



MAGEE MARSH & KIRTLAND'S WARBLER - May 15-22, 2017

Trip Report by Adrian Binns

Leaders: Adrian Binns & Chris Brown

Day 1 / May 15 - Ohio: Pearson Metropark

Chris and I picked up the early arrivals, Ellen, Elaine and Rochana from Detroit and began our birding mid-afternoon at the beautiful Pearson Metropark in Oregon. The previous day the park had been hopping with activity and the added bonus of several Connecticut Warbler. I returned to Detroit to pick up the later arrivals while Chris and the ladies wandered the trails. It was relatively quiet with Nashville, Black-and-white, two Magnolia and a Yellow Warbler seen and heard Gray-cheeked Thrush and Red-eyed Vireo heard. The woodpecker family was well represented with Yellow-shafted Flicker, Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Hairy at its nest hole.

After picking up Lou, Karen, Doug and Jim, we drove straight to Pearson and the whole group spent an hour with a few new species. In the car park Blackburnian and Northern Parula were seen in the maple trees while three Broad-winged Hawks circled overhead and a Bald Eagle flew by.

The Window on Wildlife had a number of White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, Blue Jays, Cardinals, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Downy Woodpecker coming to the feeders and water feature and joined by Eastern Chipmunk, Eastern Fox Squirrel. A female Ruby-throated Hummingbird perched on various branches between forays to the garden flowers and a Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks paid a visit.

Along the Black Swamp Trail we enjoyed a fine showing of Veery, Wood and Swainson's Thrush at a shallow depression of water where between sips of water they were searching for insects amongst the leaf litter. Both Black-throated Blue Warbler and Canada Warbler were attracted to the activity and could be seen actively feeding a few feet off the ground.

Day 2 / May 16 - Ohio: BSBO; Magee Marsh Nature Center; Estuary Trail; Boardwalk

We spend most of today visiting various locations along the Magee Marsh road. beginning at Black Swamp Bird Observatory with the first of four Mourning Warblers, good looks at a Wilson's Warbler, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Towhee and Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Around the Nature Center we enjoyed the comings and goings of Barn Swallows and Purple Martin to their nest sites. There was a good splattering of warblers with Prothonotary, Northern Paula, Common Yellowthroat and another Mourning all seen well. One oak tree held Blackburnian, Magnolia and a Tennessee along with a Philadelphia Vireo.

We had a productive walk along the Estuary Trail beginning with a couple of Chestnut-sided and half a dozen Bay-breasted Warblers in the same tree. The latter included several females, which to date there had been few. Swainson's Thrush and a Red-headed Woodpecker both showed well. Warbling Vireos were

common along the walk and it gave us a chance to compare them with the similar looking Philadelphia we saw early. We found both cuckoos in quick succession, first a Yellow-billed perched low near the waters edge followed by an actively foraging Black-billed. Along the edge of Lake Erie the calm waters attracted a Black-bellied Plover in full breeding plumage and Common Tern.

Following lunch we stopped at the pool, courtesy of recent rains, where amongst hundreds of Dunlin, and a score of Semipalmated Plovers we located a White-rumped Sandpiper.

By mid afternoon the crowds thin out and we spent almost four hours on the boardwalk. Though warblers with spread out it was nice to see numbers of American Redstart, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted, Black-and-white and Wilson's. There would be a few Blackpoll, Black-throated Green and Black-throated Blue and one Palm and Yellow-rumped bringing our total warbler species for the day to 19.

Flycatchers were well represented with several Eastern Wood Pewees and Eastern Kingbirds, a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher and a heard Alder Flycatcher. Baltimore Orioles were everywhere and a Scarlet Tanager briefly showed itself. At the Big Loop a Common Nighthawk was found roosting high up in a cottonwood and an American Woodcock put on a wonderful show, rocking back and forth as it slowly walked prodding into the soft soil with its long bill as it went. Our day ended as it began with a Mourning Warbler, but this time giving us our best views.

Day 3 / May 17 - Ohio: Metzger Marsh; Magee Marsh Boardwalk

Following a night of southerly winds we eagerly anticipated a good showing of migrants. The winds were strong and increased to 20 mph as the day progressed.

We began at Metzger Marsh with Common Gallinule and Pied-billed Grebe. The high water levels eliminated any chance for shorebirds! Getting out of the van at the Woodlot we were greeted by a singing male Prothonotary only feet away! A multitude of biting flies coming from the marsh, courtesy of the southerly winds, did not make it very enjoyable but we did manage to find 15 species - Blackpoll, Bay-breasted, Black-throated Blue, Tennessee, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Blackburnian, Yellow, Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, Northern Parula, Black-and-white, and Northern Waterthrush - most being high up in the trees.

We broke up the remainder of the day with two sessions at the Magee Marsh Boardwalk. A pair of Sandhill Cranes were feeding in the marsh opposite the first Bald Eagle nest. Since they are not often seen, not to mention so close, it was not surprising that it drew a small crowd. It was amusing that it was next to a sign that read Emergency Stopping Only!

Beginning at the west end of the boardwalk a female Mourning Warbler showed briefly. It would be a good day for seeing females with Black-throated Blue, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Black-and white and Canada all seen. Finally they had arrived! A pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were attending to the finishing touches of their nest. Blackburnian's are real stunners; Mourning's are often elusive skulkers; and Canada's ones we don't get to see too often, so it was nice to be able to spend time with all of these. At the platform we were able to look down on Black-throated Green, Northern Parula, Black-and-white and Palm giving us a completely different perspective.

Flycatchers and vireos continued in small numbers, with Acadian seen and both Willow and Alder identified by call. Red-eyed Vireos when not singing gleaned insects from the leaves. Swainson's was the only thrush we found today, and there were multiple sightings. A very pale fronted Red-breasted Nuthatch looked much like a White-breasted until one looked at the head pattern and a brilliant male Scarlet Tanager lit up the green leaves as it perched on various branches around the Little Loop.

The afternoon session along the east end of the boardwalk was most productive. It is my favourite time of day, the temperature drops, the crowds thin out and I find the birds are often lower. Concentrating on the north side of the Big Loop, most of four hours was spent along a short section by the bridge and channel! Most of the birds were close and with patience with all saw the female Canada feeding in a shrub between views of Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, American Redstart, Black-throated Green, Blackpoll and Common Yellowthroat that visited! A Black-billed Cuckoo was also seen in that shrub and the end of the afternoon showed very well as did a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Amazingly a Blackburnian that we could almost touch took a back seat as the cuckoo was being seen! Along the creek there was yet another Mourning and we got a wonderful look at Tennessee and Prothonotary. Doug was able to spend time with a point blank Northern Parula and get only Philadelphia Vireo of the day. An Ovenbird showed briefly but I could get everyone onto it as it vanished into the underbrush. That gave us 19 warbler species for the day, but more importantly we got extraordinary looks at most of them.

After dinner Rochana, Lew and Karen joined Chris and I in a search for rails and bitterns at Pearson North. In spite of a very pleasant evening we never heard a peep from any of them, only the sound of bullfrogs croaking and a woodcock calling.

Day 4 / May 18 - Ohio: Pipe Creek; Harder Farm; Magee Marsh Boardwalk; Maumee Bay SP Boardwalk

We began the day walking through the woodlot at Pipe Creek where Swainson's Thrush, Veery and a Spotted Sandpiper were feeding on the pathway. Checking the shrubs, in particular low for any Connecticut, we came across a handful of warblers - Bay-breasted, Tennessee, Blackburnian, Common Yellowthroat along with Red-eyed Vireo and Indigo Bunting - doing their best to keep out of the wind. A Northern Waterthrush and Canada were heard with a male of the latter seen along the first dike.

The impoundments were fairly quiet with only a pair of Trumpeter Swans and a male Ring-necked Duck on them. Along the edge Willow Flycatcher perched low to stay out of the wind, a Savannah Sparrow was feeding along the grassy dike path and on two occasions we saw Sora in flight, a very slow flight I may add, cross low over the water from the edge of dike and into the reeds. Overhead Bank Swallow and Caspian Tern passed by and all along the rocky outer edge of the impoundments we encountered many water snakes, mating mating!

The strong winds blowing through the Harder Farm grasslands proved too much for most of our sought after species. Of the grassland birds we were hoping for we only saw Eastern Meadowlark and Field Sparrow, while we did considerably better with raptors - Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered, Red-tailed and Broad-winged Hawk.

After lunch we proceeded to Magee Marsh with one stop along the way when Chris spotted Black-bellied Plovers in a field. They were joined by Dunlin and Semipalmated Plovers and on the opposite side of the road we watched a Peregrine eating a fresh kill - possibly one of those shorebirds.

On the Magee Boardwalk the winds continued to keep the birds low providing excellent views once again. American Redstarts were the most numerous followed by a few Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided and Magnolia. We have done exceedingly well with sightings of Mourning Warbler, and it continued with a male enthralling us as it moved about a short section of fallen tree trunks. A Gray-cheeked Thrush gave our group short glimpses before we were called to see the Mourning Warbler. A male Canada finally faced us so we could all see its neckless. Flycatchers were well represented with several Yellow-bellied showing well. Much to Jim's relief he got to photograph a very cooperative Philadelphia Vireo. A late afternoon storm moved through and cut our session short.

The day ended unexpectedly when having seen the Eastern Screech Owls on the Maumee Boardwalk, an intermediate morph at the nest box and the red morph close by in a tree, we were shown a photo of a leucistic bird someone had just seen. The kind gentlemen offered to take us to the area on the boardwalk where he had just seen it and it was not long before we located it. After looking it over and watching its behaviour we concluded that it was a leucistic Gray Catbird.

Day 5 / May 19 - Ohio: Oak Openings; Magee Marsh Boardwalk

A front came through in the night from the north dropping the temperatures by 25 degrees! We had an excellent morning at Oak Openings beginning with a number of sparrow species - Grasshopper, Savannah, Lark and Henslow's - the latter singing from deep in grasses and only seen in flight.

There was a wonderful variety of breeders including Eastern Towhee, Yellow-throated Vireo, Indigo Bunting, Orchard Oriole, Blue-winged Warbler and Summer Tanagers all in the process of pairing up, while Eastern Bluebirds and Red-headed Woodpeckers already had nest sites established.

At the Window on Wildlife a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak was joined by common backyard birds, American Goldfinch, Tufted Titmouse, Black-capped Chickadee and Red-bellied Woodpecker. We never had to leave the car park to both hear and see Pine and Hooded Warbler!

Along Tornado Alley at the bridge we had good views of a singing Canada Warbler and a courting pair of Yellow-throated Vireos. A short distance along we soon picked up White-eyed Vireo, Great Crested Flycatcher and a female Summer Tanager foraging for nesting material. Along the edge of the open field an Alder Flycatcher was calling at the same time a Yellow-breasted Chat was singing up a storm. We were also lucky to witness the chats aerial flight while singing, which consisted of a slow descending flutter as its pumped its tail and wings always being above horizontal. What a finish to a wonderful morning!

There would be afternoon stops at BSBO and Magee Marsh Bird Center for various purchases and it was here that we were alerted that a 'king heron' was being seen along the causeway. Seeing the small gathering of people there it was obvious that the person meant King Rail. Indeed there was one hunkered down and calling on the far side of the channel.

On the boardwalk the cooler temperatures and reduced numbers of birds likely accounted for fewer birders. The big news was that a Connecticut Warbler had been seen. We soon relocated it and after it kept us all on our toes by eluding us at regular intervals we were all able to get satisfactory looks as it walked between, under and over logs, branches, brush, and through the herbaceous ground layer. That would bring our total of warblers for the day to 21. Another highlight was watching a male Prothonotary Warbler making numerous trips to pick up leaf litter and take it to his nest hole.

Day 6 / May 20 - Michigan: Embury Rd; Gregory SGA; Nelsville Boardwalk; Houghton Lake; Grayling

We began the day in Michigan north west of Ann Arbor walking a serene section of undulating woods looking for Cerulean Warbler. There would be excellent looks at a calling Acadian Flycatcher and Blue-winged Warbler while Mourning, Black-throated Green and Chestnut-sided were only heard along with Hermit and Swainson's Thrush. On either side of the road we had Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak singing, which allowed us to compare the two similar sounding vocalizations - rougher and broken into parts versus sweeter and smoother respectively. After 40 minutes of walking we heard and located a Cerulean Warbler in the upper canopy. It was always on the move occasionally dropping lower and we were all able to get the field marks and clearly see the band across the upper breast. It was joined by a female which opted to stay high up!

Moving into grasslands at the Gregory State Game Area we were soon watching Bobolinks displaying, a Northern Harrier cruising low of the fields and a pair of Sandhill Cranes flying by. Savannah Sparrows took a back seat to the Henslow's Sparrow which worked its way up a bare perennial singing its heart out.

By early afternoon we were in the vicinity of Houghton Lake at the Nelsville Boardwalk where Sedge Wren and Swamp Sparrow obliged us with song but poor views. A pair of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, an Eastern Towhee and Nashville Warbler showed well but there was no sign of a Golden-winged Warbler. Lew pointed out a Fringed Polygala also known as Bird-on-the-Wing *Polygala uniflora* a member of the milkwort family with a beautiful orchid-looking flower, Chris found a Dreamy Duskywing and a few White-faced Meadowhawks were flying about.

Once amongst Jack Pines we found suitable habitat for Kirtland's Warbler and had the most wonderful experience watching a male foraging low amongst 5-10 foot pines. He carefully worked his way from one to the next, tail wagging, gleaning insects as he went, occasionally stretching his neck for one higher and even fluttering to catch one on an outer bough. Eventually he broke out in song and being close, it was loud! A couple of Nashville were also around though never showed that well. The expected rain began just as we were leaving ending another excellent day.

Day 7 / May 21 - Michigan: Wakely Lake; Hartwick Pines; Nelsville Boardwalk; Houghton Lake Flats; Houghton Lake Sewer Authority; Nayanquing Point SWA

The expected morning heavy rain never materialized though it was foggy. A Vesper Sparrow was singing up a storm in the vacant lot beside the hotel and a Red-headed Woodpecker alighted on a snag. At the playing fields on the edge of town an Osprey sitting in its nest and eight Wild Turkeys.

At Wakely Lake we searched for Common Loon but only came up with Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers on the water. A Spotted Sandpiper showed well bobbing as it walked on a narrow stripe of floating vegetation. The pristine mixed deciduous-evergreen forest we walked through to the lake was alive with singing Ovenbirds, Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow-rumped Warblers, calling Great Horned Owl, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated and Hairy Woodpecker, along with drumming Ruffed Grouse.

The feeders at Hartwick Pines State Park held a small number of Evening and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks with Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch and Black-throated Green close by. A deluge of rain put an end to our birding there, so we began the journey south.

Around Houghton Lake we enjoyed a dozen Black Terns flying back and forth over the Flats; multiple ducks species - Redhead, Northern Shoveler, Bufflehead, American Wigeon, Greater and Lesser Scaup - scoped from the road at the Sewer Authority, and, a return to the Nelsville Boardwalk successfully seeing Golden-winged Warbler, our 31st warbler of the trip!

Following lunch we spent most of the remainder of the afternoon at Nayanquing Point where reeds and brush had been cut back making the viewing of the marsh on the edge of Lake Huron excellent. A shallow pool in a muddy field held several dozen Caspian Tern and hundreds of Dunlin. Small flocks of Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstones came and went, and amongst the Dunlin a few Black-bellied Plovers a Red Knot and peeps, mainly Semipalmated and Least with a couple of White-rumped.

From the platform tower we got a wonderful view of the surrounding marsh with distant Sandhill Cranes, a Forster's Tern perched on a post and got views of a very cooperative Virginia Rail wandering about the edge of the vegetation below us! A walk down the main impoundment dike track yielded Yellow-headed Blackbird, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, American Coot, Mute Swan, Marsh Wren and Swamp Sparrow, as well as several calling American and Least Bitterns - a fitting end to a tremendous week tour of NW Ohio and Michigan!