

THE NEIL BENNETT AUTUMN BIRDING CLASSIC:

by Dan McAskill

Crystal clear skies, a moon nearly full, warm temperatures (around 5 degrees Celsius), and no wind - what more could owlers wish for at 3:30 am on September 30th in Prince Edward Island? The answer is of course, owls that will respond to the playback of recorded owl songs. Fortunately, they too were willing to respond and the 7th Autumn Birding Classic was off to a great start with Barred Owl, Great Horned Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl responding to the recorded owl songs played in the area between Mount Albion and Dromore. In addition to the three species of owls, an American Bittern responded to the songs played by the team of Society birders, namely, Ray Cooke, Michelle Johnston, Eric Marcum, and Dan McAskill. No such luck was found with rail songs and the Long-eared Owl recording.



The team then team drove to East Point, arriving shortly after dawn. Visibility was excellent as the sun rose in the clear skies and bathed the relatively calm waters with light. Northern Gannets crossed the rising sun and flocks of eider and scoter were seen near the point. The highlights came quickly with a Parasitic Jaeger winging northward around the point on its strongly curved wings. Then an alcid came flying in and landed revealing the triangular cheek pattern of an Atlantic Puffin before quickly diving and disappearing from sight. Amidst the eider and scoter, a Harlequin Duck was found. Then a relatively large hawk appeared. It was quickly joined by two others and they flew offshore towards Cape Breton. The body and tail appeared long and the wings appeared slightly dihedral (V shaped),

somewhat like a harrier but also reminiscent of a buteo (broad winged hawks). It took some homework and Ray's excellent memory to solve this sighting. Out came a copy of "Hawks in Flight" and it verified the solution - this is the description of the flight of Swainson's Hawks. The group sighting also matches a number of recent groups of Swainson's reported in Cape Breton. This is the first autumn sighting on the Island for this species.

From East Point, the team moved westward along the north shore road (Highway 16) stopping at a small roadside burrow pit wetland and woods, East Lake and the adjacent shore, North Lake, and a number of field, pond, and woodland sites between there and Charlottetown. Ray's sharp eyes detected an Orange-crowned Warbler flitting between a poplar at the burrow pit to adjacent white spruce and a first year Lesser Black-backed Gull at North Lake. By noon, 59 species had been seen. Eric had a meeting but the rest of the team continued to Officer's Pond, Donaldston, and Blooming Point. Wood Duck, teal, Mallard, were picked up en-route. Ray MacDonald and Dorothy Johnston, husband and mother respectively to Michelle, hosted the team to lunch as they overlooked Tracadie Harbour. During this brief stop, Common Loon and White-winged Crossbills were added to the growing list. Eric rejoined the team at 2 pm and the team headed out the Brackley Point Road to Covehead. The marsh flats and harbour were both quite productive with, among others, Baird's, Pectoral, and White-rumped Sandpipers being added to the list.

The ponds in the eastern end of the Park yielded Lesser and Greater Scaup, Redhead, and other waterfowl to bring the list to 84 species. By days end, a respectable total of 87 species were seen. Besides the birds noted above, the following species were seen during the day. Red-throated Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Cormorant, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Canada Geese, Green-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Common Eider, Black Scoter, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Bald Eagle (2 adults), Northern Harrier (2), Sharp-shinned Hawk (2), Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin, Bonaparte's Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, Iceland Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Caspian Tern, Common Tern, Black Guillemot, Rock Dove, Mourning Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Blue Jay, American Crow, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American