

The Red-eyed Wearios – Baillie Birdathon Report, Thursday 19 May 2011

For this year's birdathon, the Red-eyed Wearios team acquired two valuable new members. Betsy McFarlane, Gay McDougall Gruner, Peter Gruner and Averill Craig were joined by Sue Bishop and Ahmad Shah, and though these two were weary and red-eyed after returning late the night before from a trip to see the spectacular spring bird migration which passes through Long Point, Ontario, they proved to be great assets for our team.

Determined to best our total of 90 species last year in the same parts of western Quebec and eastern Ontario, we met at 05:30 in the McGill Bird Observatory (MBO), but started the day's birding with a short visit to the Morgan Arboretum under threatening skies. Clad in very necessary rain gear and rubber boots and despite intermittent downpours, we enjoyed the sight of a beautiful rainbow, and interpreted its presence at the beginning of the day as a propitious omen, particularly as it was soon accompanied by the unmistakable repetitive notes of our "namesake" bird, the Red-eyed Vireo announcing "here I am", and asking where were we?



This early in the morning, most of the action was high up in the trees, and in that first half hour we saw and heard a good number of warbler species, including the first of many of the day's abundant Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Other warblers included Black-throated Green, Nashville, Tennessee, Bay-breasted, Northern

Parula, Magnolia and Ovenbird. We added a Blue-headed Vireo, and then were able to admire first a handsome male Baltimore Oriole, and followed by a Rose-breasted Grosbeak catching the intermittent rays of the early morning sun. There were several woodpeckers, including Downy and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, while Red-breasted Nuthatch, Common Grackle, Chipping Sparrow, Northern Tree Swallow and Ring-billed Gull were also recorded in that first half hour.

By 6.15 we were back in the MBO where Gay was scheduled to do the day's "census walk" where she was recording not just every species seen and heard, but counting their numbers too. We were happy to accompany her through the set path, and to act as

additional eyes and ears. In addition to most of the species already seen, we added a flight of Canada Geese and several Wood Duck flying by. We also were able to tick Warbling Vireo, Great Crested Flycatcher, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush, Solitary Sandpiper, American Crow, Red-winged Blackbird, Killdeer, American Goldfinch, American Robin, Chickadee; near the pond we heard an Eastern Wood Pee-Wee and several Northern Cardinals, and spotted some Mallards; there were several Swamp Sparrows too, and a tree full of Cedar Waxwings, while a Green Heron obligingly flew quite close to us, as did some Wood Duck. A Virginia Rail announced its presence in the reeds. Across the open area the lovely liquid burble of a Bobolink was heard for the first time that day, and the Common Yellowthroat's "witchity-witchity" emanated from the bushes. The persistent rain at least kept the biting bugs down, but Kingbirds were still seen hunting for insects, while White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows and at least three House Wrens were also present.

A quick swing back to the Arboretum netted a few useful additional species (including a Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Pine Siskin at a feeder) but was far less productive than our earlier visit. After dropping Betsy's dog Zak off at home, and heading west, our next stop was at the Pinery in St-Lazare. The rain had eased up by this time with occasional light drizzle, and a walk down the middle trail through young spruce yielded Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, beautiful Cape May and Magnolia Warblers, a Red-shouldered Hawk and several Blue Jays.



After a pause at a feeder in St-Emmanuel, we headed out towards St-Clet where in various exceedingly waterlogged fields we recorded a group of Wild Turkeys, Horned Larks scattered in amongst more numerous Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrow, a Flicker and even a Great Blue Heron standing in a ditch right beside the road. We were also able to tick off Barn Swallow and Mourning Dove; where there was a little more vegetation we added Starling, Catbird and a beautiful bright chestnut-coloured Brown Thrasher which was conveniently posing at the top of a tree.



Then, at chemin Ste-Julie, west of the 201 just where it turns the first corner, we came across a most extraordinary sight, and indeed one that we would vote as the highlight of the trip. The flash of an unusual colour combination for this habitat literally brought us up short (we braked so hard, it was fortunate nobody was driving behind us!) What could it be? Under a sky



that was finally showing a patch of blue, we peered through our binoculars, and there flitting from plant to plant by the side of the road, was a black bird with a pure white belly and white edges to its wings and - what was that? Good heavens - a red shoulder patch! It was in fact a partially-leucistic (that is partly albino) male Red-winged Blackbird. He even allowed us to approach relatively close on foot permitting a few photos which, though not of the highest resolution, do record an interesting aberration – and a very handsome bird to boot! We were afraid that its unusual appearance might provoke attacks by other RWBLs, but we were pleased to hear from Betsy a week or so later that she had seen it again in the same area, and that it appeared to be in good shape.

After this excitement we moved on to the delightful farm owned by Lance Laviolette. Lance had most kindly prepared for us a list of likely birds and where to see them. The sun came out though it was still a little cool, and we spent an enjoyable three quarters of an hour there, noting the strangled call of a Raven and then seeing Tree Swallows and some 50 Snow Geese fly overhead. Several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and what seemed to be a chorus of Eastern Meadowlarks were to be heard as we admired the nest that an Eastern Phoebe had built underneath the balcony at the back of the house. Baltimore Orioles were to be seen and heard too, and plenty of American Goldfinches. Betsy's superb hearing allowed her twice to hear an Eastern Bluebird, but unfortunately it eluded the less sensitive ears of the rest of the team so we couldn't count it. Seven Turkey Vultures wheeled above a ridge in the distance.



On the way out of the farm, we admired and were amused by a particularly charming and apt *Corvus Formidonis* (Scarecrow to you!) perched on top of a shovel.

After a brief comfort break at the Forever Green Stables, which gave us the opportunity to pat noses and give a carrot each to Betsy's two horses Andy and Big Bird (and to add House Sparrow and Bank Swallow to our list of birds), we set off towards Voyageur Provincial Park where we planned to have our lunch stop. It was by now sunny and 19 degrees and the fields on the way yielded two separate sightings of Vesper Sparrows, an American Kestrel perched on the top of a snag, and a very handsome Red-tailed Hawk which dropped down into a pasture and immediately flew up again, the sunshine giving us a lovely view of its fanned-out bright russet tail feathers.

Our lunch stop was taken at a sunny picnic table in the park, and allowed us to add American Redstart and an Osprey flying overhead, as well as to hear the flutelike notes of the Wood Thrush and omnipresent Ovenbirds. A Kingfisher was present too. We also ran into (not quite but almost literally) a large, ill-tempered, ugly and pre-historic looking Snapping Turtle which was right in the middle of the road on a bend, and very determined to cross it in its



own good time, without interference from us. However, brave Gay and Ahmad were able to move it to the verge, but VERY carefully, as it chomped down hard on a large stick and hung on like grim death. We could only be grateful that it was the stick and not a hand that it had aimed for ...!

We now headed towards the lovely Alfred Peat-bog, seeing many Bobolinks en route and another, initially mysterious, hawk sitting in a roadside tree with its back to us. It was darkish and had white patches on its back and a barred tail and hard to identify but finally, after consulting all our field guides, we determined it to be another (juvenile) Red-tailed Hawk. The Alfred Bog is a little piece of boreal forest, hundreds of miles south of anything like it, which gives refuge to many plants and animals that were stranded as the warming climate pushed the boreal forest northward.



Unfortunately, beautiful and delightfully peaceful as the Alfred Bog is, that day it was so quiet that we failed to find the Clay-coloured Sparrows that can be seen there, or indeed any other bird. We did take the opportunity to admire some of the interesting low-growing plants to be seen from the boardwalk, but moved on without adding a single bird species to our list.

However, if the lovely natural environment of the Alfred Bog was disappointing, the man-made Alfred Sewage Lagoons were full of ducks and other water birds, and were super-productive for our list. The light was perfect, and the ducks seen from ground level and from the excellent observation tower included Gadwall, American Wigeon, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Ruddy Duck. We also had Pied-billed Grebe, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted and Least Sandpipers, Marsh Wrens and from the heights of the observation tower a memorable view from above of a Peregrine Falcon swiftly flying by, close to the ground, something bulky in its talons; it eventually perched and started to tear at its prey, but by this time it was too far away for us to be able to identify the unfortunate victim on which it was dining.

By this time we were tired and hungry enough ourselves to feel like returning to the Hudson Inn for a well deserved dinner. En route we added House Finch to our list. We also had a rather extraordinary view of a Bald Eagle – but we could not add it to the list as it was clearly some sort of totem attached to a stick, and was being held up at the head of a small procession of what appeared to be a band of North American Indians who were

walking beside the highway. What exactly they were doing there, and the purpose of the bird totem, remains a cause for speculation as we felt it would be inappropriate to stop and try to take a picture. It was certainly a somewhat surreal way to end our birding day.

After dinner, we had intended to continue birding into the dusk and beyond, but tiredness and particularly the knowledge that the dogs belonging to two members of the team had been alone in their respective homes since early morning and would certainly be hungry and (perhaps more urgently) metaphorically crossing their legs, led us to give up at this point, pleased nevertheless to have achieved the 106 species listed below. Next year, we swore, doggy day-care will be organized so we can do even better!

Snow Goose
 Canada Goose
 Wood Duck
 Gadwall
 American Wigeon
 Mallard
 Blue-winged Teal
 Northern Shoveler
 Northern Pintail
 Green-winged Teal
 Redhead
 Ring-necked Duck
 Lesser Scaup
 Ruddy Duck
 Wild Turkey
 Pied-billed Grebe
 Great Blue Heron
 Green Heron
 Turkey Vulture
 Osprey
 Red-shouldered Hawk
 Red-tailed Hawk
 American Kestrel
 Peregrine Falcon
 Virginia Rail
 Common Moorhen
 American Coot
 Killdeer
 Greater Yellowlegs
 Solitary Sandpiper
 Spotted Sandpiper
 Least Sandpiper
 Ring-billed Gull
 Rock Pigeon

Mourning Dove
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird
 Belted Kingfisher
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
 Downy Woodpecker
 Northern Flicker
 Pileated Woodpecker
 Eastern Wood-Pewee
 Least Flycatcher
 Eastern Phoebe
 Great Crested Flycatcher
 Eastern Kingbird
 Blue-headed Vireo
 Warbling Vireo
 Red-eyed Vireo
 Blue Jay
 American Crow
 Common Raven
 Horned Lark
 Tree Swallow
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
 Bank Swallow
 Barn Swallow
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Red-breasted Nuthatch
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 House Wren
 Marsh Wren
 Golden-crowned Kinglet
 Hermit Thrush
 Wood Thrush
 American Robin
 Gray Catbird

Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Tennessee Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Cape-May Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat

Chipping Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Bobolink
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Baltimore Oriole
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow