

OFO Baillie Birdathon 2011



Mike Cadman

Saturday, May 20th, 2011

The 2011 OFO Birdathon team (myself, Chris Earley, Paul Grant, Larry Staniforth, and Bryan Wyatt) did our Birdathon in Wellington County on May 20. Our plan was to make an assault on the 147 species Big Day record for the county, obtained on a historic day in 1988. Conditions seemed ripe. The cold April and odd May weather had constricted and slowed down migration and there seemed to be a lot more birds in the Guelph area than usual. With the expansion of some of the big birds (Trumpeter and Mute Swan, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Sandhill Crane, Common Raven) along with others such as Red-bellied Woodpecker which weren't an option in 1988, things were looking good. Was this to be the year.....?

We started at 3:30 am at my house in downtown Guelph, then stopped at a few owling spots on our way north, and were totally skunked on the owls. Our first bird was a Canada Goose, but things picked up. At dawn, we looked out over a wetland just south of Luther Marsh, and were surprised when a Common Nighthawk buzzed past us at head height. It was to be the first of three nighthawks in three different locations, which is quite unusual for Wellington County. At Wylde Lake, the bog at the south end of Luther Marsh, which is the usual stakeout, we got a singing Lincoln's Sparrow, but didn't get the Hermit Thrush we were hoping for, and there was little sign of migrant warblers – which are vital to a successful Wellington Big Day.

We then entered the Luther Marsh property (with special permission from Grand River Conservation Authority), working our way north along the west side. Things were OK but not spectacular as we birded the forest at the south end, but we were in for a disappointment as the forest opened up to reveal that the lake was completely fogged in, so we couldn't see into the open water we were relying on for waterfowl. Still, providence smiled on us as two Black Terns were foraging in the one small piece of marsh that we could see through the gloom, and Virginia Rail

and Sora both responded to a Virginia Rail recording, the Virginia approaching to within three feet of us, giving us a wonderful look.

As usual, the best place for warblers at Luther was along the Bootleggers road, near where it runs into the lake. We quickly added Bay-breast, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, and others, along with Blue-headed and Philadelphia Vireos, as the sun started to break up the mist. Tantalisingly, as the mist cleared, we could see a Bald Eagle perched just out of the county (the boundary runs through Luther Lake). Then Bryan finally picked out one sitting on Big Island in the county and countable! Over the lake we noted a distant Caspian Tern, lots of Ospreys and cormorants (which have taken over much of the old Great Blue heron colony, forcing the herons to start nesting in a nearby forested area and to spread out around the lake itself) but very few ducks (4 species).

By the time we left Luther at noon, we had 101 species and we were feeling quite good about our day, but we were 19 species behind the 1988 total (though we'd stayed later at Luther on that day). The Arthur sewage lagoons were excellent, giving us 5 new species of ducks (including, oddly enough, a resplendent male Red-breasted Merganser) and almost all of the very few shorebirds we were to get. Wellington County remains a very tough place to find shorebirds!

From there we swept south to Guelph via various hotspots. In Guelph itself we picked up a staked out Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks on nests, Chimney Swift, House Finch, Eastern Bluebird, and the elusive White-breasted Nuthatch within the city limits. The best bird of the day was a singing Prairie Warbler in a fairly large rolling hawthorn savannah near a high school on the edge of town.

The north end of Mountsberg Conservation area, as usual at this time of year, had too many fishermen in boats, so there were no waterfowl, but we did get a Marsh Wren. Nearby Badenoch Swamp offered up our first Willow Flycatcher of the year (and another nighthawk) as darkness descended. It's handy to have a nature interpreter on your team. Chris did a marvellous Barred Owl imitation and managed to solicit a response from what must be the only Barred Owl territory in the county. After striking out at a couple of Screech Owl spots, we went to our usual spot and Chris whistled a bird in in no time. And that was it.

When we tallied up we had reached 140 species. While that didn't break the record of 147 species, it was the second highest one day total on record for the county (from numerous previous attempts, trust me!). Of course, we missed a few seemingly easy birds. Given the decline of grassland birds, we should have staked out an American Kestrel and Vesper Sparrow: Upland Sandpiper appears to be gone. And it's always tough to find a Swainson's Thrush in Wellington County when you want one! Chris heard a Blackpoll Warbler just on the wrong side of the county line, and we had no luck on some of the other later migrants such as the cuckoos and flycatchers. While we could have used a few fortunate breaks, we did have a marvellous day out looking at birds, and who can ask for more than that?

Thanks to the team for their excellent companionship and for working so hard to make the day a success; to the OFO executive for choosing me as the Celebrity Birder for 2011 and making it all so easy; and to the generous OFO members who contributed over \$4000 so far for OFO and Bird Studies Canada through the Birdathon.