

## Elisha Mitchell Audubon Society 2016 Birdathon Reports

### Team Peregrine

*Kevin Burke, Emilie Travis, Clifton Avery, Aaron Steed, Simon Thompson*

Team Peregrine added a few new faces to the team this year, and ended up consisting solely of Ventures guides! This was the first Birdathon for several of our team members and everyone was enthusiastic about helping Team Peregrine soar to new heights....

When the day came, we were ready. We met well before sunrise and piled into Emilie's Subaru, which was well-stocked with a plethora of tasty treats and snacks and went on our way. Our first stop did not disappoint, and produced a pre-dawn cacophony of Whip-poor-wills, a distant Great Horned Owl, several American Woodcocks, and Yellow-breasted Chats.



*Clifton, Emilie and Aaron*

The sun rose and we really started racking up the species. Before long it was time to move on – you never want to spend too long in one spot! We headed south, finding Common Loon and Double-crested Cormorant at Lake Julian. Green River Gamelands and the nearby areas added another huge chunk of birds including Blackpoll, Swainson's, Kentucky, and Prothonotary Warblers. We celebrated our 100<sup>th</sup> species with handfuls of Bugles (aka 'Corn Horns') and kept going (and eating). A Great Egret was a nice find at Lake Adger, and we had shorebirds here as well – Lesser Yellowlegs, and Least & Semipalmated Sandpipers. The Snow Goose seemed to have left Osceola, but thankfully the Virginia Rails were still present at the Park at Flat Rock!

Kevin peeled off in the afternoon while the rest of us pressed on, making stops for Brown-headed Nuthatch, Warbling Vireo, and Purple Martin before heading up to the Blue Ridge Parkway. We left it a bit late, arriving closer to sunset than we would have liked, but we added lots of warblers, flycatchers, and all the high-elevation birds we still needed for the day. Before light faded, we got great looks at Peregrine Falcon, and shortly after sunset, we got our final 2 birds of the day – Northern Saw-whet Owl and Barred Owl. We finished the day with a respectable **130 species** – a fair number considering we were birding for nearly 19 hours...

Can we do this more than once a year?

*Aaron Steed*

### The Beaver Lake Bluebirds

*Jamie Harrelson, Marianne Mooney, Tom Tribble*

The Beaver Lake Bluebirds, still feeling triumphant after two glorious wins in a row, were determined to log another victory this year despite being short a valued team member. Intrepid team leader Tom Tribble, Marianne Mooney, and I began our day well before sunrise and were rewarded with the wonderful songs of resident and migrant warblers, vireos, and tanagers along the first segment of our route. One of the most memorable sightings of the early morning was a very cooperative Swainson's Warbler that posed and sang for us a few feet away. We proceeded to our next stops and, after a bit of searching, found a pair of Prothonotary Warblers and witnessed some warbler lovin'.

A notable miss for the day was Cerulean Warbler—our stop at Chimney Rock State Park unfortunately did not yield this species; even so, being serenaded by a Blackpoll Warbler while taking one of many snack “breaks” and finding a pair of mating skinks made that stop more than worthwhile. It's interesting that, during these Big Days, you inevitably find birds in places you didn't necessarily expect, which often results in shuffling the schedule of stops or skipping stops altogether. At an early afternoon stop, we found species that we expected to find but also lucked out and found a Cliff Swallow mixed in with other swallows and a Least Flycatcher that had been hanging around. The strangely wonderful, buzzy song of the Grasshopper Sparrow emanated from a field nearby as we strolled. Lingering at Lake Julian were Common Loon and Lesser Scaup. Guess they wanted to soak up the ambiance of their southern Appalachian home for just a bit longer!



*Marianne, Tom and Jamie*

Our highlight of the afternoon was seeing a small flock of Bobolinks posing on a wire. This was only my second time seeing this species, so it was a real treat! Picking up several species along the route, we headed up on the Parkway. I couldn't think of a better or more beautiful place to spend an evening! After an unsuccessful attempt to observe Peregrine Falcons on an eyrie near the Parkway, we headed up a nearby trail and picked up high-elevation species such as Hermit Thrush, Brown Creeper, and Winter Wren. As we walked, we heard the distinctive call of a raptor. Marianne and I looked at each other, eyes wide with excitement, and cried “Peregrine?!” We practically ran back to the parking area! Our patience paid off because we got to see the bird both in flight and perched near the outer edge of the rock face.

A late evening stop at Graveyard Fields yielded an American Woodcock in the distance, his emphatic “PEENT” calls drifting up from his performance arena. Our last stops of the night weren't as successful as we had hoped; we missed out on owls and Whip-poor-wills were not calling, probably because the moon was a mere crescent obscured by clouds.

The weather gods must have been smiling on us because, other than a brief shower during an afternoon drive between stops, we evaded the rain until just after our final stop—the bottom dropped out and we got soaked getting back in our cars! Despite the fact that we missed a few species (where is a good ol' Red-bellied Woodpecker when you need one?!), our Big Day ended up being successful and thoroughly enjoyable. The Beaver Lake Bluebirds, tired but satisfied after a fantastic day of birding, finished up with a total count of **122 species**.

***Jamie Harrelson***

## The Not-So-Common Loons

### *Jay Wherley, John Koons, Luke Cannon & Tom Bush*

The Not-so-Common Loons, a rookie team this year, set out on the morning of May 11th with high hopes. (Having taken part in a bird count the previous weekend that netted 54 species over most of the day, I was aiming for at least 70 species as a reasonable goal for our inaugural year.) Our first rookie misstep happened out of the gate when our arrival time at Lake Julian preceded the actual opening of the gate. Thinking the delay was a chance to pick up a first bird of House Sparrow at the next door Ingles didn't pan out either. (In fact, it took 2 more attempts along the day to check off that bird.)

Once we were underway, species did start to accumulate. Glass-flat water was nice for spotting under cloudy/misty skies. The long time Egyptian Goose was present and several fly-bys were initial highlights: Great Egret and our namesake Common Loon. John Koon led us towards a newer paved trail on the North end of the park that notched up Yellow-throated Warbler and Eastern Kingbird. He then spotted a late Pied-billed Grebe for us. We left the park with 38 species and heading North.



*Jay, John and Tom*

The three-man morning team moved on to Biltmore knowing Purple Martins would be an easy get, with a good chance of other not-so-common species. In the Antler Hill area, we had Tree, Barn, and a single Cliff Swallow. Also our first-of-year Blue Grosbeak. We hit a good spot along the Farm Trail that yielded American Redstart, Blackpoll, Yellow, and Black-and-White Warblers. Walking back to the parking lot we had good looks at two Savannah Sparrows, but lost two probable Bobolinks diving for cover in the field. Fly by highlights were American Kestrel and Double-crested Cormorant. We were having such fun here that two hours slid past before we checked the Lagoon. No ducks on the water there, but picked up Orchard Oriole and a Black Vulture.

The team was now off to Beaver Lake where we were met with a drenching rain that stalled us for a bit. We also picked up Green Heron and White-eyed Vireo here, but missed several semi-regulars.

The parkway at Craven Gap was our next avenue; we added fundraiser specialty Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Hooded Warbler and Scarlet Tanager here. Further along the parkway, up to the first tunnel, both Black-throated Warblers and a Blue-headed Vireo were added. John switched out at this point, but not before showing us nesting House Wrens at his home - every bird counts! Luke Cannon joined us for the late afternoon and evening at Owen Park/Warren Wilson. We spent three hours covering most of the area, starting with a singing Baltimore Oriole with nest. Luke made good on Bobolink discovery, despite an electric fence jolt. A surprise flyover of two Common



*Luke*

Nighthawks ended our day at a respectable, but not stellar **83 species**. Much respect to the other teams who executed excellent planning, birding skills, and teamwork! We hope to step it up next year.

*Jay Wherley*