

## TO NEW JERSEY: FOR THE BIRDS

by John C. Kricher, Norton

Sport takes on many forms. For us, it is birding. Not genteel birding, such as you see among the binocular-laden throngs that invade Mt. Auburn Cemetery daily throughout the spring, but hard-core competitive no-holds-barred olympic-style birding. The game is not to watch birds, nor particularly even to enjoy them. It is to find and identify them - for a prize. We were part of a newly emerging form of marathon called a "birdathon." Specifically, our goal was to identify as many species of birds as possible in a single twenty-four-hour period. Oh, and one other thing. We had to do it in New Jersey.

We were one of thirteen teams of birders, the only team from Massachusetts, to compete in the "First Annual World Series of Birding," sponsored by the New Jersey Audubon Society and the Cape May Bird Observatory. On Saturday, May 19, from midnight to midnight, we were to search for birds anywhere within the confines of New Jersey. The team that identified the most species would win a trophy as well as whatever honor goes with being the best. They would also win money, though not for themselves. The whole point of the contest was to raise money for the Cape May Bird Observatory plus other conservation organizations. Sponsors of teams pledged a certain amount per bird, half of which was to be awarded to Cape May Bird Observatory and the other half to the sponsor's favorite organization. Our team represented the Manomet Bird Observatory and was sponsored principally by the Swift Instrument Company, maker of binoculars and telescopes. Swift outfitted us with blue and white baseball caps sporting the Swift logo, a spotting scope, and kicked in five bucks a species. Shiretown Motors, in Plymouth, gave us a car. We invaded the Garden State on the treads of a brand new blue Ford LTD wagon, complete with cruise control and factory air. Our other sponsor was The Captain John and Sons, who run whale-watching trips from Plymouth. We didn't expect any whales in Jersey, but we appreciated the support and hoped for a seabird or two.

Our team consisted of four birders plus a driver-caterer. Our heavy hitters were Wayne Petersen and Rick Heil. Wayne and Rick are to birding what Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were to train-robbing. They have finesse, style, and most of all, skill. Take them anywhere, turn them loose, and watch the checklist fill. Rounding out our team were Warren Harrington and me. Warren is skilled at "quick pickups," a term which is actually respectable in birding. Among other things he got us a Belted Kingfisher, Orchard Oriole, and a Gull-billed Tern that otherwise would have remained anonymous. As for me, well, let's put it this way: if

birding carried with it the same outcome as dueling, I'd be long gone. I do OK but I'm no Wayne. However, I do know New Jersey, and even the best of pilots require navigators. Rounding out our group was Betty Petersen, Wayne's wife, who steered the LTD and made the sandwiches which served as our fuel. Betty managed to pack a small deli into the Ford wagon, and fennel baloney proved particularly popular. She also pumped us full of vitamin C tablets, at 1000 mg. a pop, which kept us alert, awake, and even civil.

New Jersey, per unit area the most populous state in the union, is not normally thought of for its birdlife. North Jersey, with its refineries, landfills, and urban sprawl would be about the last place to expect feathered hordes. Looks can be deceiving, however. Tucked in among the human clutter is the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Morris County. At ten minutes before midnight the blue LTD wagon quietly pulled to a halt at the observation center at the Great Swamp. Cricket frogs, each sounding like a finger strumming across a comb, called from all around us. We had departed from Massachusetts at 5:00 P.M. and had arrived with ten minutes to spare. Good timing.

Wayne began to whistle. Not a cheerful whistle but a long mournful trill. He was imitating a screech-owl. At one minute after midnight, Wayne was answered by the real thing. Bird number one! The game had begun. Soon we added Barred Owl and sora rail. A sleeping Eastern Kingbird, awakened by Wayne's vigorous Barred Owl imitation, called out in protest. No big thing, we'd see many kingbirds this day.

We soon left the Great Swamp. The key to success in birdathons is to keep moving. By 2 A.M. we arrived at an area bordered by interstates 80, 280, and various other main thoroughfares. Termed Troy Meadows by the locals, this marshy area is a must for certain species such as rails and bitterns. The only trouble was, we couldn't find Troy Meadows. The directions in our Summit Nature Club New Jersey Field Trip Guide said to "park on the left at the entrance to an abandoned road usually littered with garbage. Walk down the road through the woods and, as you come to a large open area, follow the middle trail until you come to the edge of the marsh." We found the abandoned road. We stepped in the garbage. We didn't find the middle trail. We didn't find the marsh. We missed the rails and bitterns.

Discouraged, we left Troy Meadows never having seen it. At 4:00 A.M. we arrived at a place with a name that seemed potentially prophetic; Waterloo. It was starting to rain lightly. We had been at it for four hours and had identified only eight species. That's two an hour. Not good. I was tired. Betty gave me a vitamin C.

By 4:45 the first light of day was evident. Things began to

pick up with woodcock, Red-winged Blackbird, Virginia Rail, and Great Blue Heron coming in quick order. Soon we were engaged in a frenzy of identification. Spring migration was in full swing and dawn brought with it the birds. Warren got a nighthawk. Wayne had a Black-and-white Warbler. Rick got a Golden-winged Warbler. By 6:00 the list had grown to 44 species, including the crow-sized Pileated Woodpecker, which I managed to find, and the diminutive Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. If a bird peeped, squeaked, chipped, or sang, we identified it. Nothing got past us. Wayne told Betty to stop the car, just in time for us to jump out and spot both Black and Turkey vultures flying up from the edge of a roadside marsh.

We encountered trouble at Allamuchy Boy Scout Camp. A woman with a thick eastern European accent whose job it was to guard the camp from vandals wanted no part of us. We learned later that one of the competing teams who had been there just before our arrival had told her we looked suspicious. It was sort of their idea of a joke. I told you this game is no-holds-barred. We needed to bird Allamuchy to get the Cerulean Warbler, a species known to nest in the oaks behind the ranger's cabin. We begged, smiled a lot, and tried hard to look respectful, honest, and true. She let us in. We got the bird.

Shortly after 8:00 we were heading south toward Princeton in heavy rain with 79 species so far. Other than the weather, things looked very good. By 9:20 we were at the Institute Woods near venerable Princeton University. The lush woods had leafed out, and other birders were there paying homage to spring migration. Birds abounded in the pouring rain. Thrushes, warblers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks seemed everywhere. We kept getting good birds, such as Mourning Warbler and Lincoln's Sparrow, uncommon species that you simply can't count on finding easily, especially in New Jersey. We left Princeton Woods with 93 species, and we still didn't have House Sparrow or pigeon. Not only that, but the rain was stopping. Spirits were running high.

We worked our way south and toward the coast. In the agricultural areas of central Jersey we searched to find grassland species. Once Wayne yielded to the call of nature and, while in the privy, missed two species, a Swamp Sparrow and a Carolina Wren. This could be serious. We were playing ABA (American Birding Association) rules and one important rule is that the entire team must see or hear at least 95 percent of the species. The situation worsened. Rick saw a White-crowned Sparrow that neither Wayne nor I could relocate. We couldn't afford too many species that all hadn't confirmed.

The LTD cruise-controlled its way through the Jersey pinelands as we stopped only briefly to add Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Eastern Bluebird to our swelling list. We knew we

were getting the birds. Now time was becoming the enemy. So was my hayfever. I began to sneeze and my eyes watered. Betty gave me a vitamin C, explaining that among its unique properties is the ability to stop allergic reactions before they "take hold." Wayne mumbled something about Linus Pauling being smart. I took the C tablet and stopped sneezing almost immediately.

Brigantine Wildlife Refuge is to New Jersey what Plum Island is to Massachusetts. Birders from all over the Delaware Valley Region and beyond are attracted to its marshes and unusual birds are to be expected. We entered Brig at 2:25 with 129 species in hand and left at 4:10 having added many duck and shorebird species plus a single White Pelican which, by some navigational error, had found Brigantine in New Jersey instead of Bear River in Utah. Although our list was pushing 160, we were running very late. To make matters worse, the team favored to win, led by none other than Roger Tory Peterson himself, had left Brigantine as we arrived. They were way ahead of us and looked pretty smug.

Stone Harbor, a south Jersey coastal resort, did not treat us kindly. We couldn't find the Red-headed Woodpecker at Cape May County Park nor the Yellow-crowned Night Heron at the Stone Harbor heronry. The sun was getting low on the horizon. At 6:00 P.M. we had 163 species.

We weaved our way through the tourist traffic at Cape May, a restored Victorian resort town that lies at the tip of the Jersey peninsula. At the south Cape May jetties we nailed seven species in short order: Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, Lesser Scaup, Black Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Purple Sandpiper, and Red Knot. We had hope.

Dusk came quickly and darkness followed. We would not quit until midnight. Our final stop was Turkey Point at Dividing Creek, nestled along the Delaware Bay among the many small towns which support the oyster industry. My job was to get us to Turkey Point. Sleep wanted me badly. With Betty at the wheel I tried to concentrate on the map but couldn't seem to read it. I popped another vitamin C. Finally, I gave up, giving Warren the map and wishing him good luck. I didn't think I was sleeping. I really believed I was there in Princeton Woods showing Brooke Shields a Blackburnian Warbler. I snapped awake when Warren announced that we had arrived at Turkey Point. None of us know how he found it, but there we were. We added Marsh Wren and King Rail, both calling in the darkness. At 11:00, we heard a Black-billed Cuckoo, which turned out to be our final species. The total sat at 175.

We didn't win the big prize. That went to Peterson's team, who racked up the amazing total of 201, capping their list with Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Marmora at about the same time

we were hearing Black-billed at Turkey Point. New Jersey had broken 200! The next highest team, the Chapman Club, netted 194. Some of the other Jersey teams were in the 180s. Our total was, however, the best of any out-of-state team so we won something called the Ed Stearns Award in honor of our abilities to find birds on foreign turf. The trophy consists of a pair of binoculars embedded in a granite block, and was presented to us by none other than Roger Tory Peterson himself. It's a bizarre trophy. Like Arthur's sword in its stone, the Leitz binocs seem to be waiting for Camelot. That, we predict, will be next year when we return to the Garden State, with more vitamin C, more fennel baloney, and some good scouting reports. We want it all. Next year, we'll find Troy Meadows.

JOHN C. KRICHER, Ph.D., is Chairman of the Biology Department and Associate Provost of Wheaton College. He has studied birds in most of North America, including Mexico, in several countries of Central and South America, and in Ireland. His research topics include bird species diversity and secondary succession in New Jersey, effects of pesticides, analysis of Christmas Bird Count data in relation to range expansion, and migrant and resident birds in disturbed and rain forest areas in Belize. He has published widely and is a member of the A.O.U., the Wilson and Cooper societies, A.A.A.S., and Sigma Xi and is president of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association.

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## Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch

Hawks are flying, and, again, birders in eastern Massachusetts have an excellent opportunity to see significant numbers of hawks in good variety. The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW), in its ninth year, will attempt to monitor portions of this flight.

The EMHW will maintain a consecutive-day hawkwatch on the summit of Wachusett Mountain in Princeton from September 1 through October 8, and on all weekends from September 1 through November 18.

Participating in a coordinated hawkwatch throughout New England, the EMHW will also cover as many sites as there are volunteers available on four weekends, September 15 and 16, 22 and 23, 29 and 30, and October 27 and 28. Volunteers are needed to report the level of hawk migration activity from any site on any of the eight coordinated weekend dates. Select a site near your home, or contact the EMHW coordinator for recommendations as to the best sites requiring coverage.

You don't need to be a hawk identification expert to participate and report. Reporting the magnitude of the hawk flight is the critical essential, but there is no better way to learn hawk identification than in the field.

Volunteers are also needed to cover Wachusett Mountain and submit a report of the day's flight. Can you contribute one weekday's coverage to the Wachusett watch? We need your help to maintain consecutive-day coverage on Wachusett and to conduct the coordinated weekend watch.

If you would like to participate, please contact:  
Katie Durham, 330 Dartmouth Street, Boston, MA 02116  
Telephone: 617-262-2535.

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If you would like more information on hawkwatching in eastern Massachusetts, including an eight-page report on the 1983 hawk flights, please send \$1.00 to help defray the costs of printing and postage. Additionally, a six-page silhouette guide to the hawks of the north-east is available for \$1.00 plus \$0.37 postage, and a sixteen-page Beginner's Guide to Hawkwatching is available for \$1.00 plus \$0.20 postage. (Checks should be made payable to Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch.) Mail orders to : EMHW, c/o Katie Durham, 330 Dartmouth St., Boston, MA 02116.