



# Audubon VERMONT

## Birdathon Adventure 2016

*By Gwendolyn Causer, Teacher/Naturalist*

I've been doing Audubon's Birdathon for quite a few years now (this is my 10<sup>th</sup> Birdathon), which has me thinking about how folks "learn to bird" and how I teach birding. With nine staff, four special guests, and a helpful "bystander birder" in our group this year, we had a wide range of expertise and approaches to birding. I had opportunities to be both student and teacher, and to observe different learning styles. Yes, I love the song of the Veery and the flash of the feathers of the Baltimore Oriole, but what really has me hooked is how birding offers us opportunities for lifelong learning and conservation action.



As always, we began early, gathering and listening on the office porch. We tallied #1 (Least Flycatcher) through #14 (Eastern Phoebe) without taking a step. Our hike began through young, shrubby habitat where we spotted and heard birds (such as Chestnut-sided Warbler and Common Yellowthroat) that prefer these nesting sites.

A porcupine watched us from a low tree branch (barely 15 feet away) and we marveled at its apparent calm. With many expert birders in our group the pace of identifying songs and field marks can be dizzyingly fast, so birders new to Birdathon take special pride in being the first



to call out an ID. Burlington Free Press reporter Joel Banner Baird surprised himself by being the first to identify an American Crow (#24). Up the trail, near the white pine blow-down, BFP photographer Glenn Russell captured a gorgeous shot of a Blackburnian Warbler. ([Full Birdathon article and photos](#))

Four of us lagged behind the group trying to find a Magnolia Warbler. This was our Education Manager Jamie's first Birdathon. She carried *Sibley's Guide to Birds* to learn the field marks and listened as we played bird songs from our *Audubon Bird Guide App* to sharpen her ears. ([FREE download online](#)) Answering Jamie's questions and teaching her what to key in on helped reinforce my own birding skills. There's really no better way to learn to bird than to get out in the field. Alas, the Magnolia Warbler eluded us this year, but we did hear a Canada Goose (#31).



Beyond the oaky ridge of the Spear Trail in a stand of hemlock trees, Jim and Mark spied a thrush – not just any thrush, but a [Swainson's Thrush](#). Typically Swainson's Thrushes are found high on mountains in spruce forests. But during migration season you never know what you might find. Mark saw the bird first. He explained that unlike the Hermit Thrush, the Swainson's Thrush doesn't have orange-red tail feathers and it also has a slight white eye ring. Fortunately, the bird sat still for several minutes while both Jim and Mark were able to confirm its identity.



Swainson's Thrush  
David Sibley



Hermit Thrush  
David Sibley

Near the end of the Museum Trail we heard a bird with a buzzy song and a cadence that reminded me of the "bee-buzz-buzz-buzz" of a [Golden-winged Warbler](#) (GWWA). But we were

not in the right mix of shrubby and meadow-edge habitat that GWWA's require. Even the expert birders were stumped by the sound. I theorized that during migration season GWWA's flying in from their wintering grounds would need to rest somewhere – why not Audubon? Mark was skeptical, so we stalked the buzzy bird with binoculars until we discovered a lone [Dark-eyed Junco](#) singing a funny, atypical song in a tree top. (To compare GWWA's "[song 1](#)" with Junco's "[odd 2-parted buzzy songs](#)" scroll to the bottom, right corner of the webpages.)



Jamie (1<sup>st</sup> Birdathon) and Debbie (2<sup>nd</sup> Birdathon) called the next bird, one with a much more straightforward song, the [Mourning Dove](#) (#44) - a hoot-like, plaintive call. During a brief break at the pond our whole group spotted two hawks, high overhead. After double-checking the field marks in Sibley's we confirmed that it was a [Cooper's Hawk](#) that had dive-bombed the [Red-tailed Hawk](#).



*Cooper's Hawk: Johann Schumacher, VIREO*

*Barred Owl: Arthur Morris, VIREO*

*Bobolink: Rob Curtis, VIREO*

Every year we search along Sherman Hollow Brook for the elusive Northern Waterthrush, a well-camouflaged species that forages at the edges of streams and wades in the water. As we were admiring the architectural details of the new tree house/gazebo space at the Birds of Vermont Museum, Mark recognized the distinctive song of the [Northern Waterthrush](#). When it sang again I confirmed the ID: #54. Breaking from the traditional route, we decided to return to the Audubon Center along the road.

If we hadn't taken the road we would have missed spotting a Barred Owl silently perched at the edge of the trail. It took flight after everyone had a good look at this magnificent predator. Our hike through the lower property of the Audubon Center yielded an additional 10 bird species, including the Bobolink, with its bubbly, bobbling R2D2-like song. ([Learn more about Audubon Vermont's new role in the Bobolink Project.](#))

Our official Audubon Vermont Birdathon count totaled 67 when I had to part ways with the staff. They continued their quest on bikes through Huntington, past Gillette Pond and along the Winooski River into Richmond. The final "Official Audubon Vermont Birdathon Count" totaled a record-breaking 88 species. I continued my Birdathon by driving the back roads to Burlington and stopping along the way to bird.



Surprisingly, the series of beaver ponds along Sherman Hollow Road did not reveal any new birds. As the checklist fills up, fresh birds become more difficult to find. Crossing into Hinesburg I entered prime [Golden-winged Warbler](#) habitat, so I stopped to search a short loop trail above the athletic field at CVU High School. ([Learn more about Audubon's work with Golden-winged Warblers.](#)) Alas, a Northern Cardinal was the only bird I could tally – a common, yet beautiful bird. But here's the thing about me and birding: I'm really most interested in *what* the birds are doing and *how* they're surviving in their environment. I'm writing this story on



my back porch and I just heard a faint Chickadee call. For the first time since my daughter Ella was 4 years old (she's almost 17 now), we have Chickadees nesting in the nest box we made at an Audubon Preschool program. The nest box is mounted on our grape arbor, about 10 feet from where I'm sitting and right at eye level. The eggs must have just hatched, because I just saw a Chickadee bring a caterpillar into the nest box for the first time. So exciting! This reminded me of teaching a group of students at Audubon this spring. After introducing the students to the vast array of different bird species using the Vermont Bird Guides we hiked up to the Peeper Pond. Red-winged Blackbirds and Tree Swallows flew all around us. Setting the guides aside, I encouraged everyone to watch how the birds were interacting, when they were calling, and try to figure out what was happening at the pond. Our discussion about food, nesting, territories, and habitat grew to encompass ideas about what the students could do to help birds during nesting season. So inspiring!



But back to Birdathon... Feeling rather disappointed to have failed to find a GWWA, I returned to my car and considered my next destination. I noticed a flash in flight as a bird flew from a tree and landed behind a pile of gravel in the parking lot. Just as I was about to drive away, the bird walked out – a Northern Flicker! Such a surprise – and the last of the five woodpeckers on my checklist.



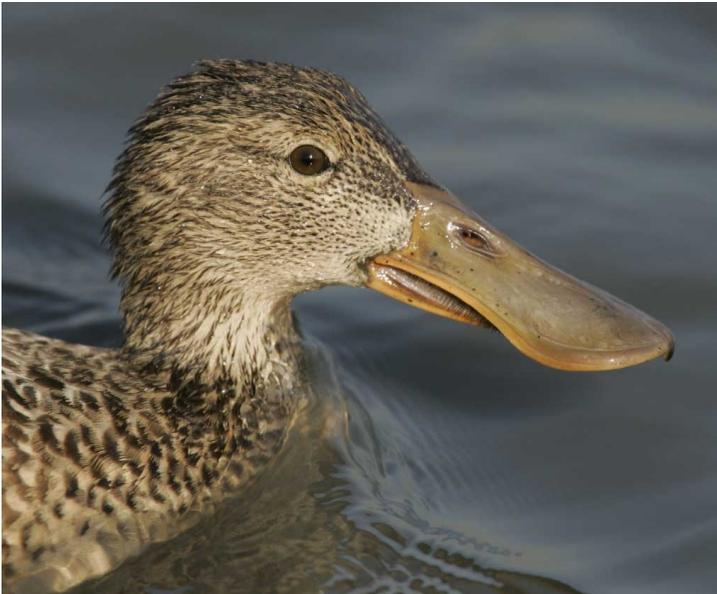
I took the Flicker sighting as sign that I should shift gears, so I skipped Geprag's Park (another GWWA hotspot) in favor of a different habitat: the wetlands of Shelburne Pond. Wading birds and waterfowl aren't my forte (because they don't sing pretty songs). I was able to find a Virginia Rail calling, deeply hidden in the cattails and sedges. Then I spotted three birds flying over the pond – a Mallard duck, a Ring-Billed Gull, and an immature Bald Eagle. The wingspan and silhouette were unmistakable, but the dark head made me double-check with binoculars when it landed.

*Northern Flicker: Adrian and Jane Binns, VIREO*



*Immature Bald Eagle: Gwendolyn Causer*

Next I stopped at the pond's boat launch, hoping for herons and was surprised to find three Bald Eagles fishing in the pond from nearby trees (only 10 feet away)! While marveling at their technique and size I scanned the open water for other birds to tally. I recognized a flock of geese, and in the far distance I also spotted a small group of waterfowls patterned with large dark and light patches. Stumped, I consulted my Audubon App, "searching by shape" for duck-like birds. And here's the wonderful thing about the world of birding, just when I was getting overwhelmed by the similar-looking waterfowl, along came a birder with a powerful spotting scope and a wealth of expertise. We struck up a conversation and I asked for his help with Birdathon. He immediately recognized the distant waterfowl as [Northern Shovelers](#), pointing out their unique shovel-shaped beaks. Happy for the Birdathon challenge, he also



*Northern Shoveler: Martin Hale, VIREO*



*Pied-billed Grebe: Garth McElroy, VIREO*

spotted a Double-crested Cormorant and a Herring Gull. Then he focused on a well-camouflaged bird that was facing away from us and had me take a look through the scope. Honestly, my first guess was that we were looking at a mammal. But when the animal turned, its unique face came into view – another "life bird" for me and admittedly one I'd never heard of before, the [Pied-billed Grebe](#). A mother Wood Duck with 8 ducklings and a Caspian Tern rounded out my count to 82 species.

Earlier this week at our Intervale Community Farm share pick-up, Ella and I ran into one of her Burlington High School teachers. He sheepishly (and jokingly) admitted that he'd recently be-



come a birder – almost as though he'd caught an infectious disease. He was so enthusiastic and eager to learn and asked me where to start. I recommended *Sibley's*, the *Audubon Bird Guide App*, and the classic *Birding by Ear CD*. I also suggested Audubon's monthly [Bird Monitoring Walks](#) and our summer [Bird Banding Sessions](#).

Nothing can take the place of a birding buddy – someone who can answer your questions and tell you why they know what they know—and hopefully make you smile! Learning from a fellow birder at Shelburne Pond newly inspired me. Not only was he willing to explain to me how to distinguish the finer field marks of the birds in question, he also shared his astonishment at how all these various species of wild birds are surviving and adapting to their environment. Yes, he helped me reach 82 Birdathon species, but he also reminded me that there's a whole world of birding behavior to observe and teach to my students, regardless of their age or expertise.

Thanks so much for everyone's Birdathon Donations to support Audubon Vermont work!  
["It's never too late to donate to Birdathon."](#)



Explore Audubon's Guide to North American Birds online:  
<http://www.audubon.org/bird-guide>

## Official Audubon Vermont Birdathon Count 2016

1. Wood Duck
2. American Woodcock
3. Least Flycatcher
4. Red-eyed Vireo
5. American Goldfinch
6. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
7. Pileated Woodpecker
8. Great-crested Flycatcher
9. Hermit Thrush
10. Veery
11. Black-capped Chickadee
12. Red-winged Blackbird
13. Black-throated Green Warbler
14. White-breasted Nuthatch
15. Ruffed Grouse
16. Eastern Phoebe
17. Indigo Bunting
18. Brown Creeper
19. Chestnut-sided Warbler
20. Ovenbird
21. Yellow-rumped Warbler
22. Black-throated Blue Warbler
23. Common Yellow-throat
24. Blue-headed Vireo
25. Eastern Blue Jay
26. American Crow
27. Scarlet Tanager
28. Purple Finch
29. Tufted Titmouse
30. Blackburnian Warbler
31. Winter Wren
32. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
33. Canada Goose
34. Dark-eye Junco
35. Downy Woodpecker
36. Cedar Waxwing
37. Red-breasted Nuthatch
38. Black-and-white Warbler
39. Rose-breasted Grosbeak
40. Nashville Warbler
41. Northern Parula
42. Swainson's Thrush
43. Wood Thrush
44. American Robin
45. Hairy Woodpecker
46. Brown-headed Cowbird
47. Turkey Vulture
48. Common Grackle
49. Mourning Dove
50. Red-tailed Hawk
51. Cooper's Hawk
52. Common Raven
53. Gray Catbird
54. White-throated Sparrow
55. Song Sparrow
56. Louisiana Waterthrush
57. European Starling
58. Tree Swallow
59. Barred Owl

## Causer Birdathon Count 2016

1. Least Flycatcher
2. Red-eyed Vireo
3. American Goldfinch
4. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
5. Pileated Woodpecker
6. Great-crested Flycatcher
7. Hermit Thrush
8. Veery
9. Black-capped Chickadee
10. Red-winged Blackbird
11. Black-throated Green Warbler
12. White-breasted Nuthatch
13. Ruffed Grouse
14. Eastern Phoebe
15. Indigo Bunting
16. Brown Creeper
17. Chestnut-sided Warbler
18. Ovenbird
19. Yellow-rumped Warbler
20. Black-throated Blue Warbler
21. Common Yellow-throat
22. Blue-headed Vireo
23. Eastern Blue Jay
24. American Crow
25. Scarlet Tanager
26. Purple Finch
27. Tufted Titmouse
28. Blackburnian Warbler
29. Winter Wren
30. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
31. Canada Goose
32. Dark-eyed Junco
33. Downy Woodpecker
34. Cedar Waxwing
35. Red-breasted Nuthatch
36. Black-and-white Warbler
37. Rose-breasted Grosbeak
38. Nashville Warbler
39. Northern Parula
40. Swainson's Thrush
41. Wood Thrush
42. American Robin
43. Hairy Woodpecker
44. Brown-headed Cowbird
45. Turkey Vulture
46. Common Grackle
47. Mourning Dove
48. Red-tailed Hawk
49. Cooper's Hawk
50. Common Raven
51. Gray Catbird
52. White-throated Sparrow
53. Song Sparrow
54. Louisiana Waterthrush
55. European Starling
56. Tree Swallow
57. Barred Owl
58. Spotted Sandpiper
59. Swamp Sparrow

60. Spotted Sandpiper
61. Swamp Sparrow
62. Rock Pigeon
63. Yellow Warbler
64. Warbling Vireo
65. Chipping Sparrow
66. Bobolink
67. Barn Swallow
68. Eastern Kingbird
69. Common Merganser
70. Broad-winged Hawk
71. Northern Cardinal
72. American Redstart
73. Savannah Sparrow
74. Baltimore Oriole
75. House Sparrow
76. Chimney Swift
77. Eastern Bluebird
78. Solitary Sandpiper
79. Northern Waterthrush
80. Mallard
81. Evening Grosbeak
82. Ring-billed Gull
83. Northern Rough-winged Swallow
84. Belted Kingfisher
85. Northern Flicker
86. Double-crested Cormorant
87. Yellow-throated Vireo
88. House Finch

60. Rock Pigeon
61. Yellow Warbler
62. Warbling Vireo
63. Chipping Sparrow
64. Bobolink
65. Barn Swallow
66. Eastern Kingbird
67. Common Merganser
68. Baltimore Oriole
69. American Redstart
70. Savannah Sparrow
71. Northern Cardinal
72. Northern Flicker
73. Mallard
74. Bald Eagle
75. Ring-billed Gull
76. Virginia Rail
77. Northern Shoveler
78. Double-crested Cormorant
79. Herring Gull
80. Pied-billed Grebe
81. Wood Duck
82. Caspian Tern