headlamps. I posted the picture on my blog when we returned to the city on Saturday night, May 17. While Ann and I got some sleep, Sean waited up for his brother Dave who was coming up from Long Island to do day one of the birdathon with us.

On Saturday, May 17 my travel alarm woke me just before 2:00 am. Looking out the window I saw the rains had stopped and the moon and stars were visible through broken, fast moving clouds. About 2:15 Sean texted

me about the clearing weather. I replied I was dressed and packing the cooler – quietly since Ann was still asleep. At 2:30, Dave, Sean and I drove out of the motel parking lot and turned south towards Bashakill. At 2:35 we had the first bird of the 2014 birdathon, a calling Whip-poor-will as we turned into the dirt road that leads to a boat launch at the Bashakill Wildlife Management Area. A few minutes later we heard a loud crash from somewhere out on route 209. The only other birds heard here were Canada Geese and Common Gallinules out on the marsh. Back on 209 and heading south we found the source of the crash noise with 209 blocked by a crashed car and multiple other cars and people waiting for the authorities. With nothing for us to do in aiding the scene we turned onto Haven Road and crossed the Bashakill on the causeway. Over the next 1.5 hours or so we picked up a calling American Woodcock, a Barred Owl, an Eastern Screech-Owl heard by Dave and myself, and more Whips. We had no luck with a family of recently fledged Great Horned Owls we had information about. Finally, with the first light of dawn in the eastern sky we returned to Haven Road and stationed ourselves on the causeway to listen and watch for birds as the marsh woke up.

I look forward all year to this dawn watch at Bashakill. It is one of the highlights of my birding year. As the sky gradually lightened we



She had heard from Jeff Kimball and Chuck Mc-Alexander who were driving up from the city to join us for the birdathon. They were picking her up at 5:30 and then joining us on the causeway. Also meeting us on the causeway were Dale Dancis and Diana Teta who often tagged along with us for at least part of the Bashakill birding. Everyone arrived before sun-up.

We picked up birds fast now: Great Blue Herons, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Solitary Sandpiper, Chimney Swift, Barn and Tree swallows hunting for insects over the marsh, while Red-winged Black-

continued to pick up birds, by ear at first and then by sight as it got light enough: more Barred Owls and Whips, Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, calling Wood Ducks, migrating Common Nighthawks, etc. Other birders, also doing their big days of the spring arrived on the causeway. One of them was local birder John Haas, to whom we owe a lot for local information on birds and birding in Sullivan County. We would not do nearly as well as we do without John's expert help. I was also pleased to run into John Tramontano. John used to live in the area and years ago he and John Yrizarry gave me my first instructions on birding Bashakill. He lives in Pennsylvania now, but returns in the spring annually for a Sullivan County big day. Around 5:15 am I called Ann at the motel.



bird, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, Warbling Vireo, Wood Thrush, Veery, Yellow Warbler, Baltimore Oriole and others called from the marsh edge and the woods. For Sean and me, our list was already about

forty species. When the sun was high enough to be striking the trees of the main parking area we moved from the causeway to the entrance road to the parking area. Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Canada and Black-throated Blue were among the warblers we quickly heard and/or saw. A birder told us he had just seen a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and we hurriedly tracked down this bird (two of them). Since kinglets have mostly passed through earlier and this is a species we only occasionally get on the birdathon.

We drove the cars into the parking lot and while Ann set herself up next to the car in a folding chair to spare her knee, the rest of us headed up the “Stop Sign” trail. I can't list everything here, or the order in which we picked them up, but among the highlights were Wild Turkeys gobbling from somewhere up the hillside, a female Hooded Merganser flying over the marsh, a calling Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed vireos, Least and Great Crested flycatchers and Eastern Wood-Pewee, a Sora called once from the marsh, a White-crowned Sparrow on the edge of the farm field. We ran into John Haas again and he told us about singing Worm-eating Warbler and Purple Finch which we successfully chased down. We were able to return the favor with an Alder Flycatcher we heard calling out on the marsh.

Picking up Ann back at the parking lot we headed down South Road to the Nature Trail. A pleasant surprise here was a singing Cerulean Warbler – we usually do not pick up this species until Doodletown at the end of the day. The spring floods had not been easy on the boardwalks and small bridges along the entrance to the Nature Trail but we managed to negotiate our way over the streams and through the mud areas. Among the highlights here were a Common Raven overhead, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Pileated Woodpecker, Blue-winged, Black-throated Green, and Wilson's warblers. When we were finished here we drove down South Road to the “Horseshoe” parking area to try for Least Bittern which John Haas told us had been

calling from the marsh there. Our hunt was successful with the bittern even providing some nice views out on the marsh. Additional good finds here were Bay-breasted Warbler and Lincoln's Sparrow. Continuing to the end of South Road we went on to Port Orange Road on the other side of the Orange County line, hoping for the Acadian Flycatcher that nests along this road. The flycatcher was not in yet (or wasn't calling), but we did pick up Prairie Warbler and Indigo Bunting under the power lines. Then it was back to Bashakill and a stop for a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl for everyone who hadn't heard one during the night. Sean was lucky enough to see the owl peer out of its roost hole, but it then ducked back in out of sight. Ann, Sean and I left everyone watching the owl roost while we drove back to the motel to check out (we were already late for the 11:00 am checkout). Sean also picked up Dave's car there and drove it back to the owl site.

Dale and Diana went off to pick up lunch and proceed on their way while Ann, Sean and I ran our motel errand. We rejoined Dave, Chuck, and Jeff and drove up Upper Pine Kill Road, another of John Haas's recommended birding routes since it gets into higher elevations and can produce some of the breeders that have already migrated through the lowlands. The road was not as productive for us as last year, but we did pick up calling Acadian Flycatcher and Blue-headed Vireo. Continuing north, we drove up route 17 a short way to get to an access along the Neversink River, another spot Haas clued us in on last year. On our scouting on Friday, Sean and I had found about ten Common Mergansers on the river here – today we only spotted a lone female flying down the stream and, unfortunately not everyone saw it. The stop here did produce Northern Rough-winged and Cliff swallows feeding over the river, a soaring Broad-winged Hawk and a surprise, a calling Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Finishing at the Neversink we headed back down 17 to the Wurtsboro exit and up 209 to Gumaer Falls Road, yet another Haas recommended location. It was a very fruitful

drive up the road with another calling Acadian, Brown Creeper, two Blackburnian Warblers and Dark-eyed Junco. By the time we left the vicinity of Bashakill our list was over 100 species.

We continued north on 209 to Ellenville and the road over the Shawangunk ridge on our way to Blue Chip Farm in Ulster County. At an overlook pull-off on the ridge we heard Prairie Warbler again and watched some hang-gliders soaring over the ridge in company with a couple of Bald Eagles. A rest stop at a McDonalds in Pine Bush added a Northern Mockingbird to the list. At Blue Chip, Dave's eagle eyes spotted the hoped for Upland Sandpipers on the edge of a field. A farm pond produced Mute Swan, Ruddy Duck, Spotted and Solitary sandpipers and a surprise Green Heron. At the nearby Shawangunk Grasslands we picked up a number of needed open country species such as Grasshopper and Field sparrows, Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark, American Kestrel and Northern Harrier, and a very distant, soaring Black Vulture. From here we usually head directly to New Paltz to pick up the thruway south, but Sean had info on a small marsh on the side of the road that might produce Virginia Rail and Red-headed Woodpecker in the dead trees. The Virginia Rail did call for us, but the woodpecker was a no show. Making up for it was a distant Belted Kingfisher sitting on a snag. As usual our only Purple Martin for the weekend was at the colony on the side of the entrance road to the NYS Thruway in New Paltz.

We normally drive Mine Road in West Point on our way to Doodletown Road, just below the Bear Mountain Bridge on 9W, but the army closed the road for maneuvers this year, so we headed straight to Doodletown. This was just as well since we were running well behind schedule by now. At Doodletown, Ann stayed with the cars to spare her knee the steep climb while the rest of us hurried up the hill. At practically the first turn in the trail there was a calling Nashville Warbler and two Pileated Woodpeckers chasing each other. On the trail we encountered a father and son who

told us where they had heard a Kentucky Warbler singing. This was great information to have since the bird was not where it had been last year and was in fact lower down and up a side trail. We were happy to hear the Kentucky calling from just where they said they heard it. Doodletown also produced another singing Worm-eating Warbler, the usual numbers of Hooded Warblers and best of all a Tennessee Warbler and a Yellow-rumped Warbler; the latter sometimes a tough bird by this time in the migration.

Coming back down Doodletown, we said goodbye to Chuck and Jeff – they would meet Ann, Sean, and me at Jamaica Bay early Sunday morning. The three of us, plus Dave, did a quick drive out to the end of the road at Iona Island where we saw another migrating Common Nighthawk and had a bonus of a calling Black-billed Cuckoo. Then it was home to the city for a quick bite to eat and an all too short night's sleep. Before going to sleep, Sean and I compared notes on the day. Our combined total was 138 species, a new record for us for the first day of the birdathon. I had missed two species Sean had seen, mainly because I hadn't tried very hard to spot them when they flew high overhead. I knew I would see Double-crested Cormorant and Osprey on Long Island the next day.

On Sunday, May 18 Ann, Sean and I left upper Manhattan about 4:15 am and got out to Jamaica Bay in Queens around 4:45. Sean and I immediately headed for a spot where we could see one of the Barn Owl nest boxes. We were treated to views of two Barn Owls; one peering out of the box and a second flying in to land nearby. On the way back to the parking lot where Ann was waiting, Sean and I were surprised to hear a Black-billed Cuckoo call. From the parking lot the three of us headed out the West Pond trail. Of course, there is no longer a West Pond since Super Storm Sandy breached the pond and turned it into a small saltwater tidal bay. Starting at the parking lot and on the way out to the breach we picked up new birds fast: Brant, gulls, Forster's Tern, Great and Snowy egrets, Glossy Ibis, and many more, including of



course, the Double-crested Cormorant and Osprey I had missed the day before. Three Clapper Rails chased each other around the marsh. Willow Flycatchers perched up and called from the side of the trail. Once we were out where we could scan the flats exposed by the low tide, our list took another big jump as we added shorebirds: Semipalmated Plover, American Oystercatcher, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Semipalmated and Least sandpipers, and more. My cell phone rang with a call from Chuck letting us know he and Jeff were on Cross Bay Boulevard and would be joining us shortly.

Because of the breach in the dike around what had been the West Pond it is no longer possible to do the circuit around what is now a tidal bay, so we now had to reverse our





route, birding the North and South gardens on our way to the North Marsh. Since we had done so well on landbirds on Saturday, the gardens did not add much, but we did pick up several singing White-eyed Vireos. Another cellphone call let us know Dale and Diana were on the North Marsh and had seen a Tricolored Heron. Unfortunately, the heron was out of sight when we got there. This species and Little Blue Heron proved to be among our worst misses of the birdathon. We usually get at least one of them, sometimes both; I do not remember ever missing both. Sean and I did a side trip over to the East Pond, but did not find anything new. When we were headed back to the parking lot, Dale called again with word of a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron on the south marsh by bench one; we had picked up Black-crowns earlier. Before leaving Jamaica Bay entirely, we headed south to Big Egg Marsh by the South Channel Bridge. While Ann rested her knee in the car, the rest of us went out onto the edge of the marsh picking up Greater Yellowlegs and Least Tern. Sean and I also heard Marsh Wren and Seaside Sparrow.

In other years, after Jamaica Bay we have often stopped at Forest Park in Queens to try and fill in passerines we may have missed the day before. This year we decided we would skip it since we had already done so well. The only warbler we could realistically hope for was Cape May, which was certainly not a given and proved to be another one of our misses this year. Instead, we drove west on the Belt Parkway to Hendrix Creek in Brooklyn to try for Green-winged Teal and Greater Scaup which

Doug Gochfeld had told Sean he had seen there. Hendrix is behind a large shopping mall and Sean led the way out of the parking lot to an overgrown path that led through some underbrush to the tidal creek. Suddenly Sean stopped and waved for us to catch up calling back to us. Jeff asked me what Sean had said. I replied it sounded like Prothonotary, but that was crazy. It was indeed a male Prothonotary Warbler, a first ever for my birdathon list. The Prothonotary was my 268th species for the Great Gull Island Birdathon since I did the first one in 1980 and the first new bird to the cumulative list since we found a White-faced Ibis at Jamaica Bay in 2010. We also got the Greater Scaup, but could not find the teal. We were happy to swap the teal for the warbler, our 28th warbler for the weekend. We now headed east on Long Island, our total at this point was 176 species. We knew we were working on a good grand total since 176 is often in the range of the weekend total on a run-of-the-mill birdathon weekend.

Our next stop was Cow Meadow Park in Nassau County. Here Sean heard a Saltmarsh Sparrow when he was ahead of the rest of us.

Unfortunately, it was a species the rest of us never did get. There were a number of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons here, but disappointingly few shorebirds. However, as we were about to leave the observation platform overlooking the marsh a Yellow-billed Cuckoo called from the wooded area behind us. A disappointment at Cow Meadow was missing Monk Parakeet, a bird we had always found here in recent years. Now it was off to Jones Beach, starting at the Coast Guard Station parking area at the West End. The island across from the Coast Guard Station provided Sanderlings and some repeat shorebirds including a large flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers resting on a floating dock. Best of all here was a flock of nine Black Skimmers, a species we have often missed in recent year's birdathons. At the West End 2 parking field there was a Horned Lark at the edge of the field and a Piping Plover sitting on its nest in one of the protective enclosures. The drive along the Jones Beach strip produced nothing new. We often get Peregrine Falcon on the water tower, but not this year – another bad miss. We went out to Robert Moses State Park and were just setting up spotting scopes for a short seawatch when Sean saw a post on his smart phone that the White-faced Ibis found a day or two earlier at Captree Island had just been seen. We quickly closed up the tripods, jumped in the cars and drove to Captree Island. After a brief search we found the juvenile White-faced feeding on the marsh in company with a few Glossy Ibis.

Ann took over driving our car for the run east so Sean could nap in the back seat. Hunters Garden and the bike trail parking lot along County Road 51 did not add anything new, though we had hoped to finally pick up Orchard Oriole here. This species proved to be another of our bad misses for the weekend – the species nests in Inwood Hill Park, practically outside my apartment window. A short run into Gabrielski Airport picked up Vesper Sparrow where Dale and Diana had found it earlier in the afternoon, a repeat from last year. A stop at the pond along Montauk Highway in Eastport produced no ducks, but

as we were headed back to the cars Sean spotted an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull flying overhead. Time was now pressing as we drove Dune Road to Shinnecock Inlet, stopping at several places to check the ocean and the bayside. We continued to pick up species, adding Red-throated Loon, Northern Gannet, Surf and Black scoters, Common Eider, and Common and Roseate terns. I was particularly happy to get the Roseate since we had missed this species last year. We are, after all doing the birdathon to benefit the Great Gull Island Project's study of the Common and Roseate terns on Great Gull Island. While scanning through some scoters from the parking area at the old Ponquogue Bridge, I spotted a Long-tailed Duck on the bay.

Now we knew we were really racing against time and the sun to get to Montauk for our final birding stops of the day. We skipped Mecox Bay because of a lack of time, but stopped briefly in Amagansett to scan the ocean – more of what we already had. On the Montauk peninsula we pulled over by the road to Ditch Plains and Sean ran across the road to check the farm pond there. The rest of us waited at the cars to save time in case there was nothing there. Sean started waving and we ran over to see the American Wigeon standing on the grass on the other side of the pond. The inlet to Montauk Harbor disappointed us with no Great Cormorants or Purple Sandpipers on the jetty, two species we have often found here on recent birdathons. At Montauk Point itself, the south bluffs in Camp Hero produced a White-winged Scoter mixed in with the other scoters and Common Eiders lingering there. This proved to be the final species of the weekend for Sean and myself. At the pavilion on the north side of the point we scanned the ocean, only seeing more scoters, eiders and Common Terns. At sunset we gave our traditional wave to Great Gull Island in the distance. Though Sean and I did not add anything new, our birding was not quite done yet. As the dusk started to settle in we were treated to a show of Common Nighthawks hawking around after insects, some flying within six feet of our

heads. This was a new species for the weekend for Ann, Chuck and Jeff who had arrived too late to get them at the Bashakill causeway the previous morning. Our very last stop was back on the entrance road to Camp Hero on the south bluffs to listen for American Woodcocks. In most years this is our last bird pick-up, but Sean and I had heard one before dawn at Bashakill the previous day. Now Ann, Chuck and Jeff picked it up. Even better we had a chorus of Whip-poor-wills, one of which flew in and called from a bush directly in front of us, allowing us to see it briefly by flashlight.

Now full dark, we drove back to town where we checked in to the Daunt's Albatross Motel where Ann and I have stayed at Montauk for many years. Over dinner we all double-checked our lists. Sean and I agreed on a total of 195 species, one short of our record. (Chuck and Jeff had 178, a new record for them.) Sean and I each missed one bird the other had gotten. For me it was Saltmarsh Sparrow; for Sean it was the Common Raven I had seen overhead at Bashakill while he was back under the trees. Our elusive goal of breaking 200 species on a weekend remains for another year. There were enough misses of birds we had good chances for to show that the 200 mark is far from impossible on the route we have plotted given a little luck.

The birdathon would not be possible without my fellow birders who are all listed in the above account. It certainly would not be anywhere near as much fun without them. Our list would also not be possible without the help and input we get from other birders along the way, but most especially without information and pointers from local birders, especially John Hass for the Bashakill area.

This article is adapted from the account I posted on my blog. The entire bird list for the weekend can be found on the blog at:

<http://www.inwoodbirder.blogspot.com/p/2014-great-gull-island-birdathon.html>.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### **EXCLUSIVE OFFER TO LINNAEAN SOCIETY MEMBERS**

In partnership with the International Society for Behavioral Ecology (ISBE), the Linnaean Society of New York is delighted to offer the following benefit:

On Monday evening, August 4<sup>th</sup>, the ISBE [www.isbe2014.com/program.html](http://www.isbe2014.com/program.html) will be hosting an event at the American Museum of Natural History celebrating Isabella Rossellini's Mammals film series. Ms. Rossellini will hold a Q&A after the showing. This event is part of the ISBE's week-long conference and a limited number of tickets (no charge) have been set aside for Linnaean Society members, available on a first come, first serve basis.

Registration for this event is open only to Linnaean Society of New York members. All registration is to be done by emailing [secretarylsny@gmail.com](mailto:secretarylsny@gmail.com) or phoning Lydia Thomas at 212-874-3338 before July 15<sup>th</sup>.

Specific event information will be sent once your registration has been confirmed. Names will be held at the door.

### **LINNAEAN "HOMECOMING"**

Save the date on your calendar! The fall Linnaean Society "Homecoming" get together for members will be on Thursday, September 18, 2014 from 6:00 to 8:00 pm. This has been a very popular evening in recent years – a chance for members to say hello after the summer break and get a preview of the new Linnaean year.

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