

VCE Birdathon – Connecticut River Valley, Norwich to Bradford
19 May 2010, 5:00 am–6:30 pm (plus owling)
~2 miles by foot, ~12 miles by kayak and canoe
Team: Steve Faccio, Pat Johnson, Kent McFarland, Roz Renfrew,
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Brief Birdathon Narrative: The VCE team again opted for a low-carbon Birdathon this spring, but swapped hiking boots and mountain bikes for rubber boots and kayaks/canoes. This stifled the likelihood 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 dry conditions, despite a weather forecast promising intermittent rain and cool winds. Seven of us convened on the north end of Lake Morey shortly after 5:00 am, with several species already under our belt. The first was a Barred Owl calling outside Chris' bedroom window in Norwich at 2:30, the second a Wilson's Snipe winnowing over Kent's house in Woodstock at 4:00, the third an Ovenbird giving its chaotic flight song in Chris' woods at 4:15.

Scans of Lake Morey from several vantage points produced 5 Common Loons (one yodeling), a male Common Merganser, a Double-crested Cormorant, and the day's only Great Blue Herons (a pair in flight overhead). Walking up and down the lakeshore road produced a good variety of landbirds, including Alder Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Northern Parula, and Canada Warbler, plus our day's only Winter Wren, Field Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. A quick stop on the Lake Morey Resort golf course failed to yield any hoped-for transient boreal warblers (e.g., Tennessee, Cape May, Bay-breasted) in the Norway spruces, but did net us an early Mourning Warbler. With low cloud cover and cool temperatures creating good fall-out conditions, we decided to zip over to Lake Fairlee, which didn't produce much, though Hooded Merganser and Blue-headed Vireo were both new.

At 7:30 am, with steady drizzle underway, we headed straight to the Fairlee Diner, where we were lucky to witness a prey delivery by the resident cliff-nesting Peregrine Falcons and heard the day's only Indigo Bunting singing near the parking lot. Fortified and warmed by food, coffee and dry heat, we debated whether to launch our canoes and kayaks as planned, or wait out the rain, by now steady and moderate. We chose the latter course and headed north up Route 5 to Bradford, with several stops along the way, ending at a well-known birding spot called 'Hooker Siding' at the end of Depot Street. This was by far our most productive spot of the day – not only did we catch a nice break in the rain, but we picked up a dozen or more new species, including transients like Solitary Sandpiper, Northern Waterthrush and 2 singing Blackpoll Warblers. Other highlights included an unexpected Blue-winged Teal pair, Green Heron, great looks at a Virginia Rail, Least and Willow Flycatcher, and all 5 swallow species.

Now pushing 10:30 am and rain varying from light to moderate, we had no choice but to hit the water. We drove back down to Fairlee and crossed the Connecticut River to Orford, where we launched our armada of 5 kayaks and a canoe. Northerly winds and current pushed us downriver, and we jumped out at several spots, soon adding both Ring-billed and Herring Gull, Wild Turkeys, Savannah Sparrow and Bobolink to our list. One of the day's most memorable sights was the active Bald Eagle nest in a towering white pine leaning out over the river in Orford. At one point during the 15 minutes we watched from the Vermont bank, both adults simultaneously visited the nest, which held two well-feathered eaglets. Just below this our only American Kestrel of the day appeared. We paddled on, beginning to feel the rumblings of hunger, knowing that Melis had lunch awaiting at the Beddel Bridge boat launch in North Thetford. We arrived there just before 2:00 pm, with a respectable master list of 103 species. Hearty sandwiches, chips and homemade cookies were much-appreciated by all – we were chilly and wet, a bit weary, but energized after a productive morning of walking and paddling.

New birds proved much more challenging to come by during our post-lunch paddling, though slightly improved weather was welcome. Bird vocal activity picked up, but we didn't hear any new species, managing to add only Osprey and Merlin on the river itself, before taking out in Lyme at 5:30 pm. Here, however, we happened upon 3 new species: Louisiana Waterthrush, White-crowned Sparrow, and Evening Grosbeak. A quick stop at Ledyard Bridge didn't produce the Orchard Orioles that have been seen there regularly this spring, but we added our final species, Eastern Bluebird, at the active nest box in Hillside Cemetery near Chris' house in Norwich.

As always, some glaring misses occurred - among them Broad-winged Hawk, American Woodcock (Kent and Chris both visited tried and true display spots after dark, but came up empty), Golden-crowned Kinglet (a hard bird to find anywhere this spring), Nashville Warbler, Purple Finch - but we were all satisfied with our final tally of 109 species. A fine day of birding was followed by a lasagna and cheesecake spread at Chris' house with family and VCE Board members, and the wood stove absorbing the chill that had seeped into our paddle-weary team.