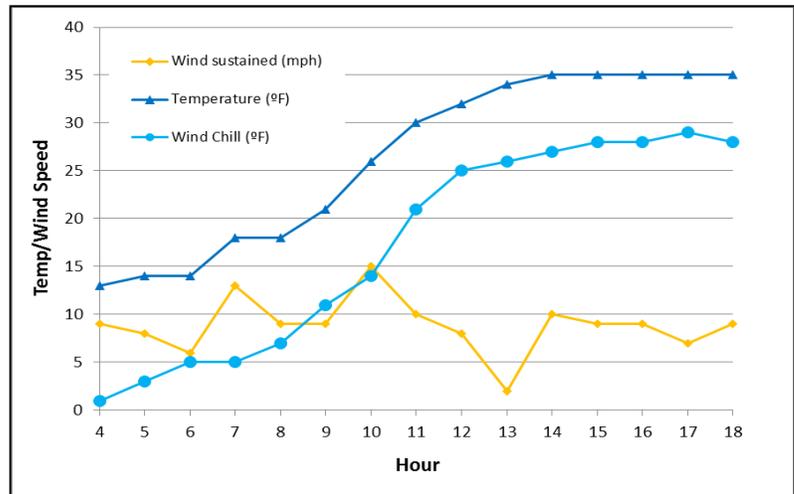


Superbowl of Birding XI with the Twitchers in the Rye – January 25, 2014

How about we start with the weather this year, and get it out of the way?! Anyone reading this who's spent even a few minutes in New Hampshire this winter knows that it's been pretty darn – well – **wintery** for most of January. With several days in a row of single digit temperatures, persistent sub-zero wind chills, and a few annoying snow storms, thoughts of “global warming” and Cape May Warblers at Odiorne were buried deep in our semi-hibernating brains. So when the forecast for this year's Superbowl of Birding was calling for persistent 15-20 mph winds, and gusts over 30, we were not particularly enthused about trying to bird the coast with that much air moving about. The good news was that at least the temperatures would be in the double digits.

So imagine our surprise when we stepped out our door in Rye at 04:45am Saturday morning to winds decidedly **less** than 15 mph. Mind you, it was still far from warm outside, but as the day progressed the wind was rarely a major issue (and never got above 15 mph, at least in Portsmouth). Yes, it started to get annoying towards the end of the day (we tried not to look south), and the high seas were not conducive to sea-birding, but we all breathed a sigh of relief that we had dodged a serious weather bullet.



And now back to our regularly scheduled birding...

The Twitchers team this year had a new member, with rookie Peg Ackerson substituting for Andrea Robbins, who had to be out of town. She joined five-year veterans Pam Hunt (captain), Becky Suomala (driver), and Pat Myers (hawk spotter) as we again got to spend the night at a supporter's cottage in Rye. At 05:00 we convened at an owling spot with a couple of other teams (to minimize harassment of the owls), and the game was on. A Northern Saw-whet Owl had been found along Love Lane back in December, and after patiently listening and whistling for 15 minutes, enough members of all three teams had heard the little owl's feeble attempts at responding (but who can blame it, it was 14 degrees outside with a wind chill of 3). And we were off to look – unsuccessfully – for an Eastern Screech-Owl. At that point, and somewhere around 06:00 the various teams went our separate ways. After all, there **are** limits to cooperation during a birding competition!

Working our way up Brackett Road, we tried for screech and Great Horned Owls without success, and so, with something resembling sunrise on the cloudy eastern horizon, we headed to our first staked-out bird: a Brown Thrasher that was visiting a nearby feeder. It turns out that Steve Mirick's “Fourth and Longspurs” had the same idea, as they arrived on the scene shortly after us. We all were using the same strategy: the thrasher is a five-point bird, and the first team to report a given five-pointer gets an extra three points. When the thrasher finally showed up, we called the sighting in to “Superbowl Central,” and both got to receive the bonus points – the first time the Twitchers have ever gotten them! While waiting for the thrasher, we learned that the Longspurs had a Gray Catbird at this feeder the day before and – much worse – had just heard a Great Horned Owl a couple of miles down the road in the exact location we had been calling half an hour earlier. We assumed the owl had gotten intrigued by **our** calling, but took its sweet time to make itself known. So yes, we were a little annoyed about having helped the

Longspurs with no benefit to ourselves, but so it goes (although let the record attest that we're actually still upset by this – we was robbed!).

But the show must go on, and we added all sorts of expected songbirds while working our way south on Brackett Road, including a nice group of 8-10 bluebirds emerging from an old martin house. At a famously birdy spot near the south end of Brackett (near where the owl was – did I mention the owl?), Pam noticed a woodpecker up in a tree. Immediately upon connecting with it in her binoculars, she yelled out “SAPSUCKER!! (another five-pointer), and the team came running. Becky saw it, but before Peg or Pat got on the bird it dropped down to an unknown location, potentially robbing us of our points (at least three of us need to see/hear each species). We moved up the road and, much to our relief, relocated the sapsucker on a much closer tree, called it in, and learned that we had got **another** three bonus points. There were good spirits all around (although we still griped about the owl as we drove by our pre-dawn hooting spot, but I digress).

There followed some quick dashes to locations where noteworthy birds had been seen in recent days, including a Brown-headed Cowbird at the Elementary School (not relocated) and Belted Kingfisher at Rye Harbor (also absent). Rye Harbor **did** provide some goodies however, including Iceland Gull, Greater Scaup, and Snowy Owl. More on Snowy Owls in a bit; right now we didn't have time to dawdle. We swung back by the thrasher feeder (no catbird, but a few Red-winged Blackbirds) and got to the extreme northern end of Rye around 10:00, where we got to see a Fox Sparrow at a different feeder. The falling tide had thus far failed to attract the Dunlin seen off the Wentworth Golf Course during advanced scouting, so we turned around and headed back south and inland.

Readers of previous Superbowl summaries should realize that this is the point where the same things happen almost every year: 1) we visit the Rye Cemetery (no good birds this year), 2) get lunch (traditional BLT, often on Rye), and 3) realize we're spending a lot of time driving around without finding anything new. A tally revealed we were at 48 species – keep this number in mind and remember that it was now around noon. We'd just burned through five hours of daylight with just under that amount left to go...

But the need to poke around inland continued to drive us, and it did yield us a Northern Flicker (plus a **second** sapsucker, go figure). We reached the coast at 14:00; two and a half hours left to go. At Rye Ledge we ran into Rick Dumont, a reporter from “Foster's Daily Democrat” who had contacted Becky about doing a story on the Twitchers. We figured we could talk to him and let him take a few pictures while we were scanning the ocean, and so it was that we found both a Bald Eagle and Purple Sandpiper. A Great Blue Heron was just south of the town line in North Hampton, but we could see it from Rye (which has always been our rule), and we were off.

Remember the owl? No not the stupid Great Horned (yes, we're still holding a grudge), but the fabulous Snowy we'd seen earlier at Rye Harbor. As anyone who's been paying attention to birding in New England this winter knows, Snowy Owls are everywhere. And when one makes its home on the roof of a bathroom building in an easily visited park along the coast, people tend to know about it. This particular owl had been causing “owl jams” in the parking lot and Route 1A for over a month, and had become a local celebrity. Of course, when there is something as cool as a Snowy Owl around, everyone wants to either share it or see it, and a group of four women racing the clock and scanning the ocean in Rye are clearly the best options out there to talk to about “White Owls” (or as one person named them “Snowy Whites,” dwarves not included). Everywhere we stopped, helpful civilians wanted to know “Have you seen the owl?” or “Do you know where the owl is?,” or perhaps simply share their reminiscences on these arctic visitors. Problem was, we didn't have time to chat, and to quote Becky from somewhere

along Route 1A: “Next time someone asks me that I’m going to scream.” Shortly after adding Ring-billed Gull to our list she had her chance.

Continuing to dodge owl fanatics, we worked our way up the rest of the coast, adding Dunlin, Red-throated Loon, and Hooded Merganser. By this point the wind, while still not bad, had been persistent enough to whip up the surf. Seabirding was getting difficult to say the least, but Becky managed to pick up a Black-legged Kittiwake fairly far offshore. On the flip side, we ended up missing Red-necked Grebe for the first time, and never managed to find any Black Scoters or alcids. After a third unsuccessful try for the catbird, we were back at Rye Harbor for a final try for kingfisher. It still wasn’t there, but almost as good (2, vs 3 points) was a flock of Horned Larks over the marsh. They turned out to be our last new bird of the day.

You probably didn’t know this until now, but I’ve listed every new species found after lunch (starting with the flicker). If you count those up and do a bit of math, you’ll find that our species total was 58. The math for total points is a little trickier, so I’ll just tell you we finished with 104. These totals are right in the middle compared to our previous efforts, but certainly weren’t high enough for any prizes this year (and New Hampshire had a crowded field, with six teams total).

Did I mention Great Horned Owl yet? It had better be a little more cooperative in 2015...

Pam Hunt for the “Twitchers in the Rye”

P.S. For the fifth year, the Twitchers used the Superbowl as a fund-raising vehicle for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH eBird. Thanks to everyone who pledged.

P.P.S. On our way home from the awards ceremony, we received a call from Steve Mirick, who told us that someone (who wasn’t on any Superbowl team) had found a SPOTTED TOWHEE in Rye (a 4th state record!!). Turns out it was in a thicket roughly 200 yards from where we were talking to the photographer at Rye Ledge.



Twitchers Pam Hunt, Becky Suomala, Pat Myers, and Peg Ackerson, plus the highly secretive Spotted Towhee. Base photo by Rick Dumont, towhee by Jason Lambert, fakery by Pam Hunt.

The list:

Canada Goose
American Black Duck
Mallard
Greater Scaup
Common Eider
Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Red-breasted Merganser
Red-throated Loon
Common Loon
Horned Grebe
Great Cormorant
Great Blue Heron *
Bald Eagle
Red-tailed Hawk

Purple Sandpiper
Dunlin
Black-legged Kittiwake
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Iceland Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Snowy Owl
Northern Saw-whet Owl
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark

Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher *
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
American Tree Sparrow
Fox Sparrow *
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

* species seen for the first time by the Twitchers. Five-pointers are in bold.

