

A Memorial (Day) to Remember

We decided to start Birdathon 2015 on Memorial Day weekend –Sunday. We gathered at about 3:30 in the afternoon and headed out into the Helena Valley with the intention of beginning our count at 4:00. Now, I believe that it is customary for teams involved in Birdathon to be flexible and somewhat patient about the actual starting moment. The reason is thus: a team would not want to begin a species count, for example, on a very common European Starling or lowly Rock Pigeon - those birds that occur with very high frequency. No, a team must wait, watch and come to consensus on the bird that “fills the bill” for beginning Birdathon.

And so it was with team *Ubiquitous Birders*. We drove to a location in the valley to find a recent migratory arrival that had been scouted by Janice Miller the previous day. Bobolink is a magnificent black grassland bird that has a beautiful cream colored helmet and striking white on the back, tail and wings. We searched for the Bobolink, but found only starlings, sparrows and the like. A quick conference ensued and we decided to head further out into the valley when someone suddenly spotted a large raptor, floating low above the marsh and grass. At 4:20, **Northern Harrier** became the starting point for our 24 hour adventure.

The unsettled day with thunderstorms and rain, made for a relatively difficult afternoon of birding. Team members, Stephen Turner and Janice Miller, along with co-spotters Jo Lace and Brian Shovers drove “the loop”. The loop is a well known birding spin around the Helena Valley that includes stops at the Masonic Home, Lake Helena WMA, the Causeway, Merritt and Harmony Lanes and back to Helena. We traveled the country roads and found **Red-tailed Hawk, Western Kingbird, Bullock’s Oriole** and a variety of blackbirds. (A note about blackbirds - It is advantageous to identify these early on in the count so that the team does not have to slow or stop for every post sitting blackbird just to tick that missing ebony icterid. We were able to knock these out very early with the exception of Yellow-headed Blackbird – which we got on Monday morning.

The wet areas around the loop provided a decent basis to the waterfowl numbers which we would eventually tally. **Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, Cinnamon Teal** and **Mallards** were found along the loop. We detoured to the Helena Valley Regulating Reservoir to ride out a rain storm, have lunch/dinner and look at soggy pelicans. **Western Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant** and **Eared Grebe** were all seen through the rain as were **Tree** and **Cliff Swallows**. As the rain cleared we were treated to unbelievably beautiful skies with dramatic cloud formations. The waning daylight sent us scurrying to find another scouted bird - **Golden Eagle** was found nesting near Spokane Bay trail. What an unbelievably awesome bird! We headed quickly back toward Helena and stopped briefly at K-Mart Pond Wetlands. The rain had really slowed things down and it seemed that we would be relying on the following day to really pad our numbers.

We finished the day by riding up Grizzly Gulch and picking up birds that would otherwise be missed. **Hermit Thrush, Green-tailed** and **Spotted Towhee** sang into the twilight hours and we called it a night a little before 10:00pm. We had seen 61 species since 4:20. It was a good place to stop. It would be an early morning and we needed to catch a few hours rest before heading north to the Great Falls area.

Three thirty a.m. is a very difficult hour to rise for the day. But as my cello alarm played I brought myself to that point of waking enough to smell the brewing Café Mam coffee. I dressed, threw my things in the truck, picked up my companions, and we were on the road headed north on I-15 by 4:30. It was light enough to grab an **Osprey** hunkered down on a nest along the Missouri River near Craig. But the early morning light failed to produce a 75 MPH, drive-by, White-throated Swift at Tower Rock State Park. Drat!

We arrived at Benton Lake NWR right on the dot at six. The full blown morning light now produced birds at an amazing rate. **Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Upland Sandpiper, Willet, Killdeer, Savannah Sparrow,** and **Horned Lark** were all seen on the road into the refuge. Five **Great-horned Owls** greeted us near the visitor center. The four owlets were young but able to fly short distances. An adult sat atop the flag pole looking bored with our craning necks and long camera lenses.

We began the auto tour around the refuge spotting some nice day birds. **Swainson's Hawk, Say's Phoebe, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Marsh Wren, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Gray Partridge** and a host of new waterfowl were seen as we slowly ticked off new species including a couple of *bonus birds*.

bonus bird – \ˈbo-nēs ˈberd\ :a surprise avian species found unexpectedly while birding

Such were the **Semi-palmated Plover** and **Red-necked Phalarope**. These diminutive shorebirds were both found at Benton Lake – not altogether unusual, but certainly not expected. YEAH!

Nearly three hours after entering the refuge we had piled on another 30 or so species. It would be getting tough now to find new adds, but we bee lined for Giant Springs State Park in Great Falls and among the many birds we had already ticked, we added **Least Flycatcher, House Wren** and **Black-capped Chickadee**.

We were burning daylight as we drove the hour to Freezout Lake. A quick bird around “the garage” produced two more Great-horned Owls, but little else. We headed for the ponds in hopes of bigger numbers. Buzz-buzz-buzz caught my ear as we drove the auto loop. The buggy sounding **Clay-colored Sparrow** was an easy ID. Over the water, a tern dipped and “turned”. **Forster's Tern** was identified by a paler back and with less black on the upper primaries than Common Tern. Another good add! Unbelievably, a **Ferruginous Hawk** wheeled directly over our heads and gave the photographers something to “shoot” about. Three secretive **Sora** gave up there location by calling their distinctive descending whinny.

At about 1:00p.m., we were fading. Augusta was close, and sustenance at hand. Time for an ice cream break! The little creek near the ice cream stand yielded an **American Goldfinch**. Still counting! Back on the road!

We headed for Helena hoping to catch a few remaining birds that Janice had seen the day before. Little Prickly Pear Canyon scored a few mountain birds we needed - **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, a distant, calling **Clark's Nutcracker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet** and **Mountain Chickadee**. Duffy Lane was a bust on the Bobolink again. BUMMER! But the big bird of the day for me was found right in our very own backyard at Forestvale Cemetery. A **Lewis's Woodpecker** flew out of the branches on the northwest side of the cemetery where it was happily feeding on whatever it is they feed on. This bird was seen the day before and Janice knew right where to look for it! YEAH!!! **BONUS BIRD!!!**

It was getting time to wrap things up. We had been at it for nearly 24 hours. We drove to the Mt. Helena parking area and finished our day by adding **Calliope Hummingbird, Pine Siskin** and **Cassin's Finch**. Tired (totally exhausted) and road weary we tallied our numbers, said our goodbyes and I headed home for a well deserved nap. It had been a great day. The total species count ended at 107. For me this was a little disappointing, but we had scheduled our Birdathon a little earlier in the season this year, and had missed some of the returning birds. So lessons learned, we are now smarter and better prepared, and we will be back at it again next spring!

NOTE: I am deeply grateful to my sponsors. Year in and year out they honor me by donating to a cause that is very dear to me (albeit a little bird-brained). Bird conservation has really opened my eyes to things like habitat loss, climate change and the future of my own children's planet. Education and awareness are necessary components to helping us live in a better world. This year's Birdathon donations will go toward the purchase of field guides for our local classrooms (at all grade levels), and toward a collegiate scholarship for a high school senior who will be pursuing a degree with an interest in conservation or ornithology. Thank you all for your help.

***This Birdathon is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jean Smith – my professor, mentor and friend.
I wouldn't be birding today without the encouragement and support of Jean. RIP**