



Audubon VERMONT

Birdathon Adventure 2019

By David Mears, Executive Director, Audubon Vermont

“Do you hear that?” said Kim.

“What?” I said.

“That’s a Blackburnian Warbler,” said Kim,

“It’s an absolutely stunning bird and one of my favorite warblers!”

“What’s a Blackburnian Warbler sound like?” I said.

“That,” said Kim, with mild impatience.

I could not help but feel moved by Kim’s obvious excitement *and* could not for the life of me distinguish the high pitched song of this beautiful warbler from the peepers in the pond and the array of other bird songs sounding about us, especially with the background growls of distant thunder. I was saved from further embarrassment (but not a stiff neck) by my binoculars, which somehow found this lovely orange and black and white warbler in the upper branches of an extremely tall hemlock tree.



Blackburnian Warbler.

Photo: Mary Delfs/Audubon Photography Awards

And so began my first [Birdathon](#). We started on the evening of May 19 at 5:30 pm and finished the next day about the same time. Apart from a short night’s sleep, I spent the better part of that time walking through the Audubon Center in Huntington or riding my bicycle on the surrounding dirt roads with the Audubon Vermont team of experts to see how many different bird species we could identify. The experience was nearly as thrilling as I had imagined. We were competing against three other Audubon Vermont teams, comprised of our Board members (and one stealth birding

expert who was up visiting from our national office), to see who could identify the most bird species within a 24 hour time period. We were also competing to see which team could raise the most donations, since Birdathon is one of Audubon Vermont’s biggest fundraiser of the year. (Nope, it’s not too late to donate! [Click here if you’d like to support our work.](#))

I am not sure whether it was the thunderstorms that came through the evening before our big day of birding, the knowledge and skill set of the Audubon staff (to which I was *not* a significant contributor!), a new addition of a trip out to Geprags Park in Hinesburg (where we saw an Indigo Bunting who shamelessly flaunted his remarkable plumage for a good minute or two before disappearing into the scrub), or some other unknown factor, but our staff team set a new record of identifying [93 species](#) this year! This solid number was not only good news for the team in our friendly competition, but also provided evidence that the places where we were birding are in relatively good shape and providing ecologically healthy habitat for birds.



*Indigo Bunting. Photo: Megumi Aita/
Audubon Photography Awards*

As successful as we were, the experience did not quite match my imagination. Somehow, I had it in my head that we would race about at a high rate of speed through the woods and fields writing down the names of bird species as we skipped across the landscape. My imaginary concept was at least partly right . . . just not the parts about racing, skipping, or anything resembling high rates of speed. It turns out that birding involves moving slowly, listening carefully, and observing every movement and sound in the forests and fields.



*Kim, Margaret, Emily, Rae, and Steve listen for warblers.
Photo: Gwendolyn Causer/Audubon Vermont*



*Ovenbird. Photo: Megumi Aita/
Audubon Photography Awards*

Even with lots of expert guidance, I struggled all day with the bird song identification. Some advice was quite helpful. For example, Ovenbirds say “Pizza Pizza Pizza,” a phrase that makes all sorts of sense. But other advice just left me more confused. I was particularly baffled by the many comparisons to the song of the American Robin. (What do you call a Robin with a sore throat, a melodious Robin, an impatient Robin, a Robin with a British accent, a Robin in a jazz band, etc?) These were all problematic since I never really mastered the song of an actual American Robin.

[Answer key: Sore throat = Scarlet Tanager, Melodious = Rose-breasted Grosbeak, . . . the rest I just made up.]

Birdathon also provided me with an opportunity to watch the Audubon Vermont team in their preferred habitat and activity – being outside and teaching. I was struck by their combination of curiosity and patience while helping me and each other identify each sound, movement, and flash of color. For each bird listed below, there was a collective and genuine expression of excitement and satisfaction when identified. We have a lot of work to do to protect these amazing creatures, but we should all feel good that this team of committed experts is working to protect our state’s birds and the places they need to thrive.



Margaret, Debbie, David, Steve, Mark, Emily, and Rae take a break from birding on bikes by the Winooski River in Richmond.

Photo: Kim Guertin/Audubon Vermont

My Birdathon experience reached a finale with a celebration where the board and staff Birdathon teams came together to regale each other with stories about the funniest moments and most notable bird identifications of the competition. The most compelling story was presented by our board member Rebecca Sameroff who described watching a Northern Harrier (the “Gray Ghost”) being pestered by a bunch of Red-winged Blackbirds and then suddenly snatching one out of the air, presumably to save for a snack later.

Apart from this thrilling and chilling tale, the experience of watching this group of people from many different backgrounds and perspectives come together to share their joy observing birds was heartwarming, and a model for solving the many challenges we face.

Thank you for all of the kind notes, words of encouragement, and generous donations we’ve received to support this work!

People ask me if it’s too late to donate to Birdathon and our answer is: “It’s never too late to donate to Birdathon!”

Happy birding!

- David Mears



Northern Harrier. Photo: Stephen Pollard

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Learn more about the birds and their silly songs with [Audubon's online Bird Guide](#) or download the FREE [Audubon Bird Guide App](#).

2019 Audubon Vermont

Birdathon Species List

1.	American Woodcock	31.	American Redstart	63.	Nashville Warbler
2.	Cape May Warbler	32.	Blackburnian Warbler	64.	Hairy Woodpecker
3.	Northern Parula	33.	Black-throated Green Warbler	65.	House Finch
4.	White-crowned Sparrow	34.	Chestnut-sided Warbler	66.	Eastern Wood-Pewee
5.	House Wren	35.	Common Yellowthroat	67.	Louisiana Waterthrush
6.	Canada Goose	36.	Magnolia Warbler	68.	Turkey Vulture
7.	American Crow	37.	Ovenbird	69.	Northern Waterthrush
8.	European Starling	38.	Yellow Warbler	70.	Swamp Sparrow
9.	Mallard	39.	Gray Catbird	71.	Golden-crowned Kinglet
10.	House Sparrow	40.	Common Merganser	72.	Trails Flycatcher
11.	Tufted Titmouse	41.	Belted Kingfisher	73.	Barn Swallow
12.	Ring-billed Gull	42.	Spotted Sandpiper	74.	Rock Pigeon
13.	Wild Turkey	43.	Blue Jay	75.	Northern Flicker
14.	Black-capped Chickadee	44.	Broad-winged Hawk	76.	Bobolink
15.	American Goldfinch	45.	Ruffed Grouse	77.	Swainson's Thrush
16.	Northern Cardinal	46.	Mourning Dove	78.	Red-breasted Nuthatch
17.	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	47.	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	79.	Brown Creeper
18.	Chipping Sparrow	48.	White-breasted Nuthatch	80.	Hermit Thrush
19.	Song Sparrow	49.	Scarlet Tanager	81.	Tennessee Warbler
20.	Baltimore Oriole	50.	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	82.	Savannah Sparrow
21.	Common Grackle	51.	Winter Wren	83.	Warbling Vireo
22.	Red-winged Blackbird	52.	Cedar Waxwing	84.	Chimney Swift
23.	Tree Swallow	53.	Canada Warbler	85.	Barred Owl
24.	Least Flycatcher	54.	Mourning Warbler	86.	Yellow-rumped Warbler
25.	Eastern Phoebe	55.	Black-throated Blue Warbler	87.	Eastern Kingbird
26.	American Robin	56.	Common Raven	88.	Blue-winged Warbler
27.	Eastern Bluebird	57.	Great-crested Flycatcher	89.	Eastern Towhee
28.	Wood Thrush	58.	Black-and-white Warbler	90.	Indigo Bunting
29.	Red-eyed Vireo	59.	Dark-eyed Junco	91.	Double-crested Cormorant
30.	Blue-headed Vireo	60.	Great Blue Heron	92.	Red-tailed Hawk
		61.	Downy Woodpecker		
		62.	Red-bellied Woodpecker		