

Presidential rEgrets
By Matt Krueger

Team Presidential rEgrets surpassed our team goal of \$3,000 (and I passed my personal goal of \$1,000) raised for Madison Audubon Society, by identifying 101 species this past Tuesday--one of the best species counts we've had in years. You can see pictures of our day [here](#).

Things started out at 4:45 am in Middleton, WI as we embarked hoping to catch some nocturnal birds calling...and totally whiffed. No owls, no woodcocks, only *Turdus migratorius* (AKA robins). Not good. We changed up our route this year a bit and hit a few new places, hoping to encounter "new" species that we don't usually get on the Birdathon. That held true as we heard meadowlarks and scoped a bobolink in breaking daylight, up at the Middleton airport. On the way through an industrial park of office buildings near the highway, we picked off a rock dove perched high atop a building, at some distance. It turned out to be our only one of the day.

We headed into Pheasant Branch Conservancy (PBC), which is an urban park in a gentle ravine that seems to amass migratory songbirds. We weren't the only birders with that idea, encountering a few dozen warbler-seekers (who may have helped put us on a bird or two). We got our share of expected warblers such as chestnut-sided, magnolia, blackburnian, blackpoll, and black and white, but only in 1's and 2's. We stayed at PBC for a few hours and were treated to a [singing veery](#) (a member of the thrush family with a cool, descending song), a handful of [blue-headed vireos](#) (normally a somewhat rare bird), and a single bright blue [indigo bunting](#) and fire-red [scarlet tanager](#). We finished PBC in a prairie parcel and picked up an unexpected orchard oriole and Wilson's warbler. (The Baltimore orioles this year, I should add, were so bountiful and loud that it was borderline annoying, making it hard to hear other birds.) The "best" bird of PBC, though, and of the entire day, was a [yellow-billed cuckoo](#), which was totally unexpected, picked out by the keen eye of our captain Caleb, atop a tree.

We hit a few urban parks with ponds next (Graber, Stricker's, Tiedemann), where we hoped to pick up shorebirds and waterfowl, but the water was so high both were virtually absent. (See the underwater boardwalk pic in the album, for proof.) Also, a mean wind kicked up, blowing a steady 20 mph from the south--great fun when you're on a bike! The wind entirely spoiled our plans to see more waterfowl along the south shore of Lake Mendota, which we followed as we worked our way back to downtown Madison. We stopped at multiple lake "hotspots" to see ducks or gulls...and saw nothing but swallows. That was a sustained low point in the afternoon...

At 4 pm, entering hour 12 of our Birdathon with very little gas left in the tank, or obvious path to achieving our goal of 100 species, we took the good advice of teammate Dave and headed to the beloved Memorial Union Terrace on the UW campus on a cool 98 birds, thinking we'd have a well-earned beer prior to heading off to get species #99 (cliff swallows) we knew to be at a nearby park. Amazingly, we hadn't seen a lousy gull--NOT ONE!--all day long. Perhaps it was the beer gods rewarding our good decision-making, or maybe the winds let up just enough in the late afternoon, but as we sipped our brews, we picked up the normally "dirt common" ring-billed gulls (#99) over Lake Mendota, a chance herring gull (#100) perched on top of the turret of the iconic Red Gym (see the pic in the album, where this fine specimen is offered a toast), and, just to ensure it didn't look like we conveniently cooked the books and hit our goal of 100 species perfectly, we had a fly-by flock of cliff swallows (#101, and the last species needed for the "swallow slam.") Spirits and toasts were raised, repeatedly. And "beerding" was coined, which you can bet we'll do again.

Though we missed a few expected species (hummingbirds, kingfisher, eagle, osprey, owls, woodcock, waterfowl, shorebirds), we hit on some other unexpected species, and had a great time doing it. Legs and saddles were sore, but it was an honest day's birding. Could it be any other way?