

Birdathon 2014 Summary

Hello for the second year in a row, supporters and sponsors of Helena's own Birdathon team **Turnstone** (it's a bird)! It is my pleasure to announce that this year we smashed our standing personal record of 106 species seen in a 24-hour period, replacing the previous record with 122 species for 2014! YEAH!!!

We started the 24 hour clock at 9:18 AM, June 8th, at Benton Lake NWR upon viewing Upland Sandpipers, perched and calling atop fence posts near the refuge boundary. As we drove the loop, stopping to view each bird we sighted, we added 43 species. Highlights were a single (but lifer) Sprague's Pipit, incredible numbers of Marbled Godwits and Wilson's Phalaropes, four species of gull, a handful of Common Yellowthroats, two Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and many species of waterfowl, including the day's only Green-winged Teal. The mosquitos were incredibly thick as well, chasing us out of the refuge in about three and a half hours.

Our next stop was in Great Falls – Giant Springs State Park. The park was extraordinarily busy, but not without its usual charm. We watched a Western Wood-pewee shape the cup of her nest with her body as we ate a quick lunch. House Wrens chattered away amid the chaos of screaming children and a Downy Woodpecker was the only individual of that species for the day. A Least Flycatcher gave up its identity by proclaiming its territory and singing the characteristic "cheBEK" sounds in rapid succession. Surprisingly, the day's only Black-capped Chickadee was seen and heard at Giant Springs. The frenzied activity at the Cliff Swallow nest colony grabbed our attention for a few minutes, even though we were in a hurry to check more species off our list. A Common Nighthawk was seen roosting high in a cottonwood, an atypical way to view this aerial insectivore.

Down the road at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center parking lot, we nailed our fifth gull species – the California, and added the Northern Rough-winged and Violet-green Swallows. Further still, we stopped at Black Eagle Dam along the Missouri in Great Falls for a suspected (and verified) Common Merganser. The dam also yielded Eared Grebes and a Swainson's Hawk. We watched for a good thirty seconds as the large raptor was silhouetted against the bright sky and finally soared against a dark cloud allowing us to confirm the field markings.

Tower Rock State Park provided views of breeding White-throated Swifts and our only Turkey Vulture, which seemed to wobble unsteadily on the wing as it faded into the distance. We hurried back to Helena in order to catch a quick dinner with Patty, but made a stop at the Scratch Gravel burned area first. A male Western Tanager called and was quickly seen, and as we left the area, a Lark Sparrow surprised us with its striking facial markings. We had not expected the sparrow in this area and as I said to Dad, "That may be the only Lark Sparrow we see all day," two more darted out!

After dinner (an eat and run) we picked up the Red-necked Grebe sleeping on Spring Meadow Lake. A Spotted Sandpiper called. We were looking for one bird specifically – the Willow Flycatcher. We had parked at Montana WILD, the wildlife rehab center in Helena and literally run down the hill to grab the bird where Dad had seen and heard it the previous day. Two Gray Catbirds exposed themselves and sang in plain view... but the flycatcher was nowhere to be seen. As we were ready to give up and head to the next spot, a flycatcher popped up. Now, we had to wait for the sound. Empidonax flycatchers are notoriously difficult to identify, and often, are not able to be identified without hearing the song or call. We watched and waited and finally, "FITZ-bew," the bird sang. In a moment of connection, we both lowered our binoculars and hollered, "Yeah!" together as we high-fived and simultaneously started running back up the hill to the car. On to the next stop.

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At the Priest Pass Cutoff, first heard, the Wilson's Snipe was a great add. It was perched atop a fencepost, calling. Initially its head was facing us, but as it turned the always surprisingly long bill was evident. I think this was Dad's favorite bird of the day. We quickly stopped by my old stomping grounds, the Landmark subdivision's bridge over Ten-Mile Creek. In my childhood, an American Dipper nested under this bridge and last year, we were fortunate enough to spy the bird as it flew upstream. It was worth a shot again this year, even though we had been to this spot twelve days earlier and not seen a thing. Suddenly, Dad spotted the dipper flying downstream toward the bridge! Another add, and time to move on! Daylight was beginning to fade!

Dad has been hiking in the Cox Lake area off Arrastra Gulch a lot this spring, where the landowners are kind enough to allow hikers to use the property, and we took full advantage of this privilege. A Spotted Towhee was heard from the vehicle as we drove up Oro Fino Gulch. Pine Siskins were heard vocalizing as soon as we reached Cox Lake. We started the hike and immediately heard Warbling Vireos and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Blooming Mountain Lady's-Slippers were a supreme delight for me, the only orchid I will probably see this year. A landowner's birdfeeder had attracted a Dark-eyed Junco, which we hastily viewed through binoculars and checked off our list, trying not to make any homeowners too uneasy. Red-breasted Nuthatches and Yellow-rumped Warblers afforded us quick glances. As we came down out of the hike on the east side of the lake, Mountain Chickadees and Dusky Flycatchers were vocalizing. As we stood listening for the elusive Northern Waterthrush, a slow but accelerating thump, pause, thump, pause, thump, thump, thump-thump-thump-thump, was heard. Our hard listening had been rewarded, not with the waterthrush, but with the drumming display of the male Ruffed Grouse. When I hear this sound in the woods, it always strikes me differently. Sometimes, I think my heart is about to pound out of my chest. In this case, at first, I thought my Dad was passing gas. The grouse's drumming is deep and booming, often heard from more than a quarter-mile away. It is hard to believe that the sound is made only by the movement of air by the bird's wings.

Having added 10 species at Cox Lake, we moved on to Stansfield Lane, a birding hotspot known only by long-time Helena locals. We had scouted the area the evening before, and seen several birds that we did not yet have on the day. Upon arriving, we were greeted by a female Black-headed Grosbeak. She had been accompanied by her mate the previous day, but she was alone this evening. American Goldfinches dazzled us with their bright colors and Bank Swallows rushed through the air gathering crop-fulls of insects. And then, in a moment of *déjà vu*, the Great Horned Owl we had seen the previous night, perched on an old log shed, reappeared on the same log shed, but on the opposite end. Wow! What an unexpected joy!

We took that add and headed to a Frontage Road Pond in search of the Belted Kingfisher we were missing. Quickly scanning the area and not being greeted with an obvious kingfisher, I looked at the time. It was late - about 9 PM. We had been birding nearly 12 hours. Fatigue was setting in. Dad asked if I had scanned the telephone lines and I rolled my eyes, thinking to myself, "OK, I'll scan the damn telephone lines." And there it was - the kingfisher we had come to see, diving from the lines.

We now had to decide what to do with the remaining "hour" of daylight. We had intel about Green-tailed Towhees and Common Poorwills on Mount Helena, but we were also missing the Sandhill Cranes which are easily found in the Helena Valley. I pushed for Mount Helena. Because it was late, I thought we had a chance at the Poorwills. Following the advice of a local bird expert (Thanks, Bob!), we headed south at the Mount Helena City Park trailhead. Near the Reeder's Village Subdivision, a bird moved in some low brush. "Oh, what's that?" I asked Dad, glassing the shrub. More movement... and black - and some red. It was a towhee,

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alright, but the wrong one! Spotted Towhee! As it left the area, we remained focused and the branches moved again. Could this possibly be happening? The Green-tailed Towhee popped up, providing an excellent view and number 105 on the day! What a moment! We missed the Poorwills that evening, but we were getting up early and driving to the Anaconda area for the remaining four hours of daylight which would conclude our 24 hour marathon.

3 AM came as early as I thought it would, and we were on I-15 heading south before we knew it. The reclaimed ARCO Ponds and Warm Springs WMA are a recent addition to Montana's birding hotspots. The area is still in recovery, but the birds are discovering it, and we arrived on the scene just as the sun was clearing the horizon. The willows were suddenly alive with bird song. Northern Waterthrush was a fantastic add, having missed it at Cox Lake and Song Sparrows were busy along the rushing streams which feed the ponds. Diving ducks had been big misses at the shallow, shorebird covered waters of Benton Lake, but the Warm Springs Sewage Ponds produced Redheads, Canvasbacks and Lesser Scaup. A pair of Barrow's Goldeneyes were beautifully sunlit as they swam together in a small pond.

Crossing the Interstate, we arrived at the Warm Springs Ducks Unlimited Ponds only to find that someone had beaten us there. A van-full of birders were already glassing the ponds and said they had seen a Pied-billed Grebe and some Ruddy Ducks. Anxious that the birds had already been scared off, we tried to move away when someone shouted, "Sandhill Cranes!" Viewing and then checking the birds off our list, we moved away from the group and spotted the ruddies foraging in the back of the small cattail-filled area. The other birders moved on and we drove a little further up the road. Not seeing anything, we returned to the first pond. The Pied-billed Grebe had been coaxed out of the cattails by the moments of human absence, and we added it to the list!

Off to the nest Plots! I am working at the Mount Haggin WMA this summer as a nest searcher for the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. I know the birds of that area and where to find them, and this was our last chance at some really good adds. Right off the bat, Lazuli Buntings and Lincoln's Sparrows were heard and seen in the willows. We heard Clark's Nutcrackers calling in their raspy tongues, announcing their presence as nest-predators. A male Hairy Woodpecker drummed loudly near his nest cavity. Farther and farther in we pushed, watching the final minutes tick away as we searched for that last elusive species. We finally saw the MacGillivray's Warbler, a beautiful gray-hooded and yellow-bodied wonder, creeping around in some seemingly impenetrable foliage. Minutes left... and I knew where to find our final bird. A Townsend's Solitaire nest sits at the very back of my work plot. It was just a matter of hiking quickly to reach the area before time ran out. We hiked in, calves and minds burning with exhaustion, and reached the nest site. The birds were not near the nest! We waited... Time was slipping away. At last, the pair floated in lazily as they do. Fluttering and perching together on a low snag, they did not near the nest, perhaps wary of our distant presence. It was 9:18!

What an epic day! Of course, as always, there were some big misses. The Long-billed Dowitchers evaded us at Benton Lake and the Sharp-shinned Hawk was absent at a staked-out nest site Dad had found in Helena. The day was an overall raging success, and we would like to thank you again for supporting our bird-brained endeavors and the conservation efforts of Last Chance Audubon.

Happy birding and Cheers!

Hilary and Stephen Turner (aka The Turnstones)