

The *Finch Gang* Report
Great Wisconsin Birdathon
7 May 2017



The 2017 *Finch Gang*: Matt & Clare Carlson, Charley Roberts, Karen Etter Hale, River Sandy, Brad Webb

It was 4:45 a.m., horse-rustlin' time of night, when the *Finch Gang* assembled at Korth Park west of Lake Mills on May 7 to head out on our daylong adventure in support of the Great Wisconsin Birdathon. A sky full of bright stars signaled a good day of birding weather ahead. Right off the bat, we heard a Great-horned Owl called softly from a nearby copse of trees, and a woodcock gave his "peent" call close by. It was still too dark to see much as we headed down to the Glacial Drumlin Trail to trek east to the trestle over Rock Lake. Pausing at the gate, we listened to the dawn chorus, teasing out individual species in the outpouring of song: Tree Swallows, a pheasant, Mourning Doves, Song Sparrows, a single wild Turkey, the only one of the entire day. Birding by ear is necessary when it's dark!

As the day gradually lightened, we added birds one by one: Warbling Vireos, Wood Ducks, Red-winged Blackbirds, and single Osprey, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Veery, Green Heron, Belted Kingfisher, and an adult Bald Eagle flying over. At Rock Lake we heard one – just one – call of the Common Loon. If there's a more fascinating and eerie bird song, we don't know what it would be. We also witnessed a pair of Tree Swallows hard at work ensuring the continuation of the species, so they should be well represented in the future.

We had hoped to find many warblers, however several storms and continuing north winds kept most of them south of us. Still, we enjoyed the sweet sound and bright yellow of Yellow Warblers and found Yellow-rumped Warblers; single Palm, Common Yellowthroat, and Northern Waterthrush; and heard one Black-throated Green Warbler. Not a bad beginning for warblers after all.

Next was Korth Park, where we added Mallards, Blue-winged and Green-winged teals, and a small flock of Bufflehead. One of us had a brief look at a Red-tailed Hawk, but our informal team rule is that at least two of us have to hear/see each species for confirmation. We finally saw more, but not until well into the afternoon.

Rock Lake seemed devoid of birds, but we made several stops and were glad we did. At the north end, one of us spotted two birds some distance away, swimming together. There's always some bird or birds that require hard work to identify, and apparently these did not want to be identified. We even got out a field guide! (Hate to admit that, but it's the truth.) Finally we determined we had a female Common Golden-eye keeping company with a Red-breasted Merganser female. They even left together. Must have been BFFs.

After a lunch break to fuel up and strategize, we were off and running – well, walking slowly, of course. We headed to our secret hangout near the historic London (aka Zeloski) Marsh, a wooded area that always produces some fine additions to our list. This woods had the largest number of Downy Woodpeckers we've seen in some time. Good thing those rascals are small. We'd have been worried about tree loss if they were larger. We also found single Red-bellied and Hairy woodpeckers, a Tufted Titmouse, and a Cooper's Hawk, all of these the only ones of the day. While there, we took the obligatory *Finch Gang* Annual Team Portrait, which certainly adds a note of class to this report.



We spent most of the afternoon at London (aka Zeloski) Marsh, the spiritual home of the *Finch Gang*, being the hideout of the original Finch Brothers and the horses they stole. On arriving from the west, one of the *Gang* spotted a number of large white shapes way out on the water. Things were looking up. We couldn't see those birds right away, but as we moved onto the north-south trail, forty or more American White Pelicans were suddenly sailing overhead. It's always a joy to see these graceful birds forming mass fishing rafts and feeding in sync. On the list they went.

Waterfowl were well represented at the 1,500 acre marsh. We added American Coots, Northern Shovelers, Gadwall, Ring-necked and Wood ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, and, of course, Canada Geese. Their families were already well developed, and we wisely gave goose couples with bunches of cute, fuzzy, yellow goslings time to get out of our way. There were Turkey Vultures and a Northern Harrier in the air, Sandhill Cranes close by, a Great Egret that moved so many times we wondered if there weren't more, and a distant Bald Eagle. Yellow-headed Blackbirds kept us entertained as they sang their harsh, raucous "song", and we saw our first Black Tern (just one) of the year. The bird list was growing well.



As we ended our trek at Zeloski, the *Gang* split up to cover more territory. The Carlson group looked for field birds, while the rest of us went in search of shorebirds at nearby flooded fields and waterways. We found Greater Yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpiper, in addition to our only Hooded Merganser of the day. We also spotted an Eastern Kingbird, one Brown Thrasher, and some Rough-winged Swallows. The sheriff's deputy who wondered why we were parked at the bottom of a hill let us go with nothing more than a shake of his head. It's a good thing he didn't see the *Gang* portrait.

Our last stop of the day was at Sandhill Station south of Lake Mills, our traditional last stop of the Birdathon. Having tallied only Sora Rail so far and hoping to inspire a response from a rail – any rail, one of us clapped his hands loudly. What we got in response was a low-pitched “hoo hoo hoo hoo”. The three of us looked at each other and said, in our best professional manner, “What the H was *that*?” None of us had ever heard a call like that, either in real life or on any recordings. Waiting and more clapping didn't help. Nothing. So it remains a mystery. It doesn't do to become too smug about your birding skills, as the birds will knock that out of you every time.

We finished at 8:30 p.m., hungry but pleased that we'd tallied **91 species**, not a bad number considering how migration has been affected by the weather this year. As one *Gang* member said about our day, “It's like Christmas morning wrapped up in the 4th of July”. We're already looking forward to next year's Birdathon. We wouldn't miss it for the world.

*Thank you for supporting the **Finch Gang** in our efforts to raise money to help birds.*

Day's end



For more about the real Finch Brothers, who stole horses and hid from the law in the depths of London (Zeloski) Marsh back in the mid-1800s - or so the story goes, see the history of the *Fighting Finches*. These were stories compiled in 1937 for the Folklore Section of the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA (Works Progress Administration), which can be found at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1734>.

Canada Goose
Wood Duck
Gadwall
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
N. Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Red-br. Merganser

Ring-necked Pheasant
Wild Turkey

Common Loon
Pied-billed Grebe
Amer. White Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Green Heron

Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
N. Harrier
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk

Sora
Amer. Coot
Sandhill Crane

Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Amer. Woodcock

Black Tern

Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Great Horned Owl

Chimney Swift
Belted Kingfisher
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
N. Flicker

Least Flycatcher

E. Phoebe
E. Kingbird
Warbling Vireo

Blue Jay
American Crow

Horned Lark
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
N. Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
House Wren
Marsh Wren
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Eastern Bluebird
Veery
Amer. Robin
Gray Catbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling

N. Waterthrush
Com. Yellowthroat
Yellow Warbler
Palm Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler

Chipping Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow

N. Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Red-winged Blackbird
E. Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Com. Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Baltimore Oriole
House Finch
Amer. Goldfinch
House Sparrow