

A Good Looking Birdathon

The Good Looks started from the very first moment with a perfect view of a Chestnut-collared Longspur. It was 2:30 pm and we had just entered the Benton Lake NWR. Birding slowly we headed for the traditional Auto Tour route only to discover the ponds almost dry. Gone were the diving ducks, grebes, gulls and terns ... and especially the supremely prehistoric, metallic sheened White-faced Ibis. Our consolation was numerous shorebirds, who provided many Good Looks, and the ever present tame rabbits alongside the boardwalk. A cock Ring-necked Pheasant on a fence post (you've got to be kidding!) provided the last Good Look as we left the refuge. Spectacular views prevailed over high numbers and became the theme of this birdathon.

This year's strategy was to start at Benton Lake and bird our way home. The following day we would bird a loop around Helena. We were lucky enough to have the very good ears and eyes of our friend Sharon Miller on this first day.

Giant Springs State Park was next. There was not a single Canada Goose to be seen! We were dumbfounded. The highlight of the stop was a Great Horned Owl sitting on the top of a broken off snag. With its hunched posture and eyes scrunched closed, it was captivating and looked like an old, grizzled totem cap.

On to First People's Buffalo Jump (formerly Ulm Pishkun). As we left the interstate and the rain stopped a brilliant double rainbow greeted us. Good luck? I guess! A Short-eared Owl on a fence post and three Long-Billed Curlews screeching at us (more Good Looks) were our pot of gold.

Dunes Fishing Access Site on the Missouri between Ulm and Cascade was next. Huge cottonwoods interspersed among grass-covered dunes make this area unique. Our Good Look ... a Black-headed Grosbeak. At the scenic overlook on the interstate we saw three Bighorn Sheep (a first for our birdathons) and few birds.

The final stop for day one was Gates of the Mountains. It was POURING rain! But a few birds were concentrated near the shore. More Good Looks through the rain streaked windows – including a Common Loon – provided excitement and amazement. What a great way to end our first day.

DAY TWO

Up at 5:30 – ugggghhh. We dressed and headed for Grizzly Gulch. It was extremely wet. Most birds were "heard only". Home for breakfast then brief stops at the Fairgrounds pond and Spring Meadow where we saw 4 Black-necked Stilts – at Spring Meadow no less! On to Silver City and Canyon Creek. There was a deep fog blanketing the valley. The Scratchgravel Hills were covered. An eerie train appeared out of the fog. On Birdseye Rd our field of view was just the road from fence line to fence line. Just before Canyon Creek the fog lifted and the sun came out. What a relief – we were able to see again! We drove along singing It's a Lovely Day Today and Oh, What a Beautiful Morning. Our "just another fence post bird" for the day was a Bullock's Oriole! Our Good Looks included a Red-naped Sapsucker, Lazuli Bunting and especially the usually secretive Northern Waterthrush singing close by on a bare branch illuminated by the sun.

It was a wonderful, gorgeous birdathon – because of the beautiful sky – beautiful clouds the first day and incredible ethereal fog the second, because of the great views of birds, because of the beautiful countryside. Thank you so much for your support. Without you there would be no wonderful, gorgeous birdathon. Please make checks out to LCAS (Last Chance Audubon) and send to Bigfoot and Baldy, 940 Wilder Ave, Helena MT 59601.