

Birdathon Adventure 2015 – Audubon Vermont

By Gwendolyn Causer, Teacher/Naturalist

This year I decided to start my Birdathon story at the end. It's the best part, so why not?

Birdathon coincided with finals' week at Burlington High School, but I convinced my daughter Ella to stop briefly at Perkin's Pier on Burlington's waterfront to wrap up the day. We planned to search for a Great Black-backed Gull and an odd duck or two. I was really hoping for a Bald Eagle or a Peregrine Falcon, actually not as improbable as it sounds, as they both now nest along the shores of Lake Champlain. (Learn more about Audubon's work with the [Peregrine Falcon Recovery Project](#) and the [Bald Eagle Recovery Project](#).)

Scanning the piers for waterfowl we were surprised to find the bird in this photo. I didn't immediately recognize it. Ella thought that it looked kinda like a skinny Penguin. The bird remained statue-still as we watched, so still that we were convinced it was a decoy, placed there by a boater to prevent gulls from landing (or worse) on their boat. Ella noticed what looked like a thin white handle running from the bird's head to its back and we agreed that it must be a decoy, until the bird suddenly stretched out its neck and dove into the water after a fish. I still wasn't sure of the bird's identity, but the fishing triggered the "heron" part of my brain, so I searched my Audubon Bird App for Black-crowned Night-Heron and found a perfect match, down to the long white plumes on the back of its head, apparently a breeding-season attraction. Ella snapped some telephoto shots by aligning our binoculars with the camera. I captured this photo of Ella watching one Night-Heron on the pier, while a second one is seen flying overhead.



Photo: Ella Causer



Photo: Gwendolyn Causer

After documenting the Night-Heron, we turned our attention to the skies. Four acrobatic terns fished along the shore. The terns resembled gulls, but had longer wings and sleeker bodies, and their fishing technique set them apart. As we watched, a tern locked its eyes on a fish in the water, pointed its long, sharp beak toward its prey and tracked the fish while it circled in closer. Before diving, the tern hovered in the air, tucked in its wings, and made an aerodynamic plunge into the water. It then surfaced, flew a few strokes, and gave an in-flight shake, just like a dog. I assumed the birds were Common Terns, a state endangered species that Audubon Vermont's Mark LaBarr manages on Popasquash and Rock Islands in Lake Champlain ([Common Tern Recovery Project](#)). I wondered why they were so far from their nesting

colony, and so I gave Mark a call later in the week to learn more. He described how pairs of Common Terns will take long flights to engage in “honeymoon behavior” before settling down to nest. The males catch fish and feed them to the females, proving their worth as good providers and competent fishermen. He also mentioned that there is an active colony of 80 pairs of Caspian Terns on one of The Brothers islands near Burlington. Birdathon is always a learning experience for me, water-birds aren’t my area of expertise, and I have to admit I’d never heard of Caspian Terns before. But the size, the leg color and their high-pitched calls all fit with Caspian Tern (#73) – our last official “Causer Count” bird of the day.



Photo (Common Tern): Flickr CC Alan Sherman



Photo (Caspian Tern): Flickr CC Ferran Pestana

Photo: Charley Wilkinson



I should clarify the difference between the “Causer Birdathon Count” (total: 73) and the “Official Audubon Vermont Birdathon Count” (total: 87). Both Birdathon counts tally the number of species identified within a 24-hour period. This year the “Official Audubon Vermont Birdathon Count” clock started ticking at 5:24 p.m. on Wednesday, May 20. A few Birdathon-ers decided to camp overnight at the Audubon Center in hopes of finding some owls and other evening-active birds. The “Official Audubon Vermont

Birdathon Count” also included a birding-on-bikes adventure, following a morning of hiking. I was unable to participate in the camping and biking portions of Birdathon this year, due to my frozen shoulder injury. It was also finals week at BHS for Ella, so her available birding time was limited. So, this year the “Causer Birdathon Count” started at 6 a.m. on Thursday, May 21 and included hiking for 6 hours at the Audubon Center, a solo birding excursion along the Audubon biking route, and two brief birding jaunts in Burlington with Ella, one to Oakledge Park and the other to Perkins Pier. Oh, and I also always include chickens on the “Causer Birdathon Count.”

Back to the birds. I guess, since I’m telling the end of the story first, I’ll also share the tale of the Audubon Bikers’ final two birds. Richmond is traditionally the final birding destination of the day. City-birds like Chimney Swift (#84) and Rock Pigeon (#85) are typically found there. Jim’s daughter Molly joined the bikers for the final hours of Birdathon. The group was on the Richmond Bridge, scanning the shores of the Winooski River, when Molly spotted a Green Heron (#86) among a group of Common Grackles. So, with just one hour remaining until the 5:24 p.m. end-time, everyone realized that they



Photo (Green Heron): Flickr CC Peter Wallace

needed only ONE MORE BIRD to break the Audubon Vermont Birdathon record. The race against the clock was on. They returned to Richmond, asking locals about the location of bird feeders, hoping to spy a Purple Finch, only to come up empty-handed. Then they figured out that the last unsearched habitat was farm field, so they biked back across the bridge (and past a flock of chickens!) to Farr's Field. A tractor worked the fields while the birders scanned with their binoculars. Finally, with just a few minutes remaining, someone spotted a Killdeer (#87), cinching the Audubon Vermont Birdathon record!



Photo (Killdeer): Flickr CC Dick Daniels

Turning back the clock a full 24 hours, the notable birds of the evening birding expedition included an American Kestrel (a small falcon with swallow-like flight), a Black-billed Cuckoo (present this year to feast upon the cyclical outbreak of forest tent caterpillars), a Great Blue Heron (in majestic flight) and an American Woodcock (in mating-display flight).

We assembled 16 staff, board, and volunteer birders for a chilly 37-degree, 6 a.m. morning birding hike. In my element, deciphering the bird songs of the dawn chorus, we recognized the familiar sounds of the Audubon Center – Ovenbird, Least Flycatcher, American Goldfinch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-eyed Vireo, Veery. We heard the fast, repeated rhythm of the Indigo Bunting (“Fire, fire! Where, where? Here, here! There, there!”), but upon spying a distinctly not-iridescent-blue bird with our binoculars, we identified a Chestnut-Sided Warbler (“Pleased, pleased, pleased to meet you!”) who had been listening to and learning

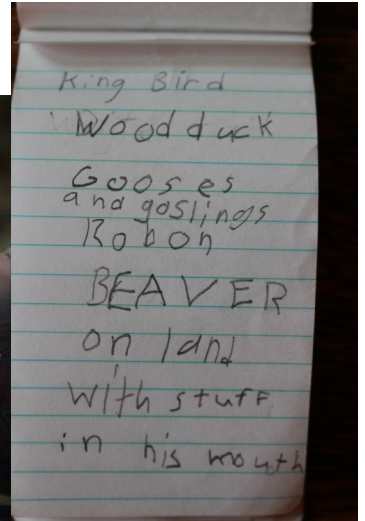


Photo: Charley Wilkinson

from the Bunting. Mark shared a new mnemonic for the rich, melodious, complex song of the Baltimore Oriole. He likes to say that it sounds like Muppet's Swedish Chef. I haven't had an opportunity to try this with my students at Audubon yet, but I'm hoping they still watch the Muppets.

By the time we reached Lookout Rock around 7:30 a.m., we had tallied 38 species; all but the Ruby-throated Hummingbird were identified by their song. Moving into the Hemlocks we all heard the clear, steady call of an awakened Barred Owl ("Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?"): #39.

As the Birdathon day wears on, it's tricky to remember which birds we've already counted. Jim and I keep a running numerical list, while Margaret ticks the birds off on a check-list. When Ella was able to skip school for Birdathon she'd also keep a checklist, but she counted more than just birds.



Photos: Charley Wilkinson - Checklist: Ella Causer

"Do we have a _____?" and "Have we seen a _____?" (fill in the birds) are common refrains. We all have a sense of which birds we're still looking for, and sometime our eyes try to turn birds we've already found into birds we need. This year, we had a particularly dramatic example of this phenomenon. The group had gotten spread out along the trail, and a few of us were trying to catch a glimpse of a pecking Pileated Woodpecker when a *really big bird* flew up from the forest floor and disappeared into the trees. Quickly the talk turned to what kind of hawk it must have been. Goshawk? Red-tailed Hawk? Perhaps the Broad-winged Hawk that had been seen nesting near the office? None of us had gotten a good look at the bird, so we couldn't confirm an ID. When we caught up with the rest of the group, they asked if we had seen the Wild Turkey that they had flushed in the woods. Nope, not a hawk, but a new bird for our list: #41.

Some birds are found only in very specialized habitats and we seek them out in these places every year. The edges of Sherman Hollow Brook are where we search for the Louisiana Waterthrush. The Brook Trail was washed away by summer flooding two years ago, so we picked our way back and forth across the water, traversing logs and slippery stones on our pursuit. We finally spotted the Louisiana Waterthrush foraging in the water near the end of the brook: #53.



Photo: Charley Wilkinson

Scanning our checklist today, I notice that this turned out to be a good year for finding Woodpeckers (5 species: Downy, Hairy, Pileated, Northern Flicker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker) and Flycatchers (6 species: Great-crested, Least, Alder, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and Eastern Phoebe). After our morning hike and a tally of 65 species, the Audubon staff shifted to birding-by-bike and I headed back to Burlington, stopping along the way to listen and look for birds.

The last time I visited Gillette Pond we were ice skating on a crazy-windy, sub-zero day in January. On that chilly day I walked a few steps onto the ice, set down a camp chair to put on my skates, turned my back for just a moment, and the chair took off down the pond. Nobody had their skates on yet, so we could only watch as it twisted and slid away, until it went out of sight around a bend, easily a half-mile away in under a minute. No ice for Birdathon, but warm sun and steady wind instead, providing thermals for Turkey Vultures to ride. I also witnessed a Great Blue Heron flying across the pond, its wingspan impossibly large.

Reaching the town of Richmond, I stopped to search for urban birds and found four: chicken, European Starling, Rock Pigeon, and Chimney Swift. Back home in Burlington, I met Ella and we scanned the shores of Lake Champlain at Oakledge Park. We found three more birds: Mallard Duck, Double-Crested Cormorant, and Herring Gull. Then we took some snapshots.



Photo: Ella Causer



Photo: Gwendolyn Causer

You've already heard about our adventures at Perkins Pier. We ended the day watching the terns and a spectacular sunset.

Thanks again for everyone's [Birdathon donations](#) to support our work at Audubon Vermont. We couldn't do it without you!

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

Official Audubon Vermont Birdathon Count

1. Kestrel
2. Wood Thrush
3. Great Blue Heron
4. American Woodcock
5. Black-billed Cuckoo
6. Brown-headed Cowbird
7. American Robin
8. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
9. Ovenbird

Causer Birdathon Count

1. Brown-headed Cowbird
2. American Robin
3. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
4. Ovenbird
5. Dark-eyed Junco
6. Blue-headed Vireo
7. Least Flycatcher
8. Mourning Warbler
9. American Goldfinch

10. Dark-eyed Junco
11. Blue-headed Vireo
12. Least Flycatcher
13. Mourning Warbler
14. American Goldfinch
15. Chestnut-sided Warbler
16. Black-capped Chickadee
17. Red-eyed Vireo
18. White-breasted Nuthatch
19. Gray Catbird
20. Hermit Thrush
21. Veery
22. Canada Goose
23. Tufted Titmouse
24. American Crow
25. Eastern Wood Pewee
26. Blackburnian Warbler
27. Great-crested Flycatcher
28. Ruffed Grouse
29. Black-throated Green Warbler
30. Rose-breasted Grosbeak
31. Black-throated Blue Warbler
32. Baltimore Oriole
33. Scarlet Tanager
34. Brown Creeper
35. Red-winged Blackbird
36. Black and White Warbler
37. Blue Jay
38. Northern Parula
39. Barred Owl
40. Pileated Woodpecker
41. Wild Turkey
42. Hairy Woodpecker
43. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
44. White-throated Sparrow
45. Yellow-rumped Warbler
46. Eastern Phoebe
47. Northern Cardinal
48. Common Yellowthroat
49. House Wren
50. Mourning Dove
51. Song Sparrow
52. Downy Woodpecker
53. Louisiana Waterthrush
54. Red-breasted Nuthatch
55. Ring-billed Gull
56. Common Grackle
57. Red-tailed Hawk

10. Chestnut-sided Warbler
11. Black-capped Chickadee
12. Red-eyed Vireo
13. White-breasted Nuthatch
14. Gray Catbird
15. Hermit Thrush
16. Veery
17. Canada Goose
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39. White-throated Sparrow
40. Yellow-rumped Warbler
41. Eastern Phoebe
42. Northern Cardinal
43. Common Yellowthroat
44. House Wren
45. Mourning Dove
46. Song Sparrow
47. Downy Woodpecker
48. Louisiana Waterthrush
49. Red-breasted Nuthatch
50. Ring-billed Gull
51. Common Grackle
52. Red-tailed Hawk
53. American Redstart
54. Yellow Warbler
55. Barn Swallow
56. Tree Swallow
57. Belted Kingfisher

58. American Redstart
59. Yellow Warbler
60. Barn Swallow
61. Tree Swallow
62. Belted Kingfisher
63. Northern Flicker
64. Eastern Kingbird
65. Alder Flycatcher
66. Warbling Vireo
67. Savannah Sparrow
68. Common Raven
69. Bobolink
70. Purple Finch
71. Turkey Vulture
72. European Starling
73. Chipping Sparrow
74. House Sparrow
75. Indigo Bunting
76. Mallard Duck
77. Wood Duck
78. Eastern Bluebird
79. Evening Grosbeak
80. Cedar Waxwing
81. Spotted Sandpiper
82. Common Merganser
83. Bank Swallow
84. Chimney Swift
85. Rock Pigeon
86. Green Heron
87. Killdeer

58. Northern Flicker
59. Eastern Kingbird
60. Alder Flycatcher
61. House Sparrow
62. Turkey Vulture
63. Great Blue Heron
64. Chipping Sparrow
65. Chicken
66. European Starling
67. Rock Pigeon
68. Chimney Swift
69. Mallard Duck
70. Double-Crested Cormorant
71. Herring Gull
72. Black-Crowned Night-Heron
73. Caspian Tern