

Birdathon 2020 – Local Birding at its Best!

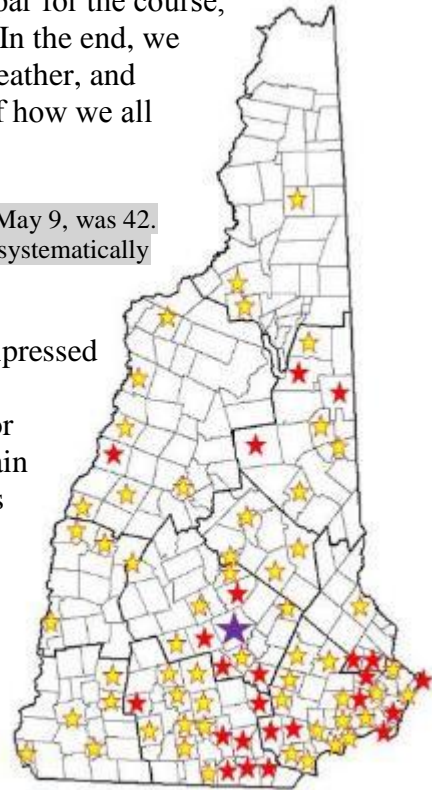
By Pam Hunt

Greetings Birdathon Participant!

Given the weather outside my (home) office window today (5/27/20), it's a little hard to believe that on Birdathon weekend – May 9 and 10 – we had record low temps*, up to a foot of snow, and winds gusting almost to 50 miles per hour. For veterans of New Hampshire Audubon's annual "Backyard Winter Bird Survey" these conditions were par for the course, but the BWBS is held in February – not the first third of May! In the end, we managed to make it through Birdathon Weekend despite the weather, and with all the data now in hand I'm able to provide a summary of how we all did.

* For the record, the HIGH temperature recorded in Concord on Saturday, May 9, was 42. This is the LOWEST high for the date in the 150 years that data have been systematically collected!

Over 160 people (not including associated family members) expressed interest in Birdathon this year, which is exceptional given the short notice. On behalf of NH Audubon I'd like to thank you for your participation. We are currently living in crazy and uncertain times, but it was great to see so many comments in your emails about how much fun you had, and it's obvious that we all benefit from having birds in our lives. Of all those potential participants, I received species lists from 124, the distribution of whom is shown on the map to the right. On this map, towns with only a single list are shown in yellow, those with 2-6 lists in red, and Concord – well ahead of the pack with 14 – is in purple.



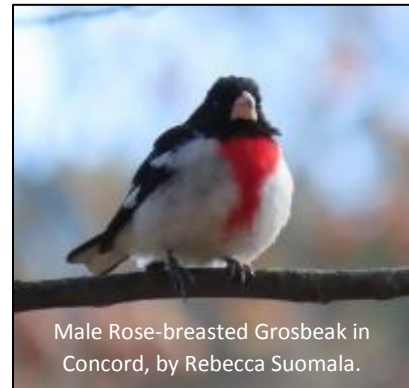
The theme of Birdathon 2020 was of course "local birding," and participants were discouraged from wandering too far from home. Only a handful actually left their home (or adjacent) town, and at least 55 never even left their yards. With local birding as the **theme**, the **goal** of Birdathon 2020 was to see how many species we could collectively find in the state of New Hampshire in a single weekend and raise funds for NH Audubon's programs to protect wildlife. So how did all of us do in the end?

Drum roll please....

We reported 161 species between Saturday and Sunday – and this doesn't count a few species reported elsewhere by people who had not explicitly signed up for Birdathon. For those of you who primarily enjoy the birds you see in your yards, this is a remarkable number, while for those who regularly do things like "Big Days" (a 24 hour birding marathon to see as many species as possible) it's probably about par for the course. The record-holding Big Day for New Hampshire was on May 27, 1997, and tallied 170 species. This total was recorded by a team of four people

in a car driving from Concord to Coos County, to the coast, and back to Concord. For this year's Birdathon we had no idea what we'd get with over 120 parties scattered across the state – and now we know. Given some of the things we missed, I suspect breaking 170 is quite possible, and may be something to look forward to in 2021!

Of those 161 species, a handful were reported by over 100 participants. As one might expect, these were the common backyard birds like Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay, American Robin, and Northern Cardinal. Less common, but still widely reported were many of the colorful migrants that had only just begun to return to New Hampshire for the summer. Having only recently returned from warmer climes, species like Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Baltimore Orioles were probably caught a little off guard by the cold and snow, and as a result many ended up visiting feeders – much to the enjoyment of many observers.

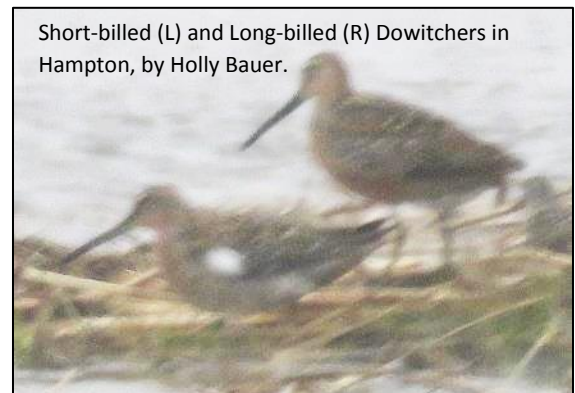


Male Rose-breasted Grosbeak in Concord, by Rebecca Suomala.

At the other extreme, 26 species were reported only once, with over half of these from Great Bay or the coast. Three species stand out by not having been on the original Google checklist: Horned Lark and Common Gallinule in Concord and a Long-billed Dowitcher in Hampton. The last of these is the most remarkable, since Long-billed Dowitchers are extremely rare visitors to the coast in the fall, and almost unheard of in spring. In fact, the Hampton bird may be only the third spring record ever for New Hampshire, and may very well have been grounded by the miserable weather. As observer Holly Bauer commented:

“who knew I'd be taking shorebird photos during a snow storm?” The photo she DID take is clearly not destined for the cover of “National Geographic,” but shows diagnostic features including more rufous underparts, white feather edgings, and something of a hunched appearance to the back. Other coastal birds reported only once were a handful of other shorebirds and wintering ocean species such as scooters. Perhaps the waterfowl at least felt at home in the weather!

Notable for their *absence* along the coast were both Great and Snowy Egrets, which are certainly around in small numbers in early May, but given the weather, restricted coastal access, and a limited number of coastal participants, perhaps it's not as surprising that we failed to tally those species.



Short-billed (L) and Long-billed (R) Dowitchers in Hampton, by Holly Bauer.

Farther inland, highlights included the aforementioned Horned Larks at the Concord Airport, which is only one of two places in the state where this declining species is now known to nest (the other being the Pease Airport in Portsmouth). The Common Gallinule, also in Concord, no longer breeds in the state at all, but the bird in question was one of several found across the state in early May, suggesting a larger than usual movement of this species to the north of its typical range. Other noteworthy “solo” birds were a Northern Goshawk in Hancock, Eastern Screech-

Owl in Henniker, and Rusty Blackbird in Kingston, but one more species stands out because it was *not* more widely-reported: Scarlet Tanager.

In fact, I didn't think *anyone* had found a tanager until one of the last lists arrived on the Wednesday after Birdathon weekend. Cathy Box from New Durham gets the somewhat unlikely accolade of saving Birdathon 2020 from missing this colorful and widespread species. She saw it on Sunday, when it was decidedly NOT snowing, but this lonely tanager provides the perfect



opportunity to discuss a bit of history involving tanagers and unseasonable weather in New Hampshire. In late May of 1974, much of northern New England experienced several days of atypically cold and wet weather, and multiple observers soon began noticing Scarlet Tanagers (and smaller numbers of other species) along roadsides, many of them deceased. Biologists speculated that the weather resulted in less activity by many forest insects, and that birds sought out warmer microclimates in order to find alternate food such as ants and earthworms, which in turn might have been made more available by the rain. Enough tanagers died during this period that there was a noticeable drop in local populations for 2-3 years. Thankfully, 2020's poor

weather occurred well in advance of peak migration for many species, although during Birdathon there were reports of dozens of Hermit Thrushes along roadsides in the Connecticut River valley where there was an accumulation of snow.

A full listing of species reported during Birdathon is at the end of this summary, but to close I thought it worthwhile to provide some highlights from individual participants. Birdathon is also about people after all, and our enjoyment of birds (no matter the weather!). Without a doubt, top honors go to NH Audubon's Phil Brown for finding 92 species in Hancock on Saturday. Not only did he accomplish this on the worse of the two days, but he also did it entirely on foot and bicycle (he even got a flat tire near the end). The next day, Becky Suomala and Zeke Cornell also found 92 species in Concord, but they had slightly better weather and used a car. It's pretty likely Phil could have broken 100 under better conditions. In addition to Becky and Zeke, a few other folks had good success in car-based local birding, usually restricted to either a town or within a five-mile radius of their homes. Two deserve "runner-up" status for finding at least 80 species: Kurk Dorsey with 85 species in the Durham area and Ken Klapper with 81 in Sandwich.

It's not surprising that people choosing the ultimate local birding experience – watching in their yards – generally found far fewer species. In such restricted spaces a lot can vary based on the amount of habitat, size of your yard, weather (have I mentioned the weather?), or simply how long you watch. The average number of species reported from participants' yards was 18, with most tallies between 10 and 25. Two yards far surpassed this range however, and it's no coincidence that both are the homes of highly-accomplished birders with a wide variety of habitat. Don and Lillian Stokes tallied 54 species on their property in Hancock, which conveniently looks out over a large pond, but top honors go to George and Andrea Robbins of

Pittsfield. They found a remarkable 71 species in (or over) their 6 acre property in Pittsfield, which is also blessed with diverse habitats and a wetland.

Remember though, that Birdathon is not all about the numbers! Participants with far more typical yards related stories of life birds, or species they hadn't seen for many years, and this is what it's *really* about. It's about enjoying the birds we have, where we find them, and retaining the strong connection to birds – and nature in general – that is arguably an important part of staying healthy.

Thanks again for participating, and if you also made a contribution to New Hampshire Audubon on behalf of Birdathon, thank you for that as well! As of the end of May, we received over \$6,000 in donations, thanks to so many of you who made contributions to this somewhat last-minute event. With the success we had this year, there's a good chance we'll revisit something similar in 2021, even if we're no longer trying to flatten the COVID-19 curve. It's abundantly clear that a lot of people, both beginner birders and those of use with decades of experience, had fun with the "local birding" angle, and as an extra bonus we burned far less fossil fuel.

I hope you continue to enjoy birds in whatever ways you can as this summer continues. It'll certainly be one for the history books, and thankfully the birds are here to keep us grounded through all of it – and NH Audubon is always working to ensure they will always be here! Thanks for being part of the team.

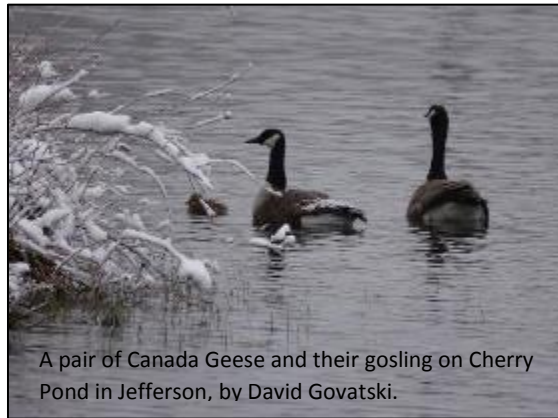


Kepner Meadow in Hancock, photographed by Phil Brown during Birdathon on May 9.

Full Birdathon 2020 Species List

(with number of “teams” reporting each species)

Canada Goose (54)
 Mute Swan (2)
 Wood Duck (30)
 Mallard (48)
 American Black Duck (4)
 Ring-necked Duck (3)
 Lesser Scaup (1)
 Common Eider (2)
 Surf Scoter (1)
 White-winged Scoter (1)
 Black Scoter (1)
 Long-tailed Duck (1)
 Bufflehead (2)
 Hooded Merganser (17)
 Common Merganser (19)
 Red-breasted Merganser (1)
 Ruffed Grouse (11)
 Wild Turkey (47)
 Rock Pigeon (25)
 Mourning Dove (89)
 Eastern Whip-poor-will (4)
 Chimney Swift (10)
 Ruby-thr. Hummingbird (23)
 Virginia Rail (6)
 Sora (1)
 Common Gallinule (1)
 Black-bellied Plover (1)
 Killdeer (16)



American Woodcock (8)
 Wilson's Snipe (3)
 Spotted Sandpiper (12)
 Solitary Sandpiper (5)
 Greater Yellowlegs (11)
 Willet (1)
 Lesser Yellowlegs (6)
 Ring-billed Gull (3)
 Herring Gull (4)
 Great Black-backed Gull (3)
 Common Tern (2)
 Red-throated Loon (1)
 Common Loon (22)
 Northern Gannet (1)
 Double-crested Cormorant (15)
 American Bittern (8)

David Govatski photographed this Killdeer in the snow in Whitefield during Birdathon on May 9!



Least Sandpiper (2)
 Short-billed Dowitcher (1)
 Long-billed Dowitcher (1)

Great Blue Heron (33)
 Green Heron (4)
 Turkey Vulture (45)

Osprey (23)
 Northern Harrier (5)
 Sharp-shinned Hawk (7)
 Cooper's Hawk (12)
 Northern Goshawk (1)
 Bald Eagle (16)
 Red-shouldered Hawk (8)
 Broad-winged Hawk (33)
 Red-tailed Hawk (25)
 Eastern Screech-Owl (1)
 Barred Owl (11)
 Belted Kingfisher (28)
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (33)
 Red-bellied Woodpecker (63)
 Downy Woodpecker (96)
 Hairy Woodpecker (69)
 Pileated Woodpecker (42)
 Northern Flicker (50)
 American Kestrel (14)
 Merlin (8)
 Peregrine Falcon (1)
 Least Flycatcher (14)
 Eastern Phoebe (71)
 Great Crested Flycatcher (5)
 Eastern Kingbird (17)
 Yellow-throated Vireo (1)
 Blue-headed Vireo (32)
 Warbling Vireo (15)
 Red-eyed Vireo (5)
 Blue Jay (106)
 American Crow (82)
 Fish Crow (6)
 Common Raven (37)
 Black-capped Chickadee (116)
 Tufted Titmouse (102)
 Horned Lark (1)
 N. Rough-winged Swallow (16)
 Tree Swallow (53)
 Bank Swallow (7)
 Barn Swallow (28)
 Cliff Swallow (8)
 Golden-crowned Kinglet (6)
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet (17)

Red-breasted Nuthatch (20)
 White-breasted Nuthatch (90)
 Brown Creeper (24)
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (9)
 House Wren (36)
 Winter Wren (24)
 Marsh Wren (2)
 Carolina Wren (20)
 European Starling (54)
 Gray Catbird (80)
 Brown Thrasher (12)
 Northern Mockingbird (22)
 Eastern Bluebird (65)
 Veery (16)
 Hermit Thrush (39)
 Wood Thrush (10)
 American Robin (112)
 Cedar Waxwing (6)
 House Sparrow (43)
 American Pipit (2)
 Evening Grosbeak (1)
 House Finch (53)
 Purple Finch (46)
 Pine Siskin (1)
 American Goldfinch (111)
 Grasshopper Sparrow (1)
 Chipping Sparrow (97)
 Field Sparrow (15)

Fox Sparrow (2)
 Dark-eyed Junco (23)
 White-crowned Sparrow (13)



Rebecca Suomala photographed this stunning White-crowned Sparrow in Concord May 10.

White-throated Sparrow (49)
 Vesper Sparrow (1)
 Savannah Sparrow (17)
 Song Sparrow (74)
 Lincoln's Sparrow (3)
 Swamp Sparrow (25)
 Eastern Towhee (29)
 Bobolink (4)
 Eastern Meadowlark (1)
 Orchard Oriole (4)

Baltimore Oriole (57)
 Red-winged Blackbird (84)
 Brown-headed Cowbird (41)
 Rusty Blackbird (1)
 Common Grackle (64)
 Ovenbird (32)
 Louisiana Waterthrush (7)
 Northern Waterthrush (11)
 Black-and-white Warbler (31)
 Nashville Warbler (9)
 Common Yellowthroat (35)
 American Redstart (8)
 Cape May Warbler (4)
 Northern Parula (14)
 Magnolia Warbler (2)
 Yellow Warbler (26)
 Chestnut-sided Warbler (7)
 Black-thr. Blue Warbler (18)
 Palm Warbler (7)
 Pine Warbler (39)
 Yellow-rumped Warbler (53)
 Prairie Warbler (15)
 Black-thr. Green Warbler (19)
 Scarlet Tanager (1)
 Northern Cardinal (102)
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak (48)
 Indigo Bunting (4)

Ken Klapper's yard in Sandwich on the beautiful spring morning of May 9th.

