

Lake Superior eBirders Big Day Recap – 16 September 2020

The coronavirus pandemic brought new challenges to the 2020 Great Wisconsin Birdathon. For the Lake Superior eBirders, we postponed our traditional “Big Day” in May hoping conditions might allow us to resume a group birding effort in fall. Alas, it was not to be, so we turned instead to Plan B (or was it C?). Ryan would bird his yard for landbirds, Nick would scour Wisconsin Point for waterbirds and rarities, and Erik would cover his home base at Cape May, New Jersey. Yes, we took social distancing to another level! Knowing mid-September was best for species diversity we watched the weather, tried to align our schedules, and ultimately hit the field on Wednesday, September 16. Read on to discover how each of us fared!



Ryan Brady – His yard near Washburn, Bayfield County



I woke with eager anticipation. A cold front had passed the night before, bringing northwest winds perfect for migration, and the radar was lit up with birds all night long. Right off the bat, my pre-dawn efforts yielded three target species with a calling Barred Owl and night flight calls of Swainson’s and Gray-cheeked Thrushes. Then, at very first light my first bird in sight, a Great Blue Heron that dropped into one of my ponds. Things were off to a good start!

But honestly that was the end of my expectations being met. Simply put, a big flight never materialized for me, despite big numbers of landbirds being tallied at Hawk Ridge in Duluth and reports of good action to my east in upper Michigan. Once or twice a year my morning flight doesn’t jive with Hawk Ridge or the radar, and it hadn’t happened yet this fall. Unfortunately, today was the day. It took me 3 hours to find 10 warbler species. Over the past month I’d found that number daily in the first 30 minutes of light!



It wasn’t all bad though. Despite low numbers I was finding decent diversity. Small flocks of Cedar Waxwings and Pine Siskins flew by, White-throated, Lincoln’s, and even a Savannah Sparrow worked my brushy field; and Red-eyed, Blue-headed, and Philadelphia Vireos put in welcome appearances.

Tennessee, Magnolia, and Blackburnian Warblers flitted about, but taking center stage were large numbers of Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers plucking flies from my house and lawn.

As the day warmed and the wind picked up, I turned to hawkwatching. I live in the southern shadow of Lake Superior so it's hard to get good flights in autumn (because most birds go around the lake). I was pleased to find Sharp-shinned,

Cooper's, and Broad-winged Hawks, as well as a sky-high American Kestrel among Bald Eagles and Turkey Vultures. Meanwhile, I was slowly but surely adding new species through mid-day like Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Indigo Bunting, and a migrating Common Loon.



I pulled out all the stops in late afternoon, calling on fresh eyes in my 8-year-old and 10-year-old boys, Colin and Evan, getting on my roof to improve the hawkwatching view, and sitting in my blind to photograph birds at my water feature, which typically gets great warbler action around the 5–6pm supper hour. But while all of it was fun and memorable, none of it netted any new species. As the sun set my spirits were pretty low, and I had but one target bird left, hoping that perhaps a late Common Nighthawk would fly by. Lo and behold, in the last glow of twilight and nearly 15 hours after I had started this birding marathon, one did!

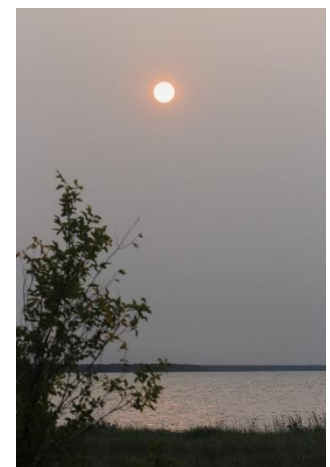


In the end, I tallied nearly 500 birds of 63 species, a really good day by most measures. I'm spoiled, though, really spoiled. Just a few days before with less effort I had tallied over a thousand birds of 72 species, among them 19 warbler species including a Connecticut. Today had been my worst warbler day in at least a month, as I managed only 19 *individual warblers* that weren't Yellow-rumped or Palm. On the other hand, perspective is everything, and I'm grateful not only that I got to bird for 15 hours straight on an absolutely gorgeous fall day but for the support of over 80 donors who brought us and the birdathon event extremely close to our fundraising goal. Thank you for supporting the conservation of Wisconsin's birds!

Here's the checklist of my 63 species: <https://ebird.org/wi/checklist/S73689626>

Nick Anich – Wisconsin Point in Superior, Douglas County

I arrived at Wisconsin Point and started birding at 5:08 am. It was pitch black and there was already a surprising number of cars in parking lots. The first hour was full of overhead call notes from nocturnal migrants, mostly Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, from what I could identify. The first bird I actually saw was at 5:50 am, as a Herring Gull drifted by the streetlight at the Superior Entry. As it became light, flight calls dropped off. At the Wisconsin Point lighthouse, there were shorebirds on the beach, but at first it was too dark to tell what they were. As the smoky sky gradually lightened, I determined there was a Baird's Sandpiper with



several Black-bellied Plovers and Am. Golden-Plovers, the latter a sign of things to come. Apparently, people were sleeping out in their sleeping bags on the beach, and some of the plovers foraged right through their campsite while the campers snored on.

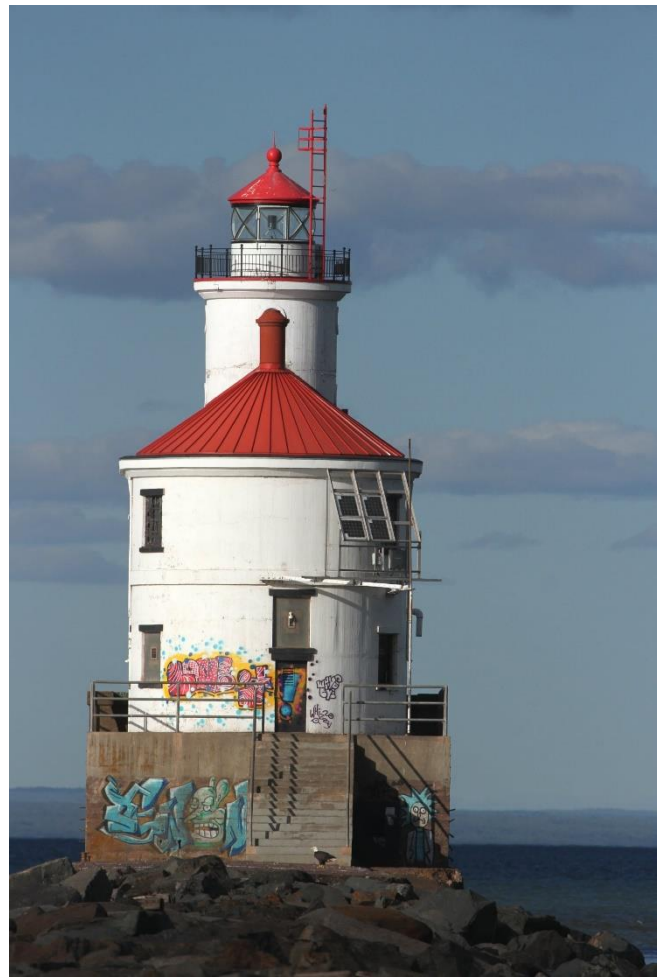


I spent the next hour birding my way back towards Parking Lot 1. There was a good amount of initial activity, presumably from some of the birds that dropped in from the night of migration, including many Swainson's Thrushes, White-throated Sparrows, and an assortment of warblers. Ted Keyel reported in from Parking Lot 1, calling my attention to an American White Pelican on Allouez Bay. He reported not much action at Lot 1, with the usual gulls were nowhere

to be seen, but reported some Wild Turkeys towards the Superior Landfill, so I opted to check the east side first. I found Ted's turkeys and picked up a flock of Pine Siskins, but the vantages from Dutchman's Creek and Gull Bluff showed an angry windy lake with few things to look at.

It was now 8:20 AM and I settled into Parking Lot 1 where Ted Keyel as well as Ty and Ida Baumann were scoping the lake. As a (socially distanced) group we picked a few things out through the crashing waves: A distant Merlin gunning for land, several small flocks of Green-winged Teal skimming the waves, and decent numbers of both Common and Forster's Terns playing in the wind halfway out. As my hands started to get cold, I dipped back to the parking lot with the intention of moving further down the point, but ran into a good flock of migrants right in the parking lot, and lingered there for about a half hour, picking up Wilson's Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and a few birds from the marsh like Wood Duck and Blue-winged Teal.

During the next few hours, I went up and down the point, standing at Gull Bluff for a while (still not much for gulls, but a couple American Kestrels flew off the lake low) and racking up a few more landbirds like Eastern Phoebe and Magnolia Warbler. A stop by the lighthouse again was relatively slow, but a couple walking back from the lighthouse over the breakwall rocks scared up American Pipit and Semipalmated Plover.



At around 2 PM, I brought my camp chair and settled in back at Parking Lot 1 with Ty for an afternoon lakewatch, trying hard for a jaeger. Gull numbers were gradually building again, but still fell far short of the usual flock. A scan of the distant horizon suggested many were far too out to see. An ultra-distant flock of ducks turned out to be Northern Pintail. Two Black-bellied Plover, and three Sanderlings shot by at a distance, heading towards Duluth. Finally, Ty mentioned he had a flock of something way out above the horizon. It was quite speckish at first, but we watched and eventually deduced that they were 39 American Golden-Plovers, which headed straight over us, going south. Minutes later we had a flock of 66 heading northwest. Gradually the remaining gulls that were present headed out, and I decided to move.



At 5 PM I found myself a nice driftwood log to sit on, and staked out the base of the lighthouse breakwall for a while. I did not add many species, but the evening light coming over my shoulder was beautiful, providing good views of the same Baird's Sandpiper I had first seen 11 hours ago. A small flock of Palm Warblers foraged along the beach, the same American Pipits were flushed off the breakwall by another group of people, and a slow but steady trickle of gulls, terns, and cormorants crossed the entry.

At about 6:15 PM I moved to the westmost Superior Entry parking lot, where I found Ezra Hosch and Alex Sundvall already scoping. I joined them (socially distanced), and we continued to attempt to pick out a Sabine's Gull or jaeger to no avail. Suddenly, we heard some whistled call notes and looked to see another flock of American Golden-Plovers winging over, looking doubly golden in the day's last rays of light.



Over the next hour, we had 8 flocks of up to 41 birds, all apparently coming in off the lake, and heading south or west towards Duluth. My total for the day was 278 American Golden-Plovers(!), almost all in active migration except for a couple sitting on the beach or breakwall. At 7:27 I concluded it was getting dark and with my energy and odds diminishing, called it a day. The jaegers were not cooperative, but the spectacle of American Golden-Plover migration was a nice cap to a beautiful fall day at Wisconsin Point. We send a heartfelt thanks to all of you who donated to us to support bird conservation in Wisconsin.



Some of Nick's most exciting checklists:

<https://ebird.org/wi/checklist/S73690227>

<https://ebird.org/wi/checklist/S73690471>

<https://ebird.org/wi/checklist/S73690712>

<https://ebird.org/wi/checklist/S73690882>

Erik Bruhnke – Cape May, New Jersey

Southeast winds were no match for a fun day of birding throughout the southernmost tip of New Jersey. I woke up early to arrive at Higbee Dike at sunrise. This location is the bluff where the renowned Cape May morning flight count takes place every fall. Here I met up (socially distanced) with Daniel Irons, the morning flight counter for the 2020 fall season. We had a great time scanning the skies together. The less-than-favorable winds



slowed down migration but still allowed for good bird diversity to push through. Throughout the 1 hour and 45 minutes of scanning I started the day off with 53 species, including a Blackpoll Warbler, Green Heron, Blue Grosbeaks, a Northern Harrier, and more. A scan over the Delaware Bay offered views of Royal Terns and even a distant Brown Pelican. What an exciting way to start the day!

I soaked up as many birds as I could at Higbee Dike before I had to head to work. Following the dike, I drove to the nearby South Jersey Marina to lead a birding trip on the Skimmer. The Skimmer is a birding and nature-viewing pontoon boat trip that I work on which explores the nearby saltmarshes and wildlife found throughout the Cape May area. We headed out on an impromptu and complimentary-to-birders trip which we offered in search of a Masked Booby that was seen the evening before. The Masked Booby ended up being a one-day wonder, however our efforts that morning brought forth endless fun times together and many birds. Shortly after leading the marina we located the Black Scoter that had decided to spend the entire summer here in Cape May. Great Egrets

and Snowy Egrets made some solid appearances as did terns, gulls, and more. After experiencing some outstanding moments with two close Peregrine Falcons flying by, the boat trip list had tallied 28 species. The only shorebird seen was Semipalmated Sandpipers, but there were many shorebirds to come later in the day.



With the mid-day sun upon Cape May and an unfortunate work load of office work to do on this fundraising day, I decided to get my work done and give the afternoon and evening a solid birding effort. I concluded my work and headed to the South Cape May Meadows to see what waterfowl were around. Recent heavy rains had made for a lack of mudflats in the “meadows” with substantial water filling the ponds. After a fairly quiet visit to the meadows, I headed next door to one of the most ecologically diverse spots in Cape May, the Cape May Point State Park. This is a personal favorite spot of mine not only because of the extensive trails and rich blend of habitat that draws in so many birds, but also because it is the location of the Cape May Hawkwatch. I hiked a portion of the state park trails where I came across new additions to my day like Wood Ducks and a Red-eyed Vireo. The southeast winds had picked up as the day progressed, which made for a slower day at the hawkwatch but bird diversity continued to add up.

Following the hawkwatch I headed a few minutes north to The Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor. This nature center and surrounding protected ecosystem is a must-visit experience for folks in south Jersey. I walked the trail in hopes of getting many waders far less expected in the immediate Cape May area. Like clockwork these hoped-for birds came around. I picked out a Tricolored Heron and Little Blue Heron feeding together in the spartina saltmarsh grass, and both Black-crowned Night-Heron and Yellow-crowned Night-heron showed themselves too. Boat-tailed



Grackles chattered nearby. I had a little time left in the day to maximize my list and I knew just where to go.

I headed directly to Stone Harbor Point, a seldomly-traveled 2.5-mile peninsula of sand, grassy dunes, and ocean shoreline south of Stone Harbor. Outside of our big day, Stone Harbor Point is my zen birding spot for down times of solitude and soaking up the birds. My usual tactic while birding here is to arrive a few hours before sunset (as I did) to enjoy all of the golden-lit shorebirds as the sun sets



behind me. The walk did not disappoint as over a thousand Great Black-backed Gulls were seen roosting near the end of the point. The excursion offered great study of Lesser Black-backed Gulls too. While walking along the point I came across Western Sandpipers, hundreds of Sanderlings, three uncommon Marbled Godwit, and even two Red Knots. While on the walk back to my car in the late evening light, I ran into my good friends Kevin Karlson and his wife Dale Rosselet who were both walking along Stone Harbor Point to enjoy the birds too. What a fun end to the day!

I ended the day with 87 bird species and a full heart after observing so many wonderful birds throughout the day, all within a few minutes' drive of where I live. It felt different doing a socially-distanced big day away from Ryan and Nick. The three of us on our Lake Superior eBirders team sincerely appreciate your support in helping us raise funds for bird conservation throughout Wisconsin.

Morning Flight

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73659713>

Skimmer boat ride

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73666333>

South Cape May Meadows

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73676743>

Cape May Point State Park (including the Cape May Hawkwatch)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73678639>

The Wetlands Institute

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73680961>

Stone Harbor Point

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S73685587>



THANK YOU!

In addition to Erik's 87 species at Cape May, Ryan & Nick combined for 90 species at their two Wisconsin locations, which is about what we expected for this new endeavor. See below for our full species lists. And although we had a blast, we hope we can run our traditional team Big Day next May! Our sincere thanks to you for supporting us and bird conservation in Wisconsin. If you know of anyone who might want to contribute (the Birdathon is now at 97% is fundraising goal) please share our team page [here](#). Happy fall birding to you all!

Ryan & Nick's Combined Species List from Northwestern Wisconsin

1. American Crow
2. American Golden-Plover
3. American Goldfinch
4. American Kestrel
5. American Pipit
6. American Redstart
7. American Robin
8. American White Pelican
9. Baird's Sandpiper
10. Bald Eagle
11. Barred Owl
12. Belted Kingfisher
13. Black-bellied Plover
14. Blackburnian Warbler
15. Black-capped Chickadee
16. Blackpoll Warbler
17. Black-throated Green Warbler
18. Blue Jay
19. Blue-headed Vireo
20. Blue-winged Teal
21. Bonaparte's Gull
22. Broad-winged Hawk
23. Canada Goose
24. Cedar Waxwing
25. Chestnut-sided Warbler
26. Chipping Sparrow
27. Common Loon
28. Common Merganser
29. Common Nighthawk
30. Common Raven
31. Common Tern
32. Common Yellowthroat
33. Cooper's Hawk
34. Dark-eyed Junco
35. Double-crested Cormorant
36. Downy Woodpecker
37. Eastern Phoebe
38. Forster's Tern
39. Golden-crowned Kinglet
40. Gray Catbird
41. Gray-cheeked Thrush
42. Great Blue Heron
43. Green-winged Teal
44. Hairy Woodpecker
45. Hermit Thrush
46. Herring Gull
47. Horned Grebe
48. House Wren
49. Indigo Bunting
50. Least Flycatcher
51. Lincoln's Sparrow
52. Magnolia Warbler
53. Mallard
54. Merlin
55. Mourning Dove
56. Nashville Warbler
57. Northern Flicker
58. Northern Harrier
59. Northern Pintail
60. Ovenbird
61. Palm Warbler
62. Philadelphia Vireo
63. Pileated Woodpecker
64. Pine Siskin
65. Purple Finch
66. Red-breasted Nuthatch
67. Red-eyed Vireo
68. Red-tailed Hawk

69. Ring-billed Gull
70. Rock Pigeon
71. Rose-breasted Grosbeak
72. Ruby-crowned Kinglet
73. Ruby-throated Hummingbird
74. Sanderling
75. Savannah Sparrow
76. Semipalmated Plover
77. Sharp-shinned Hawk
78. Song Sparrow
79. Swainson's Thrush

80. Swamp Sparrow
81. Tennessee Warbler
82. Turkey Vulture
83. White-breasted Nuthatch
84. White-crowned Sparrow
85. White-throated Sparrow
86. Wild Turkey
87. Wilson's Warbler
88. Wood Duck
89. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
90. Yellow-rumped Warbler

Erik's Species List from Cape May, NJ

1. American Oystercatcher
2. Semipalmated Plover
3. Marbled Godwit
4. Red Knot
5. Sanderling
6. Western Sandpiper
7. Ring-billed Gull
8. Lesser Black-backed Gull
9. Black Skimmer
10. Clapper Rail
11. Willet
12. Little Blue Heron
13. Tricolored Heron
14. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
15. Savannah Sparrow
16. Boat-tailed Grackle
17. Wood Duck
18. Blue-winged Teal
19. Gadwall
20. Green-winged Teal
21. Pied-billed Grebe
22. Black-crowned Night-Heron
23. Canada Goose
24. Mute Swan
25. Mallard
26. Northern Mockingbird
27. Black Scoter
28. Semipalmated Sandpiper
29. Snowy Egret
30. Black Vulture

31. Turkey Vulture
32. Peregrine Falcon
33. Tree Swallow
34. House Sparrow
35. Rock Pigeon
36. Mourning Dove
37. Black-bellied Plover
38. Solitary Sandpiper
39. Greater Yellowlegs
40. Laughing Gull
41. Herring Gull
42. Great Black-backed Gull
43. Caspian Tern
44. Common Tern
45. Forster's Tern
46. Royal Tern
47. Double-crested Cormorant
48. Brown Pelican
49. Great Blue Heron
50. Great Egret
51. Green Heron
52. Glossy Ibis
53. Osprey
54. Northern Harrier
55. Bald Eagle
56. Belted Kingfisher
57. Red-bellied Woodpecker
58. Northern Flicker
59. Merlin
60. White-eyed Vireo

61. Red-eyed Vireo
62. Blue Jay
63. American Crow
64. Fish Crow
65. Carolina Chickadee
66. Purple Martin
67. Barn Swallow
68. Red-breasted Nuthatch
69. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
70. Carolina Wren
71. European Starling
72. Gray Catbird
73. American Robin
74. Cedar Waxwing

75. Bobolink
76. Red-winged Blackbird
77. Northern Waterthrush
78. Common Yellowthroat
79. American Redstart
80. Cape May Warbler
81. Northern Parula
82. Yellow Warbler
83. Blackpoll Warbler
84. Palm Warbler
85. Northern Cardinal
86. Blue Grosbeak
87. Indigo Bunting



Thank you for supporting the Lake Superior eBirders!
Lincoln's Sparrow @Ryan Brady