

VCE Birdathon – Connecticut River Valley, Bradford to Norwich

20 May 2014, 5:00 am–7:30 pm (plus owling)

~2 miles by foot, ~15 miles by kayak and canoe

**Team: Sarah Carline, Steve Faccio, Spencer Hardy, Susan Hindinger, Kent McFarland,
Melissa MacKenzie, Chris Rimmer, Judith Scarl, Sara Zahendra**

Canada Goose	Willow Flycatcher	Blackburnian Warbler
Wood Duck	Least Flycatcher	Yellow Warbler
Mallard	Eastern Phoebe	Chestnut-sided Warbler
Hooded Merganser	Great Crested Flycatcher	Blackpoll Warbler
Common Merganser	Eastern Kingbird	Black-throated Blue Warbler
Ruffed Grouse	Blue-headed Vireo	Pine Warbler
Wild Turkey	Warbling Vireo	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Common Loon	Red-eyed Vireo	Blk-throated Green Warbler
Double-crested Cormorant	Blue Jay	Canada Warbler
Great Blue Heron	American Crow	Wilson's Warbler
Green Heron	Common Raven	Eastern Towhee
Turkey Vulture	No. Rough-winged Swallow	Chipping Sparrow
Osprey	Tree Swallow	Savannah Sparrow
Cooper's Hawk	Bank Swallow	Song Sparrow
Bald Eagle	Barn Swallow	Swamp Sparrow
Broad-winged Hawk	Cliff Swallow	White-throated Sparrow
Red-tailed Hawk	Black-capped Chickadee	White-crowned Sparrow
Virginia Rail	Tufted Titmouse	Dark-eyed Junco
Wilson's Snipe	White-breasted Nuthatch	Scarlet Tanager
American Woodcock	House Wren	Northern Cardinal
Semipalmated Plover	Winter Wren	Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Killdeer	Carolina Wren	Indigo Bunting
Spotted Sandpiper	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Bobolink
Solitary Sandpiper	Eastern Bluebird	Red-winged Blackbird
Greater Yellowlegs	Veery	Eastern Meadowlark
Lesser Yellowlegs	Hermit Thrush	Common Grackle
Least Sandpiper	Wood Thrush	Brown-headed Cowbird
Rock Pigeon	American Robin	Orchard Oriole
Mourning Dove	Gray Catbird	Baltimore Oriole
Barred Owl	Brown Thrasher	House Finch
Chimney Swift	European Starling	Purple Finch
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Cedar Waxwing	American Goldfinch
Belted Kingfisher	Ovenbird	House Sparrow
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Louisiana Waterthrush	
Downy Woodpecker	Northern Waterthrush	Total: 117 species
Hairy Woodpecker	Black-and-white Warbler	
Northern Flicker	Tennessee Warbler	
Pileated Woodpecker	Nashville Warbler	
American Kestrel	Common Yellowthroat	
Merlin	American Redstart	
Peregrine Falcon	Northern Parula	
Alder Flycatcher	Magnolia Warbler	

Brief Birdathon Narrative: The VCE team opted for our customary low-carbon Birdathon this spring, but swapped hiking boots and mountain bikes for water shoes and kayaks/canoes. This all but quashed the possibility of headlining our master list with Bicknell's Thrush, but promised some aquatic birds that would prove elusive on a strictly terrestrial route. We were encouraged to awake to clear and cool conditions, and moderately low water on the Connecticut River, raising hopes for migrant shorebirds on exposed flats. Nine of us convened at Judith's house in downtown Fairlee at 5:30 am, with several species already under our belt. The first was a Barred Owl calling outside Chris' bedroom window in Norwich at 4:00, the second an American Woodcock 'peenting' at the Route 5 Coop fields. Spencer and Chris met at the Ompompanoosuc River flats at 5 am, where shorebirds visible through the rising mist included Semipalmated Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs and Least Sandpiper. Checking Stevens Road on our way north, we heard the sweet song of an Eastern Meadowlark and found an American Kestrel perched on a utility wire. We were off to a solid start.

From Fairlee, we beelined up to Bradford's well-known birding spot called 'Hooker Siding' at the end of Depot Street. Walking the RR tracks netted us two dozen or more new species, including Virginia Rail, Solitary Sandpiper, Least and Willow Flycatcher, a pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Northern Waterthrush, Magnolia and Wilson's warbler, the day's only White-crowned Sparrow (singing), and show-stopping looks at an Orchard Oriole pair. Mist was lying heavy along the floodplain, and temperatures cool. We headed from the Depot to the North Woods Diner for a restorative breakfast. Rimmer must have downed too much coffee, because his vehicle managed to separate from the others en route to a post-breakfast hike in the uplands forests of Wright's Mountain. Without cell service, we went our separate ways. Most of the crew tallied birds like Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, Winter Wren, Northern Parula and Purple Finch. Chris, Spencer and Sara took advantage of their navigational blunder to check Lake Morey, finding two Common Loons and a pocket of boreal migrants that included singing Nashville and Canada warblers. We reconvened ~9:30 am at the Fairlee Diner, where we almost gave up on the resident cliff-nesting Peregrine Falcons, but finally glimpsed an adult in a scorching dive on a passing Red-tailed Hawk. We also picked up Common Raven here. Our list stood at 98 species.

Crossing the Connecticut River to Orford, we launched our armada of 7 kayaks and a canoe, hitting the water at 10:30 am. Immediately we heard a Merlin screeching from a large white pine across the river and found its nest. Species #100 was a Pine Warbler singing nearby. The day had a September feel, with low humidity, bright sun and northerly winds, which combined with a steady current to push us downriver. We jumped out at several spots, paddled into oxbows and backwaters, listened carefully as we passed through a variety of habitats. New species piled up slowly, but included Common Merganser, singing Brown Thrashers and a Rufous-sided Towhee. Rumbblings of hunger stopped us at the Beddel Bridge boat launch in North Thetford at ~1:30 pm, where the day's only Pileated Woodpecker and Cooper's Hawk appeared. Our list stood at a respectable 108 species. We decided to gun for 115, with an outside chance at 120. Lunch rejuvenated us, and the goal seemed within reach.

New birds proved much more challenging to come by during our post-lunch paddling. A improvised detour by Chris up Grant Brook yielded 5 shorebirds in view at once on a small mud flat, two of which (Killdeer and Lesser yellowlegs) were new for the day. He managed to swamp his kayak trying to navigate up a small (and very shallow) rapids – too bad no one was there for photodocumentation, and that the weather was benign! Back on the main river, Osprey and Bald Eagle made appearances. We strained to hear a Yellow-throated Vireo or Eastern Wood-Pewee, but both eluded us. A Louisiana Waterthrush sang from the mouth of a small brook across from Kendall Station. We pulled into our take-out spot at the Ompompanoosuc River access ~6:00 pm, hoping to find new shorebirds on the flats, but we had to settle for Cliff Swallows nesting under the I-91 bridge. Chris ran up to Campbell Flats to find the nesting Eastern Bluebirds. Back to Orford in Spencer's van to retrieve our vehicles, then to Ramunto's for well-deserved pizza. Chris drove the back roads of Norwich after dark, searching in vain for a winnowing Wilson's Snipe or calling Whip-poor-will. Back at his house in Strafford, Steve had a snipe, upping our final tally to 117 species.

As always, some glaring misses occurred – among them Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, pewee – but none of us felt the least bit cheated. We spent a full day outdoors, absorbed and delivered good-natured ribbing in abundance, laughed a lot, saw some great birds, and paddled 15 miles on one of New England's signature rivers.