

BIRDATHON 2005 – Margaret Buckwalter

Friday, the 13th of May

Shortly after 5 a.m. our car pulled up at the Rapp Farm outside of Shippenville. The sky was just paling and a few stars were still out. A chilly wind blew across the old reclaimed strip mine making the three of us shiver and zip up our jackets. Janice Horn and I were initiating Janice Grunenwald into the rituals and practices of the Birdathon. To hear better we left the cars and stood, backs to the wind, to listen. Robins were already singing their chorus and then a brown thrasher joined in. Overhead we could hear the twittering of a woodcock, our target bird for this early rising. Soon it landed and we could hear it “peenting” too. Song sparrows and chipping sparrows were chiming in as we left for Paint Mills Road.

As the road descended through the woods to Paint Creek we heard many wood thrushes, a chickadee, several ovenbirds, tufted titmouse and blue jays. Unexpectedly, the long, bubbling song of a winter wren rang from the undergrowth. Scarlet tanagers, Baltimore orioles, a white-breasted nuthatch, mourning doves, a rose-breasted grosbeak, European starlings, downy woodpecker, barn swallow and wild turkey, many red-winged blackbirds plus a cardinal, crows and, at the bridge, rough-winged swallows swelled our list.

Our rookie birder, Janice G., was the first to spot the bobolinks in a field outside Shippenville where we weren't even expecting them. Then we headed to my house for breakfast, to watch the feeders, and to warm up after a chilly morning. We picked up a late dark-eyed junco, a hairy woodpecker and a ruby-throated hummingbird in my yard..

On the go again, in Game Lands 63 near the old clear cut we picked up northern flicker, tree swallow, common grackle, chestnut-sided warbler, and indigo bunting. At the Beaver Creek ponds we tallied our first red-tailed hawk, killdeer, Canada geese, and yellow warbler.

The most interesting find here was not of the avian kind. Janice G. pointed out something swimming in the water. “Beaver?” she asked. It didn't look quite right for a beaver and I thought maybe it was a snapping turtle. I was half right. It was two snapping turtles copulating with much rolling over, and splashing of tails, heads, and feet. None of us had ever seen this before. They weren't paying any attention to us, so we went closer. The action continued but it puzzled us how they were actually accomplishing anything. Janice H. figured that the largest turtle was about two feet from head to tail. Ducklings and goslings are probably not going to last long in this pond.

Walt Fye's ponds were our next stop and produced turkey vultures, a kestrel, mallards and purple martins for our list. It was turning out to be a beautiful day, sunny but not hot. We said goodbye to Janice G. here. She had proved to be a great addition to our team – sharp-eyed and enthusiastic.

At the Mehrten, also part of Beaver Creek, Janice H. and I pulled out our lunches and lawn chairs to relax and survey the pond. On the way in we had been surprised by a very vocal yellow-breasted chat and a noisy pileated woodpecker. Red-eyed vireos were abundant and swallows but we didn't find many other species not already on the list.

Our next stop at Kahle L. proved a bit more productive. The scope picked up a great blue heron fishing on the far shore, ring-billed gulls, a couple of common loons, and one eastern bluebird on the road around the lake. It was getting harder and harder to find new birds so we decided to eat dinner with Roger Horn at Gringo's North in Knox.

Hunger appeased, we stopped at the dairy farm pond near BiLo in Knox and were delighted to find a least sandpiper feeding on the shore. We still hadn't hit much grassland habitat so we headed for Mt. Airy and Mt. Zion. On the way a northern mockingbird quite literally thrust itself on us as it was defending its territory from some red-winged blackbirds. We had a great, close-up view of the mocker.

Mt. Airy provided us with eastern kingbird and the unmistakable wolf-whistle of an upland sandpiper. In hopes of seeing a short-eared owl we returned to Mt. Zion. We didn't find any owls but in the dusk we added Henslow's sparrows, the representative grassland sparrow and a fitting way to end a good day.

Since my first letter I was the happy recipient of the Earl L. Poole Award for my contributions to Pennsylvania ornithology. This happened at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology which Seneca Rocks Audubon hosted this year. Besides my plaque, SRAS received a special Conservation Award for its efforts to secure Mt. Zion (also known as Piney Tract) for the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The PSO meeting was a big shot-in-the-arm for SRAS. We had almost a hundred participants, wonderful weather, and great field trips.

We saw 64 species of birds on our Birdathon. Janice calls it our "laid back Birdathon" because we didn't go very far very fast, but we had a great time. Please send your checks made out to "SRAS" as soon as possible if you haven't already. We would like to complete this Birdathon as soon as we can.

SRAS is a 501(c)3 organization so yours is a tax-free donation.

Thank you for helping to make our Birdathon a success.

Sincerely,

Margaret Buckwalter

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P. S. Please explore our website www.senecarocksaudubon.org for more details on the Poole award and the PSO Annual Meeting.