



The Red-eyed Wearios – Baillie Birdathon Report, May 10th, 2012, Point Pelee National Park, ON

Sadly, for its 2012 Baillie Birdathon, *the Red-eyed Wearios* team was without one of its founder members, Peter Gruner, who passed away suddenly earlier in the year. Peter's contribution to the birding, his unobtrusive presence on the trail, his intelligence, kindness, gentle humour (and his culinary contributions to our picnic lunches) were all greatly missed.

Because of scheduling difficulties, the remaining members of *the Red-eyed Wearios* had to split into two groups, each making its observations in different national parks in Ontario - although both areas extend into Lake Erie, and are focal points for migrating birds. Betsy McFarlane, Gay McDougall Gruner and Averill Craig did their Birdathon at Canada's southernmost tip, in Point Pelee National Park and surrounding area; meanwhile Sue Bishop and Ahmad Shah made their observations in Long Point National Park, some 260 km to the east.

Report of the Pelee team

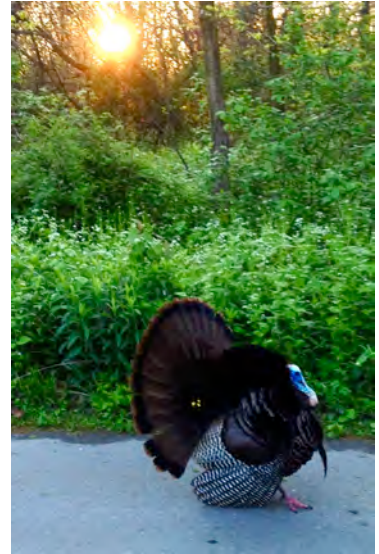
Last year in western Quebec and eastern Ontario *the Red-eyed Wearios* had recorded 106 species, up from 90 in the same area the year before? Could we do better this year? We would certainly do our best.



We had arrived at Point Pelee south of Leamington, Ontario a few days earlier and had scouted the various locations we would cover on "the" day, encountering a number of exciting birds which we hoped to be able to see again during the 24 hours of our Baillie Birdathon. At 4:15 am, as requested, the alarm call jerked us awake. Sunrise would be at 6:15 for this location, and well before 6 am we were at the park's Visitor Centre ready to take the day's first trolley down to "the Tip" of the peninsula, where we hoped to see gulls and ducks. In fact, our first birds of the day were seen from the trolley: a small group of Wild Turkeys. We also heard Eastern Towhee, several American Robins, many, many Yellow Warblers, a few Tree Swallows, Blue Jays and the sound of a Carolina Wren. Betsy's excellent "birding ear" was also able to distinguish a Tennessee Warbler. At "The Tip" a mixed group of gulls huddled on the sand, and we were able to identify Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, and Bonaparte's Gull, while a Double-crested Cormorant flew low over the water in which some half-dozen Red-breasted Mergansers of both sexes were swimming.

Having looked our fill at these birds we began to walk slowly north, hearing Blue Jays and seeing the first of the many, many Baltimore Orioles and almost as many Orchard Orioles which were in evidence everywhere throughout the park. We heard the "mew" of a Catbird from deep in a bush, and saw several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers.

With the rising sun just showing over the horizon, we rounded a bend in the road and straight into a close encounter with a large male Wild Turkey. He was a very handsome bird indeed, as you can see from the photo, with a bright blue face, an inflated crop, and a long dangling so-called “beard” which he was waving about as he fanned out his tail for the benefit of a couple of (hopefully!) admiring females; when we came into view the hens disappeared into the vegetation at the side of the road, but the Turkey-cock stayed, and then started to do something which we had never seen before: he walked towards us, dragging the primary feathers of his wings along the asphalt, so that they made a quite loud scraping noise. He didn’t appear to be injured, but we were unsure if this was being done to intrigue his hidden female companions; or maybe he had decided to show off to the three human females (!), but perhaps this was some kind of threat display? (A subsequent check of the Cornell University website confirmed that this was typical breeding display behavior).



The unmistakable honking of a flight of Canada Geese prompted us to look overhead, where we also saw Barn Swallows swooping, and in the surrounding trees and bushes we were able to tick off several common birds, including Mourning Dove, Brown-headed Cowbird, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, and Starling while adding our third warbler species: a Nashville, hopping around at eye height. A Veery standing still on a log was our first thrush (other than American Robins). On the eastern side of the peninsula, working our way back towards the Visitor Centre, we came across the open ground known aptly as “The Sparrow Field”, in which are several enormous piles of brush - wonderful cover for the various species of sparrow which give this area its name. Perched on top, or lurking in a less exposed position inside the pile, or completely invisible but still audible, we found Lincoln’s Sparrow, Field Sparrow and Song Sparrow; White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows were also seen in the same sector, not to mention some scampering rabbits!

On the edge of the Sparrow Field, we looked in vain for the Yellow-throated Vireo, which we had seen quite clearly only the day before; equally there was no sign of the lone migrating Bobolink that had been singing from the top of a tall tree. However as we walked slowly down the adjoining road scanning the bushes and the trees we did add a Warbling Vireo, Ovenbird and several more warblers, including Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Yellow-rumped and Myrtle Warblers as well as a Mourning Dove and several Cedar Waxwings. Unfortunately, the Eastern Bluebird, which had been hanging round the trolley stop the day before, had apparently decided to move on. By this time we felt in need of refreshments. While we paused at a picnic table to enjoy the Friends of Point Pelee’s special (**king-sized!**) “Bird-seed cookies” and very welcome coffee, we were rewarded with two more species, American Goldfinch and a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird, seen (rather remarkably) on the ground at the base of a large tree. Of course, having just flown non-stop across the width of Lake Erie or even further, this tiny bird was doubtless far more in need of a calorie-boost than we were!

By now it was 7:30 am, and our next choice of trail was through Tilden Woods - where we had been treated to the sight of many, many warblers in the late afternoon on the day of our arrival (and had felt the onset of “warbler neck” as we craned ours back to get glimpses of these small birds, constantly moving up high in the trees, and often behind a leaf). We were immediately greeted with the song of

our “namesake” bird: the Red-eyed Vireo (“Here I am, where are you?”) as well as sightings of Chipping Sparrow, Downy Woodpecker, and a beautiful singing dark-blue Indigo Bunting; warbler sightings for our list included Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Magnolia, Nashville, an American Redstart which was flycatching - competing for insects with a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Meanwhile a Northern Waterthrush and a Swamp Sparrow were heard near a pool of water in a swampy glade. Yellow Warblers were seen and heard (Tweet-tweet - my Shredded Wheat) in almost every tree! Then we were rewarded with vivid flashes of red, as a stunning male Scarlet Tanager became visible moving amongst the well-leafed branches of the trees further along the path. From further away echoed the cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck call of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

We had first seen our next bird a couple of days previously; happily for us it was there again, snoozing away the daylight hours in exactly the same place. Peering through our binoculars we were able to focus on a large tree perhaps 75 metres away. As we slowly scanned down the trunk, suddenly we all gasped as a red-phase Screech Owl seemed to manifest itself out of nowhere, his bright russet feathers and tufted ears making him look for all the world like a plump, ginger “Cheshire” cat! This was a very satisfying sighting, since it was the very first Screech Owl of this particular colour that any of the team had seen.



By 8:30 we had turned our attention to the Woodland Trail. New birds included Wood Duck, and a pair of beautiful Red-headed Woodpeckers chasing each other along a couple of horizontal branches. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were plentiful and easy to see; Blackburnian, Cape May, and Bay-breasted Warblers as well as further Red-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos all in the highest parts of the trees made our necks ache yet again, but it was worth it to see them as well as a handsome male Pine Warbler in his spring plumage. A Great Blue Heron flew overhead while, in the background, a Black-billed Cuckoo was calling. Closer to, we were pleased to hear the “tchébec” of a Least Flycatcher.

All very nice additions to the list, but the best was yet to come. Several people we encountered told us the exciting news that a pair of Prothonotary Warblers had been seen on this trail. Being at the fringe of its range in Canada, the Prothonotary Warbler is almost entirely restricted to a few areas in southwestern Ontario, mostly adjacent to the Lake Erie shoreline. Striding out, we finally reached a spot where a crowd was gathered around a part of the boardwalk that straddled a swampy pool, shaded by overhanging trees and low branches – perfect habitat for the cavity-nesting Prothonotary Warblers.



Human Prothonotaries were religious and legal clerks who sometimes wore a golden hood and a blue cape. We didn’t have to wait very long before we saw their namesakes, the unique warm golden colour glowing in the heavy shade, in contrast to the bluish grey wings - the birds occasionally reflected in the dark water below. A nesting box had been erected on a pole in the middle of the pool, but the female was ignoring it, taking nesting material to the cavity in a low overhanging branch, while the male was busily building a “dummy” nest a little further away, to help foil potential predators or to tell competing cavity nesters that this territory is taken. At one point he flew up higher and behind us, so we turned around and in looking for him were surprised and delighted to find that he

had led us to another Screech Owl, this time a more discreetly coloured Gray-phase one, who seemed to be keeping an eye on the crowd below, while blending almost perfectly into his surroundings.

Tearing ourselves away, we then moved on to the area of the historical Delaurier Homestead, where we thought that for sure we would be able to find Bluebirds in the surrounding abandoned fields, as we had in past years. Frustratingly, no such luck this time, but we did add some new species with a Turkey Vulture and then a Cooper's Hawk being seen overhead, and after much searching our first, very elusive, Palm Warbler in the bushes beside the path. Even more exciting, Betsy (she-of-the-remarkable-hearing) was able to home in on the "buzzy bees *buZZZZZZZZ*" sound of the much less common Blue-winged Warbler.

By this time it was more than time for lunch (is it because good things go with good times that birding makes one feel so constantly in need of "a little something"?). We had planned to indulge in a BBQ'd sausage cooked by the Friends of Point Pelee, but as the nearby parking areas were now full up with the vehicles of later risers, we decided to fall back on our own (very delicious) picnic and then check out the Marsh Boardwalk. There we were rewarded with beautiful Black Terns wheeling overhead, as well as Mallards swimming, and Common Yellowthroats, Swamp Sparrows and many Red-winged Blackbirds seen in the cattails. However, the expected Marsh Wrens had obviously decided that it was time for their siesta, and they refused to come out to oblige us. Ironically, while we were there, we saw the BBQ belonging to the (closed) snack-bar being loaded onto a truck – it was being taken down to the main Friends of Point Pelee stand at the Visitor Centre, because – disaster – their BBQ had apparently exploded. Thank goodness we had been able to fall back on our own backup picnic!

The extensive flat, arable area known as the Onion Fields is located north of the Pelee peninsula – and the odour of onion on the breeze can be quite pungent. However, the fields are often good for shorebirds; as we drove slowly by, Gay spotted a fair-sized grouping of Black-bellied Plovers, and something else smaller and redder. When we stopped and got our spotting scopes out, we realized that they were Ruddy Turnstones. Horned Larks, Savannah Sparrows, and House Finches were found along this road which parallels the north boundary of Pelee marsh, and Purple Martins and Chimney Swifts swooped overhead. We even saw an interesting partially leucistic (that is albino) Grackle a white primary feather in strong contrast to the rest of his normal dark glossy plumage.

Averill's moment in the sun (not literally unfortunately – there was none at this point) came when she was first to notice a juvenile Bald Eagle, flying low and purposefully over the edge of the Pelee marsh. In fact we were now keeping a very careful eye on the weather in this exposed location, since the forecast was for afternoon thunderstorms and even for possible tornados! There were plenty of (very wet) ditches to jump into for shelter should a tornado be sighted (!), but none of us liked the prospect of such severe weather, particularly Betsy who a couple of years ago suffered the very unpleasant experience of having her car crushed in her driveway, when a large tree was toppled by a microburst (the type of wind which can bring down aeroplanes trying to land or take off in a thunderstorm). Two people in Quebec died that night because of the storms, and her electricity was out for six days.



Making sure we were clad in raingear and our most glamorous rubber boots, we made for Hillman Marsh a few kilometres away (where we had been soaked to the skin during a brief but heavy shower the day before). As we got the 'scopes out of the car the wind was gusting strongly, and black clouds could be seen in the distance. However, although the sky continued to darken

ominously we decided to stay for a while, and managed to see several new species of duck (Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, Northern Shoveller, American Wigeon).

Shorebirds included more Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlin, and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. We were disappointed that the American Avocets that had been reported a few days previously were no longer to be seen. However, standing out both for its size and its elegant feathering, we were able to have an excellent view of a lone Marbled Godwit, its long black-tipped, slightly decurved bill clearly visible

As the sky became darker and darker, streaked with distant lightning, the clouds roiled and the thunder could be heard approaching ever closer, we decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and began our windswept walk back to the shelter of the car. Happily we were able to pick up two more species on the way, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, plus a flying Great Egret, whose white feathers contrasted rather beautifully with the darkening sky. There was no sign of the previous day's elegant Mute Swan.



A quick count showed that we had achieved our goal of a minimum 100 species, but we wanted to improve on that if we could, so we decided that after supper we would try for some evening birds. We returned to the almost empty Visitor Centre parking area as the sun was setting, in the hope of getting American Woodcock there. However, no such luck in that location this time - but there were insects ... in their millions. We could scarcely believe the volume of the humming sound being made by the thick clouds of (non-biting) bugs to be seen and heard over the woods in every direction – and we were happy to note that Bank Swallows were taking advantage of the chance to feast on them before retiring for the evening.

We thought we would give the evening birds one more chance, and headed back to the Delaurier Homestead. Neither Whip-poor-will nor Night Hawk was heard, though both were known to have been around, but here in the gathering dusk we were finally able to catch glimpses the male American Woodcock's aerial mating display and to hear its unmistakable “peeent, peeent, peeent”. If you have never seen or heard this bird, an amateur video on YouTube (filmed in Massachusetts) gives a fair impression of the experience we had with what was our final species of the day:

<http://tinyurl.com/American-Woodcock>.

Pretty tired, and just a little disappointed that we had not been able to find some of the 18 additional species that we had counted during our scouting, we called it a day and declared our Birdathon over. We were happy that we had successfully avoided the risk of Lyme Disease, as we had been very careful not to get bitten by the Deer Ticks which are present in the park (and about which there are many warning signs), and pleased that we had managed to get a **final total of 104 species** for our 2012 Baillie Birdathon ... not a bad count and, as we reminded each other, there is always a chance for a larger total next year...!

Thank you so much for supporting the *Red-eyed Wearios'* efforts on behalf of the McGill Bird Observatory – we hope you enjoyed our report. A complete list of the species seen follows is attached.

Gay McDougall Gruner; Betsy McFarlane; Averill Craig

**Red-eyed Wearios - Baillie Birdathon
Point Pelee National Park & Vicinity
Thursday, May 10th, 2012
Species Observed**

Canada Goose	Eastern Kingbird
Wood Duck	Blue-headed Vireo
Gadwall	Warbling Vireo
American Wigeon	Red-eyed Vireo
Mallard	Blue Jay
Blue-winged Teal	American Crow
Northern Shoveler	Horned Lark
Green-winged Teal	Purple Martin
Lesser Scaup	Tree Swallow
Red-breasted Merganser	Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Wild Turkey	Bank Swallow
Double-crested Cormorant	Barn Swallow
Great Blue Heron	Carolina Wren
Great Egret	House Wren
Turkey Vulture	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Bald Eagle	Veery
Cooper's Hawk	Wood Thrush
Black-bellied Plover	American Robin
Killdeer	Gray Catbird
Greater Yellowlegs	European Starling
Lesser Yellowlegs	Cedar Waxwing
Marbled Godwit	Blue-winged Warbler
Ruddy Turnstone	Tennessee Warbler
Dunlin	Nashville Warbler
American Woodcock	Northern Parula
Bonaparte's Gull	Yellow Warbler
Ring-billed Gull	Chestnut-sided Warbler
Herring Gull	Magnolia Warbler
Black Tern	Cape May Warbler
Rock Pigeon	Black-throated Blue Warbler
Mourning Dove	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Black-throated Green Warbler
Black-billed Cuckoo	Blackburnian Warbler
Eastern Screech-Owl	Pine Warbler
Great Horned Owl	Palm Warbler
Chimney Swift	Bay-breasted Warbler
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Black-and-white Warbler
Red-headed Woodpecker	American Redstart
Downy Woodpecker	Prothonotary Warbler
Least Flycatcher	Ovenbird
Great-crested Flycatcher	Northern Waterthrush

Common Yellowthroat
 Eastern Towhee
 Chipping Sparrow
 Savannah Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 Lincoln's Sparrow
 Swamp Sparrow
 White-throated Sparrow
 White-crowned Sparrow
 Scarlet Tanager
 Northern Cardinal
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Indigo Bunting
 Red-winged Blackbird
 Eastern Meadowlark
 Common Grackle
 Brown-headed Cowbird
 Orchard Oriole
 Baltimore Oriole
 House Finch
 American Goldfinch
 House Sparrow

Total 104 species

**Point Pelee National Park & Area, Outside the Birdthon 24 hours
 (7 – 9 and 11 May, 2012)
 Additional Species**

Mute Swan
 Common Loon
 Short-billed Dowitcher
 Great Black-backed Gull
 Eastern Whip-poor-will
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Northern Flicker
 Yellow-throated Vireo
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Red-breasted Nuthatch
 Eastern Bluebird
 Swainson's Thrush
 Blackpoll Warbler
 Hooded Warbler
 Wilson's Warbler
 Canada Warbler
 Clay-colored Sparrow
 Bobolink

18 species
