

Cutright's Old Coots Big Day (May 11, 2017): 153 species

Covering 240 miles, 3 a.m. to 9 p.m., in Ozaukee, Washington, Sheboygan, Fond du Lac & Dodge Counties

It's a good thing that over several decades of getting up in the middle of the night to simultaneously chase birds and dollars I have learned how to scribble down notes in the dark. Why, you ask? Because in helping to lead 5 birdathon fundraisers over the span of 10 days during May (while also publishing the 24-page June issue of WSO's Badger Birder) I fell behind and the birds and landscapes have begun to blur a bit.

It's been just over three weeks now since Cutright's Old Coots gathered on artist Tom Uttech's farm and studio site outside Saukville (Ozaukee County) just before 3 a.m. on May 11. The temperature was a pleasant 50 degrees, the winds calm. Tom has what we call a "birdy" yard and he and Joan Summer were listening to both Barred and Eastern Screech Owls when Marilyn Bontly, Mike Wanger and I pulled into the driveway.



We'd add five more species in the next hour – woodcock, Great Horned Owl, Swamp Sparrow, Canada Goose and Sora – all in the neighborhood. We then moved along to Blue Goose and St. Augustine Rds., near the Cedarburg Bog area and added a number of other early risers: Tree Swallow, robin, Song Sparrow, towhee, cardinal, Wood Thrush (what a song!), Mourning Dove, White-throated and Field Sparrows and before 5 a.m. we already had reached 10% of our goal for the day of 155 species.

The last half hour before dawn would see us nearly triple that number as the "dawn chorus" grew in volume, variety and complexity as we walked and cruised roads adjacent to the Cedarburg Bog. Wild Turkeys gobbled, crows cawed, House Wrens chattered, catbirds began their meowing. Throw in the songs and calls of the Common Yellowthroat, Red-winged Blackbird, chickadee, Chipping Sparrow, House Finch, House Sparrow, phoebe, gnatcatcher, Baltimore Oriole, Yellow Warbler, Ovenbird and flicker. We were able to see many of these birds by now, including a flyover Wood Duck, while also enjoying the Penn sedge, mayapple, skunk cabbage, marsh marigold and delicate tamarack.

The 30 minutes after sunrise would add three woodpeckers – Hairy, Downy and Red-bellied – and five more warblers – American Redstart, Nashville, Black-and-white, Blue-winged and Black-throated Green – along with Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Brown-headed Cowbird, Brown Creeper, Blue Jay and Veery. As we headed north a couple of miles to pick up the bank Swallows we knew nested in an old quarry wall at the Saukville Gun Club we added Killdeer, starling, Horned Lark, Turkey Vulture and Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

As I've said before, folks who sleep late during May just don't know what they're missing....

Following a route that had become both comfortable and familiar in the two preceding years we headed next to the west end of the Riveredge Nature Center, along Highway Y right on the Washington County line. There we added more warblers – Northern Waterthrush, Northern Parula and Magnolia – as well as Blue-headed Vireo, White-breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebird, Cedar Waxwing and Great Crested Flycatcher.

We detoured back to Tom's to offload four hours worth of coffee and check the feeders in that "birdy" yard I mentioned earlier. We were rewarded with a late-departing junco, Red-breasted Nuthatch, a gorgeous Lincoln's Sparrow, a Red-tailed Hawk and a Barn Swallow.

By 7:45 we arrived at Hawthorne Hills County Park, with trails along the Milwaukee River, that again this year yielded a number of new warbler species: Louisiana Waterthrush, Orange-crowned, Golden-winged, Chestnut-sided and jaw-dropping Blackburnian and Black-throated Blues. We also scored the day's first Scarlet Tanager, Least Flycatcher and a kingfisher worked his way downriver. Farther north along the river at Waubedonia Park we found the hoped for Tufted Titmouse and Pileated Woodpecker, along with Common Grackle.

Some miles east we arrived at a flooded field along Hawthorne Rd. that had been good for shorebirds, odd and on, for several weeks now. The thin, shallow strip of water didn't look like much but with careful scoping would yield Least, Spotted, Pectoral and Solitary Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitcher, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. And at the margins we would find Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, American Pipit (wooh!), Mallard, Bobolink and one of the day's highlight birds, a very late Tree Sparrow.

By 9:30 we were running behind schedule but made a short detour to record Purple Martins at a colony we had scouted earlier, and picked up the Vesper Sparrow that would be our 100th species for the day. A Great Blue Heron joined the list at some point along the way toward a stretch of Six Mile Road where we had scouted Upland Sandpipers, a bird that has become very hard to find statewide. Thanks to the calm that prevailed we were able to hear their wolf-whistle call and then quickly move on to record Eastern Kingbird Cliff and Rough-winged Swallows, Northern Harrier, Gadwall and Northern Shoveler. It was here, too, that we thought we had another highlight species: Northern Goshawk. A review of Mike's photos and consultation later with other birders led us to conclude it was instead a large female Cooper's Hawk – neat, but just not as rare.

A quick swing through the Alder Road Waterfowl Production Area yielded Ring-billed Gull, Green Heron and a late Palm Warbler (a week ago they had been everywhere).

Our next major destination was Harrington Beach State Park – not the whole park, just the spot at the end of County Road D on the park's north edge from which we could scope Lake Michigan. It would prove a great stop, yielding Common and Caspian Terns; Herring, Bonaparte's and Glaucous Gulls; a late Horned Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Red-breasted Mergansers, Greater Scaup and a small flock of unexpected White-winged Scoters. Now at 123 species, our success here and at the shorebird wet spot led us to drop plans for now to visit Sheboygan's North Point and instead we headed west on Jay Rd. to a swampy area we hoped would hold a Prothonotary Warbler and perhaps a cuckoo. No luck on these, but we added Warbling Vireo and three raptors: kestrel, Broad-winged Hawk and what would later turn out to be our second Cooper's Hawk.

We would again learn the hard way that we need to do this trip a week later if we are find all the species we hope for in the Northern Kettle Moraine State Forest. Our route through a corner of Sheboygan County and stops at Mauthe Lake and elsewhere in Fond du Lac County added Red-shouldered Hawk, Pine Warbler, Chimney Swift and Great Egret but we whiffed on Cerulean and Hooded Warblers and Acadian Flycatcher, all three of which turned up in their customary locations within a week to 10 days later.

As usual, our route saved the best for last. With our list already at 131 species, we still managed to add 22 new species in a trip across Highway 49 and around the auto loop at the Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Dodge County, our fifth county of the day. Highlights included one Glossy and three White-faced Ibis (both of which are normally seen along Florida and Texas Gulf Coasts respectively), 14 Black-necked Stilts, Black-bellied Plover, Forster's and Black Terns, Trumpeter and Mute Swans, American White Pelican, Bald Eagle, Black-crowned Night Heron, Dunlin, Wilson's Phalarope, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Virginia Rail, Yellow-throated Vireo, Marsh Wren, American Coot, Redhead, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal and Pied-billed Grebe.

And there at 153 we would wind up despite a fruitless and probably ill-considered one-hour dash back to Lake Michigan and North Point in Sheboygan where we added absolutely nothing tour list for the day, leaving us two short of the goal we had set of 155 and seven short of the 160 we recorded on May 18, 2016. Still a great day, full of great fund, some extraordinary birds, and with any luck the satisfaction of knowing we will have raised more than \$10,000 for the Bird Protection Fund. And that's the goal that is first in our minds. One and all, we thank you for your support.

---- *Carl Schwartz, Tom Uttech, Marilyn Bontly, Joan Sommer, Mike Wanger*