



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Birding trip adds to life lists and to lifetime memories - Aerial View

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James F. McCarty

Plain Dealer Reporter

After driving 4,400 miles through seven states and one Canadian province in pursuit of birds, we're back home.

My 14-year-old son, Bret, and I survived a mud bath in Manitoba, freezing rain and fog in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, swarms of mosquitoes in Minnesota and legions of crawling ticks in North Dakota. And amazingly we still found the time to spot nearly 200 species of birds, many for the first time in decades, and 10 for the first time in our lives.

Add to those sightings four bears, a moose, a porcupine, a coyote, beavers, muskrats, several turtles rescued from the road, ground squirrels, and about a hundred deer, and it ended up being a pretty memorable two-week nature adventure.

Our quest was to observe as many of North America's rarest birds as possible in their native habitats. Typically, when we see the birds they are travelers during layovers in Northeast Ohio on their spring and fall - or occasionally winter - migrations. It's always a thrill, to be sure, but nothing like seeing them perched on nesting grounds in the Upper Midwest, foraging for food for chicks, or belting out a territorial song.

It was as if we had stepped back in time and were reliving spring all over again while experiencing the songbirds in full vocal regalia.

Warblers were singing throughout Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba. They included Nashville, Cape May, black-throated green, Tennessee, chestnut-sided, magnolia, black-and-white, ovenbird, yellow-rumped, American redstart, Northern waterthrush, mourning, Canada, and Blackburnian warblers.

The "chebeck" calls of least flycatchers served as a constant background chorus in North Dakota and Manitoba, with the occasional interjection of a "Quick, three beers!" from olive-sided flycatchers.

The prairies provided a symphony of grassland bird songs from Western meadowlark, vesper and Savannah sparrows, Sprague's pipit, orchard oriole, and upland sandpiper. The raspy buzzes of clay-colored sparrows supplied the percussion. And the three-note tinks, followed by a musical trill of the Baird's sparrow delivered the perfect crescendo to the performance.

In Northeast Ohio, only the old-timers can recall when the drumming of ruffed grouse was a common sound of the forest. But the booming sound was our constant companion in the spruce and aspen forests of Riding Mountain.

We must have scanned a thousand potholes on the prairies of North Dakota and Manitoba - glacier-carved ponds that dot the landscape for miles on end - each one holding the opportunity for a treasure of nesting and feeding waterfowl and shorebirds.

After a while, the bounty became almost embarrassing: Wilson's phalaropes, marbled godwits and willets pecking along the shorelines; American avocets probing the shallows; black terns cruising overhead; and

lesser scaup, ring-necked, bufflehead, redhead, canvasback, blue-winged and green-winged teal, ruddy, Northern shoveler, wood, American wigeon, gadwall, and Northern pintail ducks, joined by red-necked grebes diving and dabbling in the depths.

The raptors were a joy: ferruginous, Swainson's, red-tailed, Cooper's, and sharp-shinned hawks, merlin, osprey, kestrels and bald eagles.

But no more of a joy than the little birds: boreal chickadee, brown creeper, red-breasted nuthatch, purple finch, pine siskin, white-winged crossbill, LeConte's, grasshopper, and Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrows, sedge wren, and mountain bluebird.

For those keeping score, Bret came home with 10 life birds: sharp-tailed and ruffed grouse, gray partridge, the chickadee, Baird's sparrow, the crossbill, the pipit, Kirtland's warbler, black rail, and upland sandpiper.

I had three new ones: the grouse, the chickadee and Baird's sparrow.

But this trip wasn't about life birds. It was about reconnecting with old birds from my youth, exploring the wildlife of habitats that are rapidly disappearing, and sharing two weeks on the road with a son who possesses an amazing talent for locating and identifying birds.

It was a trip we'll both treasure for our lifetimes.

Sightings

Nancy Anderson and Jeanne Hrenko found a lark sparrow at Chagrin River Park in Lake County.

The black rail continues to be heard - and occasionally seen - at Charlie's Pond near Circleville, Pickaway County.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plained.com, 216-999-4153

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