

OFO BIRDATHON 2010

Margaret Bain

It started off well – brilliant stars and a nearly full moon, a warm, clear night, and a northbound flight of thrushes as I waited in my driveway at 2.30am for the others (no, we didn't start at midnight). To my ears, most of the thrushes were Swainson's and Veerys but with a nice sprinkling of the high down-slurred calls of Gray-cheeked. But the rest of the day was an endurance test in record-breaking high temperatures – the car thermometer stayed at 34C for six hours in the middle of the day and with the humidity it was technically nearer 40C most of the time. Not surprisingly, most birds were in the coolest spots they could find and not at all keen to show themselves, let alone sing, so we worked hard for our final somewhat disappointing total of 140 species.

My companions were Richard Pope and Bill Gilmour. Our itinerary was entirely within Northumberland County, east of Toronto, so we were also sneakily trying to set a new Northumberland Big Day record, presently standing at 149. Night birding gave us a cooperative Eastern Screech-Owl, Whip-poor-wills and American Woodcock but the firefly-lit marshes were silent. As first light glimmered, we did some one-stop-shopping for grassland sparrows on Trenear Road near Brighton. A Grasshopper Sparrow, beautifully illuminated in the car headlights as we drew up at this excellent location, sat on the road and sang for us, and five more minutes produced Clay-colored, Field, Vesper, and Savannah as well.

Our next stop was Owen Point at Presqu'ile Provincial Park to scan Lake Ontario before the heat-shimmer got too severe. We picked up quite a few species here, but there were disappointingly few shorebirds, and the lingering Red-necked Grebe and Red-throated Loons, present for days before, had disappeared. As we birded the area around the Lighthouse, the Red-bellied Woodpecker squawked on cue but there were very few warblers and other small passerines, and Bill's usually well-attended backyard feeders were unexpectedly quiet.

Inland the heat was building, what birdsong there was diminished even further, and new species were few and far between. We did have a few bonuses – feisty Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warblers dutifully sang where we looked for them, Black-billed Cuckoos were already calling as we drew up at a woodlot where we had heard them last year, and Richard's strange howls were convincing enough to call in a Barred Owl where we hadn't expected to find one. An Upland Sandpiper quietly sat on a fencepost for us to enjoy, and a Red-headed Woodpecker was flying to its nest even as we turned off the main road to look for it. So we succeeded with several relatively difficult species, but even common warblers were impossible to find – Blackburnian was probably our biggest miss, though we tried in many likely places.

The mosquitoes were loving the merciless heat. 'Scope-carrying birders are their main delight – as you walk along, the hand you cantilever your 'scope with is exposed and unprotected, almost instantly becoming a mass of painful mosquito bites. Perhaps a golf-glove would help? We struggled on, tracking down new birds excruciatingly slowly. Some light relief came at a manmade pond near Grafton, where we added Solitary Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs before realizing that one of the ducks on the shoreline looked very strange, a strikingly-plumaged almost-textbook Baikal Teal! But some features weren't quite right and we concluded it was a Baikal Teal X Mallard hybrid. Would we have counted it if it had been a "real" Baikal Teal? At this point in the day, probably we would!

As dusk approached, back we went to Presqu'ile. We 'scoped the beaches for the elusive Piping Plover or any other new shorebirds without success. As night fell, we stood on top of the marsh viewing-platform listening to Marsh Wrens and Swamp Sparrows, but not one American Bittern called in the hour or more we were there, even though Bill had had several noisy bitterns in sight from exactly the same spot only a few nights before. Our last bird was a ghostly Common Nighthawk floating by on the horizon. But by now we were almost completely surrounded by rapidly gathering thunderstorms, with impressive lightning flashes to the east and south, so being on top of a high viewing platform no longer seemed such a good idea. It was nearly 10pm, time to call it a very long day.

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