

Cutright's Old Coots Big Day (May 17, 2018): 156 species

Covering 200+ miles, 3 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., in Ozaukee and Dodge Counties

For those of you who have read this report for the Great Wisconsin Birdathon at any point over the preceding 6 years, *I should start with what was new or different about our 2018 effort:*

- We beat our goal of 150 species.
- We beat last year's total of 153.
- We traveled the fewest miles ever.
- We really only birded in 2 counties
- We saw 85% of all our species in just one county, Ozaukee, where we birded for almost 12 hours and saw 132 species.

- We added a 6th team member: Iowa conservationist Ric Zarwell, a good friend of Noel Cutright, who left the team when he passed away in 2013.

- The weather was amazingly nice, with an early morning low of 50 degrees and largely sunny skies and not too much wind.

Now what was the same this year?

- We had a great time and saw some wonderful birds, including a few we had not expected to see, which is even more fun.

- Thanks to the generosity of our many donors, we are going to be of significant support to the Bird Protection Fund, although we still need to raise about \$1,700 more if are to reach \$10,000 and trigger a promised goal-reaching \$1,000 bonus from an anonymous donor.

So how did our day go?

As usual we started our day at 3 a.m. in rural Saukville, in the backyard of artist and birder Tom Uttech. This year our first bird was an Eastern Whip-poor-will heard a short way down County Road O. We added a Barred Owl in a nearby subdivision and an Eastern Screech Owl at Blue Heron Wildlife Preserve around 3:30 a.m. A visit to Hawthorne Hills County Park yielded no owls but a Song Sparrow became #4 on our list.

We elected to await the dawn chorus along Blue Goose Rd. at the Cedarburg Bog where we finally heard a Great Horned Owl and several American Woodcock and would record 48 additional species over an hour and 45 minutes. That list included 4 of the 6 thrush species we would see during what was one of the best thrush migrations we could recall, along with 8 of the 22 warbler species we would see during the day.



Our next major stop, at the west end of the Riveredge Nature Center, yielded 37 species as we walked a mile along the Milwaukee River. Included were 13 warbler species and 5 of the thrushes as well as our first Eastern Wood Pewee.

Our next stop was also along the river at nearby Hawthorne Hills County Park, where we witnessed the largest concentration of thrushes any of us could recall. What a joy to hear the songs of numerous Veeries and Wood Thrushes and even an occasional Swainson's, but it was even amazing to see them joined by numerous Gray-cheeked and American Robins littering the park lawns. Plus 15 warbler species and some aerial observations of Double-crested Cormorant, Turkey Vulture, Sandhill Crane and Chimney Swift.

Our list would grow steadily through the day. It had reached 26 by 5 a.m. and more than doubled to 58 at 6; by 7 it reached 71, 84 by 9 and would be over 100 before 11 a.m.

One of the day's true surprises was spotting several Brewer's Blackbirds along CR-H near Port Washington at around 10 a.m. on our way to locating our first shorebird pond of the day at Hawthorne and CR-KK, which team member Joan Sommer had been monitoring. There we had Semipalmated Plover; Least, Semipalmated and Spotted Sandpiper; Wilson's Phalarope and Lesser Yellowlegs. In the same area we picked up some of the other shrub and grassland species we were seeking (Ring-necked Pheasant, Vesper and Clay-colored Sparrow, Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark).

Missing from the area, which includes the now-fragmented stretch of Six Mile Road, were birds that used to nest there like Upland Sandpiper, Western Meadowlark and Loggerhead Shrike.

You can't bird Ozaukee County without spending time at the Lake Michigan shore. We didn't arrive at Port Washington's Coal Dock Park until nearly 1 p.m. and then



stayed there for more than an hour, tallying 26 species, many of them new for the day, including the Peregrine Falcon pair that nest on the power plant there. Our waterfowl list included both Surf and White-winged Scoters (two more highlights for the day), Green-winged Teal, Lesser and Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, and Red-breasted Merganser.

We also managed to find a single Ruddy Turnstone peeking over the rocks on the distant breakwater and tallied 7 gull species (Lesser Black-backed, Glaucous, Great Black-backed, Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring, Iceland and a Thayer's subspecies), as well as 25 Caspian Terns and 700 Common Terns. (Great to have gull experts like Uttech and Mike Wanger as part of the team.)

It was by then almost 2:15 and we still had not left Ozaukee County. But team member Marilyn Bontly suggested we quickly swing by the Stonecroft ponds along Highway C south of Port where we would pick up two Mute Swans that she knew had been in the area, along with Pectoral Sandpiper and Short-billed Dowitcher.

At this point, having tallied 132 species in Ozaukee County, we opted to jettison a large chunk of our route in Sheboygan and Fond du Lac Counties (including the Northern Kettle

Moraine) in favor of spending the rest of our day in the diverse and species-rich Horicon Marsh area, where we arrived around 3:45 p.m. We would eBird 6 more checklists from that area between then and 7:30 p.m. and add 24 new species to our list.

The first hour was spent along Highway 49; notable additions to our list included Blue-winged Teal, Ruddy Duck, Trumpeter Swan, Redhead, Pied-billed Grebe, American White Pelican, Northern Harrier,

Virginia Rail, Common Gallinule, American Coot, Black-necked Stilt, Black Tern, Forster's Tern, Bald Eagle and Great Egret

We finally picked up several Yellow-headed Blackbirds in a farmer's backyard on Point Rd. before making our final stop of the day along County Road I west of the marsh. There we added Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Long-billed Dowitcher and a Eurasian Collared-Dove that we had staked out on an earlier visit to the area.

Having filed 25 checklists tallying more than 2,500 individuals of 157 species (topping both our 2018 goal and last year's total), and with Tom still recovering from a recent knee replacement and Mike needing to catch the next day's 8 a.m. ferry to Washington Island, we declared victory and headed home to our various beds.

We conclude this report with gratitude to the birds for being there, for the weather cooperating and to all who read this for their support of the Old Coots, the Natural Resources Foundation, the Great Wisconsin Birdathon, the Bird Protection Fund and all of its priority conservation projects, especially Bird City Wisconsin, the Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory's waterbird watch and the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas II.

--- *Carl Schwartz, Tom Uttech, Marilyn Bontly, Joan Sommer, Mike Wanger and Ric Zarwell*



Pictured in the report: (1) All the Coots except Tom who joined us a short time later but we forgot to take another photo; (2) Golden-winged Warbler; (3) Eurasian Collared-Dove; the bird photos were taken by Mike.