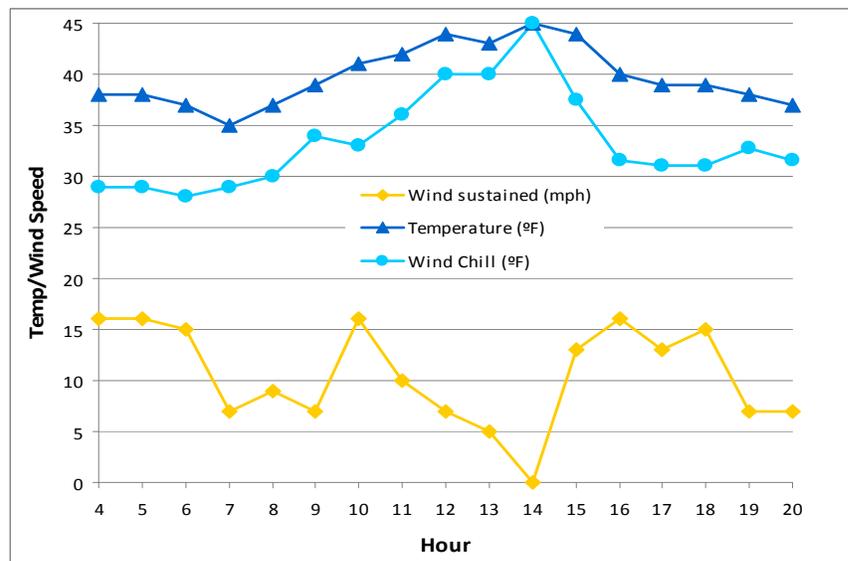


Superbowl of Birding IX with the Twitchers in the Rye – January 28, 2012

After a relaxing evening at “Motel 6” in Portsmouth, the “Twitchers in the Rye” (captain Pam Hunt, driver Becky Suomala, Pat Myers, and rookie Andrea Robbins) got up at 4 a.m. and – for the first time in our four-year history – started the “Superbowl of Birding” at the appointed hour of 5 a.m. This time the famed blue Prius (for readers of previous summaries!) was parked at the Rye Recreation Area, awaiting the arrival of a rival team: Steve Mirick’s “NH 4th and Longspurs.” Our two teams had agreed to participate in “coordinated owling” at a couple of key spots in Rye, with the intent of minimizing any harassment of the birds.

So Steve and Pam whistled and hooted for about 20 minutes, going through the full range of possibilities: Eastern Screech-Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Barred Owl, and Great Horned Owl. In return we heard only the wind in the trees – a wind that was in all likelihood a little too strong for the tastes of most owls, who remained steadfastly silent.

This mention of wind allows me to expound briefly on the subject of weather, a subject near and dear to Twitchers’ narratives. Although it was indeed windy at 5 a.m., a big difference from previous years was the underlying air temperature. For the first time in our four years of competing, the mercury never dipped below the freezing point, so even with 10-15 mph winds for much of the day we were quite comfortable, and drove around with windows open and no heat! A stark contrast to the sub-freezing wind chills we experienced for much of the 2009 and 2010 Superbowls.



Weather in Portsmouth, NH on January 28, 2012.

But back to owling. Our combined teams headed to Love Lane, where several of us heard a potential saw-whet make a single call, but never heard the alleged beast again. We then split off to head our separate ways, with the Twitchers opting to revisit the Rye Recreation Area to see if any screech-owls had warmed up. They hadn’t, but we learned later that the Longspurs had the same idea, and somewhat later in the pre-dawn hours HAD turned up a screech-owl at this location. Meanwhile, our team continued north to Marsh Pond in search of Great Horned Owl, Odiorne in search of screech-owls, and Foyes Corner for Great Horned again. All these attempts were unsuccessful, but at Foyes Corner we heard a Song Sparrow – our first bird. With one point under our belt, we returned to Marsh Pond to try one last time for Great Horneds. This time our patience was rewarded, when after a few more hoots from Pam, our target bird started calling in the distance. With this victory, we were primed and ready to look for landbirds in the increasing daylight.

Feeders along Brackett Road were strangely quiet, and eventually we pulled in to Wallis Road to look for the Dickcissel that had been hanging out with a flock of House Sparrows since at least mid-December. But who did we find here but Steve and the Longspurs, although thankfully they hadn’t

found the bird yet. It is important to point out here that a Dickcissel is worth 5 points in the Superbowl, and the first team to report a 5 point bird earns 3 bonus points. So once again our two teams found themselves cooperating in the true spirit of NH birding, and with much excitement watched the Dickcissel finally arrive. As required, we phoned in the sighting to the Superbowl judges only to find that a team in Massachusetts had called one in two minutes before. We earned our 5 points but were robbed of the coveted bonus points!

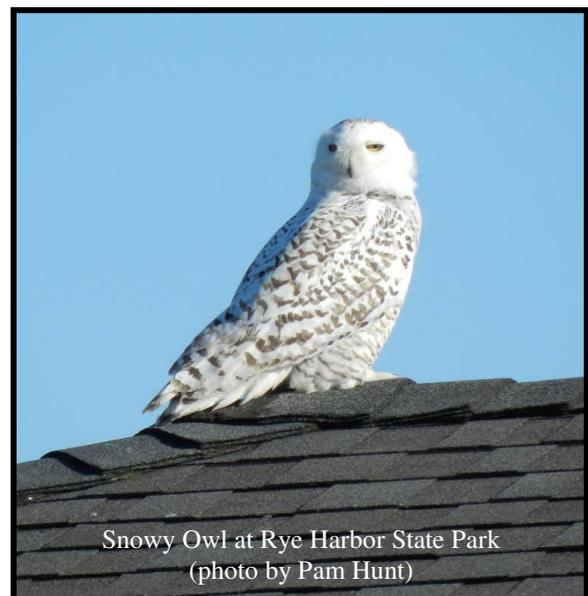
Then it was on to Odiorne Point State Park, albeit with stops for coffee (to keep Pat awake later in the day), a fruitless Sanderling scan at Wallis Sands beach, and a bonus find of Hooded Merganser south of Odiorne. As we walked toward the spot where the Cape May Warbler has been spending the winter, we saw the Longspurs walking away, and knew that they had beaten us to the bonus points (but note that the Hooded Merganser was worth 2 points, and that the Longspurs never found one, so our delay cost us less than one would think!). We found the warbler, but didn't dawdle to enjoy it (it is truly amazing that this tiny bird, which should have been in the Caribbean, had survived since late November in this decidedly non-tropical location), and headed into the park to look for several other high-value birds that had been in the extensive thickets in recent weeks. But an hour of searching failed to turn up Hermit Thrush, Gray Catbird, or Brown Thrasher, and it was time to head inland before landbird activity died down.



Cape May Warbler at Odiorne State Park
(photo by Len Medlock, prior to Superbowl on January 15)

Landbird activity never really ramped up and feeders that were active the weekend before were often devoid of birds. Nonetheless, over the next couple of hours we turned up a few good species such as Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, and Golden-crowned Kinglet, but ended up missing Hairy Woodpecker (one was heard only by Pam and Becky, and we needed three people for it to count). So around 1 p.m., after picking up sandwiches, we hit the coast at Rye Ledge to concentrate on ocean birds.

Rye Ledge provided a welcome spurt in the growth of our list, with all the expected seabirds and several bonuses. To start, Andrea's persistent scoping turned up several Northern Gannets far offshore, and this pelagic species was followed by another: a Black-legged Kittiwake that Becky picked out as it flew north along the coast. Not long after, we had stronger-than-expected southeasterly winds, which made the ocean fairly choppy. This choppiness would come back to haunt us in a couple of paragraphs. After taking our traditional group picture at the town line, we went a little farther north to look at the ledge from a different angle, at which point Andrea spotted a Snowy Owl that had presumably been sitting on the rocks the entire time!



Snowy Owl at Rye Harbor State Park
(photo by Pam Hunt)

Up the coast we continued, eventually pulling in to Rye Harbor State Park for a quick check of the cove to the north. This was interrupted by a Snowy Owl perched on the roof of the pavilion, which necessitated some photos and conversations with friends who were also enjoying the owl. One of those friends had actually seen the owl fly in from over the ocean, so we presume it was the Rye Ledge bird driven away by the rising tide. Nothing was in the cove, nor at Concord Point to the north, and at Wallis Road we took an inland detour to look for Swamp Sparrow at the Dickcissel spot. While we didn't find the sparrow, our consolation prize was a small flock of Red-winged Blackbirds (which are actually worth the same number of points anyway). Back on Route 1A, we got a nice look at a Sharp-shinned Hawk on a wire right next to the road (this was only our second countable hawk of the day, since an earlier Cooper's Hawk at Odiorne had been seen only by Becky and Andrea).

And thus we found ourselves at Pulpit Rocks, our last stand for the seabirds we were still missing: Red-throated Loon and an alcid of any sort. After missing the loon last year, we began to get a sense of déjà vu when Andrea found one that promptly disappeared. But shortly thereafter one flew south fairly close to shore and we all got to see it. It was promptly followed by a couple more of course. Alcids proved elusive, and our efforts to find them were stymied by the choppy seas. Becky finally latched on to a flock of 3 Razorbills fairly close, but by the time she was able to describe where they were they had disappeared – and were never relocated. While searching for them, Pam found a probable Dovekie that promptly dove into the watery hyperspace never to reappear. Meanwhile, the southeast wind was finally starting to cool us off, so we abandoned the exposed coast and decided to make our last stand in the lee of the Seacoast Science Center. Here the game of “whack-an-alcid” continued, and it was Andrea's turn to find a Razorbill that disappeared before anyone else could see it. Time was running out, but Andrea's persistent scanning lucked upon a Greater Scaup that flew in and landed right offshore.

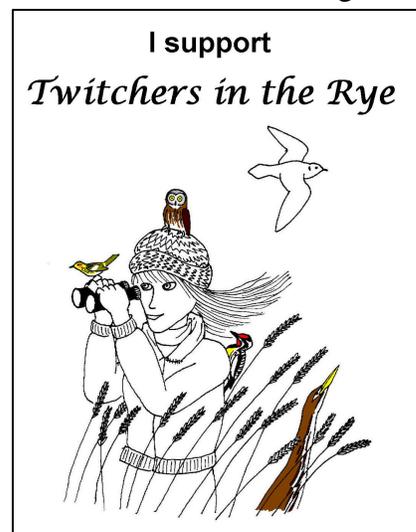
With maybe half an hour left before we needed to head south to the Superbowl wrap-up in Newburyport, we did a quick swing through some spots along Route 1B on the way to New Castle. The first of these resulted in our final species of the day – a flock of Cedar Waxwings – and at 4:45 we left Rye with 58 species and 95 points. These totals are right at our average for the previous three years – and our second best showing to-date. As a bonus, they resulted in pledges of more than \$1,000 for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH eBird (two projects of NH Audubon's Conservation Department). Many thanks to our sponsors!

At the wrap-up, we got to show off our new team shirts (generating much jealousy in the other NH teams), and against all odds won a major door prize for the second year in a row. Last year it was Becky who won a pair of Minox binoculars, and this year it was Andrea, who was so excited that she forgot to get some cookies while up at the prize table. Pat and Pam are eagerly awaiting next year's Superbowl, when one of them will hopefully be the next team member to win new binoculars!

Until next year!

Pam Hunt for the Twitchers in the Rye

To the right is a sponsor version of our new Twitcher shirt design, created by Pam Hunt. If you would be interested in purchasing a shirt, please let us know. If there's enough interest, we'll figure out a way to make them available.



The list:

Canada Goose
Mute Swan
American Black Duck
Mallard
Greater Scaup
Common Eider
Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter
Black Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Red-breasted Merganser
Red-throated Loon
Common Loon
Horned Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Northern Gannet

Great Cormorant
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Purple Sandpiper
Black-legged Kittiwake
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Great Horned Owl
Snowy Owl
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
Blue Jay
American Crow
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse

White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Cape May Warbler
American Tree Sparrow
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Dickcissel
Red-winged Blackbird
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

The Twitchers in the Rye (Becky Suomala, Pat Myers, Andrea Robbins, Pam Hunt).

