

2005 Birdathon report – Carole Willenpart

Our big birdathon day started early on Wed., May 11, although not as early as I had hoped. We arrived to start our day at 9:30 am so our 24 hours began then. Our destination was Presque Isle State Park, always a great birding spot. Unbelievably we hit a lucky day for weather with mostly warm temperatures and very little wind. There are very few days at Presque Isle with no wind! Earlier in the week there were both American and Least bitterns seen at Niagara Pond so I resisted the temptation to start birding as soon as we arrived and headed straight to the pond and Fry's landing area. We pulled off and checked the ponds and marshy area – no bitterns! But we did find a pair of common moorhens and wood ducks, with Nashville warblers singing at the edges in the trees. Across the road in some watery areas trapped from the bay was a Northern waterthrush close to the road. Though called a waterthrush it is actually a warbler and walks with a funny tail-bobbing motion. Also at the pond was a singing marsh wren and an early willow flycatcher both heard and seen. A kingfisher hunted along the edge of the bay and a bank swallow perched on a wire giving great views. Driving in we had already seen and heard the more common birds such as Baltimore oriole, towhees, warbling vireos, catbirds, and yellow warblers. At home, warbling vireos are not very common but at Presque Isle in the spring they usually seem abundant. If we had counted yellow warblers all day our totals would have been in the hundreds!

We had only been out of the car for about 15 min. and I could already tell it was going to be a good day. Bird song was just everywhere and conditions were great. Sometimes you can just feel when the birds are there. I was sure we'd hit our goal of 100 species by tomorrow morning.

We left and drove around to Dead Pond Trail, parked, and went through our "tick prep" (lots of ticks here!) then headed down the trail. We hadn't walked but 5 ft. and already the warblers were all around us. Palm, cape may, black-throated blue and black-throated green warblers as well as lots of yellow-rumped (myrtle) warblers. Further down the we added Blackburnian and bay-breasted warblers and handsome white-crowned sparrows. Great crested flycatchers were calling and we also saw and heard several least flycatchers. Thanks to Dick's sharp eyes we caught sight of a thrush in the woods to the right and after waiting for a clear view discovered it to be a Swainson's thrush. A nice find, these birds nest in the Adirondack's and further north where we have seen and heard them singing in the summer. Further down the trail an American woodcock flushed from the path right in front of us but I was able to see the rusty tail color and long bill. So far, a fantastic day and our spirits were high. As we neared the end of the 2 mile trail, kingbirds, thrashers, kestrels and red-breasted nuthatches were also added to our list for the day.

Finally, we arrived at the lakeside edge of Sidewalk Trail and we turned left and headed back across the peninsula on this nice concrete walk that cuts through the middle of Presque Isle. Deciduous forest to the right and marshy area to the left, it is a fabulous spot in spring. We still weren't able to add any rails or bitterns here, not even a green heron. But we did find

the red-headed woodpecker back at his nest tree and also 2 Wilson's warblers near the marsh edge. Then, unbelievably, as we walked quietly along a whip-poor-will started singing in the woods to our right! What a glorious sound as I never get to hear it at home. It only called 3 times and then fell silent, something may have startled it. But a great and totally unexpected find for late morning. At the end of Sidewalk Trail we still needed to walk back around the road to the car. By the time we arrived, lunch seemed in order so we took a short break and headed out for a quick bite. But before we left, Dick spotted another good bird I would have just missed, a black-billed cuckoo in the tree beside the car! Being so close we had a detailed look at the red area that these birds have around their eyes. Our total so far, 70 birds!

For the afternoon, the destination was Gull Point Trail in search of gulls, terns, egrets and shorebirds. Another great trail that leads out to the very tip of Presque Isle, it is a protected area in summer for nesting birds. The only drawback to this trail, ..SAND.. which makes for harder walking when you're already tired! We struck out, carrying the scope as well, with Lake Erie to our left, calmer than I'd ever seen it. Swallows and gulls circled and called overhead. Along the way we added wood thrush and veery to our list, though a little surprised to find them out here. In Thompson Bay we spotted some lesser scaup (ducks) and terns overhead. When we arrived at the observation platform at Gull Point we set up the scope and started checking the point. The usual herring and ring-billed gulls were there as well as greater black-backed and Bonaparte's gulls, double-crested cormorants and both Caspian and common terns. The only shorebird seen was a spotted sandpiper and we got no glimpses , unfortunately, of the piping plover that had been seen here recently. After half an hour we headed back the trail and ran into birder extraordinaire Jerry McWilliams on his way out to Gull Point. We shared sightings and parted ways, to head back home. The only bird added on the way home, a red-tailed hawk. Hard to believe!

The Curllsville strips were the last stop for the day. There were no northern harriers around but the Henslow's sparrows were out singing, as well as the grasshopper sparrows and the bubbly, tinkling songs of the bobolinks filled the evening air. A good end to the day and we headed home to rest up for morning and the end of the marathon....

Thursday morning- Things weren't looking too good for birding when we awoke with cloudy skies , cold temperatures, and WIND. The worst kind of birding day. I hurriedly added some yard birds to our list such as the barn phoebes and the meadowlarks next door, house finch at the feeder and red-eyed vireos back for the summer in our woods. Then the next stop was a race to Stockdill Rd hoping for the clay-colored sparrow to be back... no such luck! But did manage to see some great views of Henslow's sparrows and added a savannah sparrow to the list. Then to the final stop in our southern woodlands along the Allegheny River near East Brady. There we had some success to add the hooded and cerulean warblers as well as northern parula. On the last road we found the Acadian flycatcher returned to his hemlock-lined stream for the summer and the Kentucky warbler also back and singing in his "patch" just up the hill. The clock ran out at 9:30 am and the total.....103!! A tiring but still fantastic 24 hours of birds.

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