

Superbowl of Birding VIII with the Twitchers in the Rye

It is once again late January; it is again shortly after 5:00 a.m. And that same blue Prius is parked along Love Lane in Rye. And yes, there are four figures standing in the road next to it and whistling. This time the Northern Saw-whet Owl called back from the nearby cedars, and after high-fives all around, we got the heck out of there.

The four people engaging in this pre-dawn hit-and-run were none other than the “Twitchers in the Rye,” competing in our third “Superbowl of Birding,” sponsored by Massachusetts Audubon’s Joppa Flats Education Center. As in the last two years, we confined our birding entirely to the town of Rye. Obviously, this severely reduced our chances of winning anything, but we’re sticking to our guns until the Superbowl Organizers add a “restricted geographic area” category as part of their enlightened awaking to a more local approach to birding. This year the Twitchers were Pam Hunt (Captain), Becky Suomala (Prius Driver), Pat “Hawkeye” Myers, and Len “Bed and Breakfast” Medlock, but this was far from the original line up. Founding team member Patience “Bed and Breakfast” Chamberlin was off in South America somewhere, and our original sub of Sara Cairns had to drop out early in the week before the contest. But it is a testament to the fame of the Twitchers that we had TWO back-ups lined up, and thus we ended up at Len’s house in Exeter on Friday evening (and with Len proudly wearing a “Sara Cairns” nametag at the Superbowl wrap-up).

In addition to there being a guy on the team and an owl at Love Lane, there was one other important difference from 2010 – we weren’t freezing to death. The temperature was actually in the low 20s (vs. 4 degrees in 2010) and there was no wind, sparing us the -15 wind chills from our previous attempt (but you still can’t blame Patience for opting for Peru or wherever it is she was).

From Love Lane we made a beeline to the Rye Recreation Area, where we encountered Steve Mirick’s Superbowl team, the “NH 4th and Longspurs.” They’d found neither the saw-whet nor screech-owl that Paul Lacourse had here on the Christmas Bird Count in mid-December, and were on their way to Love Lane. We stayed a little longer and managed to lure in a gray morph Eastern Screech-Owl, which nicely sat over our heads giving great views. And we were off again. But our owl luck had runneth out – stops along Long John and Bracket Roads, and near Odiorne Point State Park failed to turn up a Great Horned Owl. An American Tree Sparrow called around 6:30, and Snow Buntings were calling overhead at Odiorne. It was time to switch gears.

Our plan was to try for land birds (a Winter Wren had been around) and look for “Frosty” (the local Lesser Black-backed Gull) at Odiorne, and then blast south to the marshes near Concord Point where we’d had Hooded Mergansers on a high tide a few days previously. The trick was that we needed to be there before the tide dropped too much – and high tide was at 7:00 a.m. There was no Winter Wren, there was no Frosty, and a fly-by Red-throated Loon was only seen by two of us, thus not counting by Superbowl rules (we needed three: this rule will haunt us again). A female Black Scoter (rare in Rye) was something of a bonus, but it was quickly becoming evident that Odiorne was otherwise “dead” as far as “good birds” went.

And because we'd dallied at the Odiorne dead zone longer than ideal, the tide had dropped significantly at Concord Point, thus robbing us of our Hooded Mergansers. Our consolation prize here was a Swamp Sparrow, and since it was worth three points to the merganser's two points, we really shouldn't complain. At our next stop, the marshes at Rye Harbor proved good for woodpeckers (yes, I said woodpeckers). Len heard the distant drumming of a Pileated across from the bridge, and south of the harbor we were treated to the bizarre sight of a Northern Flicker hopping around on the snow in the salt marsh with a few Horned Larks (later in the day a Red-tailed Hawk was eating something out in this same section of marsh, and one has to wonder if it was a slightly mal-adapted flicker...).

A final near-high-tide stop at Rye Ledge failed to turn up the flock of Sanderlings, Purple Sandpipers, and Dunlin that we'd found roosting here the previous Sunday (sense a theme yet about our success at finding scouted birds?), so we hightailed it back north to begin our "inland" birding. Along the way, we were distracted by a large flock of robins near Straw Point which contained a dozen or so Cedar Waxwings. While in this area, Len and Becky saw a fly-by flock of 10 White-winged Crossbills, but Pat and I missed them (remember the Red-throated Loon). ANOTHER flock of crossbills was at Concord Point, but this time ONLY Pat and I saw them, so we were sort of even. And in any event, there were NO crossbills along Fairhill Ave. where Len had found several a couple of days earlier. His singing Carolina Wren wasn't there either. And so it goes.

Cutting back south along Brackett Road we once again ran afoul of the "three person" rule, when Pat and I heard a Red-bellied Woodpecker. In a manner amazingly unlike Red-bellied Woodpeckers the world over, it didn't call again – ever. Things improved a little later with sightings of both Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, and a single Wild Turkey (a Twitcher first!) roosting in a pine tree. At a feeder near the Rye Elementary School, we were treated to a couple of Common Redpolls.

And then it was time for lunch. We stopped this time at the Hungry Horse Café and got a round of BLTs (on rye, of course) and tomato soups. We took all our goodies to Garland Road and ate at the entrance to the Rye Water Works, where we'd had a Golden-crowned Kinglet the previous weekend. You guessed it – no kinglets. It was now around 12:30, and we – although not realizing it at the time – were in a slump. Our staked-out Hermit Thrush had apparently uprooted its stakes, there were no noteworthy feeder birds in the neighborhoods near Eel Pond, and practically every stop for forest birds (e.g., kinglet, creeper) was met with near total silence (not even chickadees in many cases!). It was time to cut our losses and return to the coast. After all, we still needed Red-throated Loon and Razorbill.

You'd think that on a warm day with no wind, when you could almost walk to the Isles of Shoals, sea birds would be easy to find. Not so for the 2011 Twitchers. Even the common species were somewhat scarce at all our coastal stops (but there WAS a flock of 14 White-winged Crossbills at Fairhill Ave. this time), and thus we found ourselves back at Odiorne around 3:00 p.m. – still needing Red-throated Loon. After maybe 30 minutes of scoping, Len found a Razorbill. Then Becky found it. And after a grueling 5-10 minutes, I found it to clinch it for the team. Poor Pat never even had a chance (we only had three scopes), but can take solace in the fact that it was a really lousy view anyway. And thus, as the little hand approached 4, we

officially gave up on Red-throated Loon. There was an hour left in the competition, and given that we needed to be in Newburyport by 5:30, we really only had 45 minutes to cover the portion of Rye along Route 1B toward New Castle. Stopping at a feeder along 1B, we heard a Brown Creeper. It was to be our last new bird for the day. And it turns out that between the redpolls around 11:30 and the Razorbill around 3:30, *we hadn't added a single species to our list*. Nonetheless, we ended up with 57 species and 94 points, right smack in the middle of our previous two attempts. In the process we raised a little over \$500 for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH eBird (two projects of NH Audubon's Conservation Department).

The day was capped by the wrap-up party in Newburyport, where all the highly coveted prizes are awarded. While not taking home the gold or silver, Becky scored big time by winning a door prize of Minox binoculars. Maybe next year they'll help her see that fly-by Red-throated Loon...

The list:

Canada Goose	Purple Sandpiper	White-breasted Nuthatch
American Black Duck	Ring-billed Gull	Brown Creeper
Mallard	Herring Gull	Eastern Bluebird
Common Eider	Great Black-backed Gull	American Robin
Surf Scoter	Razorbill	Northern Mockingbird
White-winged Scoter	Black Guillemot	European Starling
Black Scoter	Rock Pigeon	Cedar Waxwing
Long-tailed Duck	Mourning Dove	American Tree Sparrow
Bufflehead	Eastern Screech-Owl	Song Sparrow
Common Goldeneye	Northern Saw-whet Owl	Swamp Sparrow
Red-breasted Merganser	Downy Woodpecker	White-throated Sparrow
Wild Turkey	Hairy Woodpecker	Dark-eyed Junco
Common Loon	Northern Flicker	Snow Bunting
Horned Grebe	Pileated Woodpecker	Northern Cardinal
Red-necked Grebe	Blue Jay	House Finch
Great Cormorant	American Crow	White-winged Crossbill
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Horned Lark	Common Redpoll
Cooper's Hawk	Black-capped Chickadee	American Goldfinch
Red-tailed Hawk	Tufted Titmouse	House Sparrow

Our big misses were Red-throated Loon (have I mentioned that already?), Hooded Merganser, Great Horned Owl, Belted Kingfisher (another scouted bird that deserted us), Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Carolina Wren (although we've yet to get one in Rye on the Superbowl). There's always next year.

Pam Hunt for the Twitchers in the Rye

Figure 1. Weather for Portsmouth, NH on January 29, 2011 (compared with January 30, 2010).

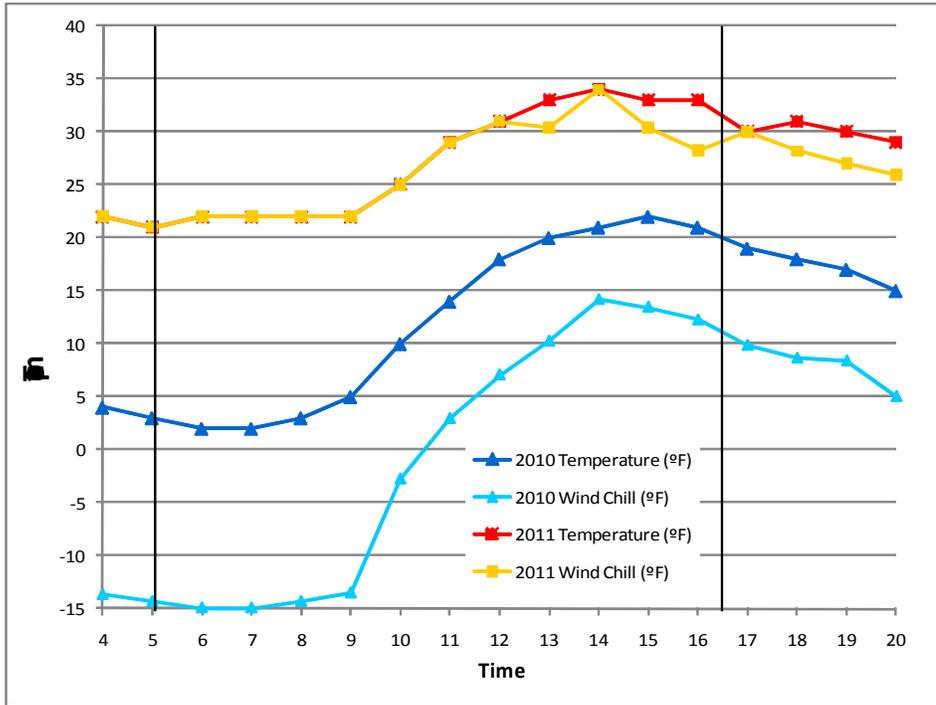


Figure 2. The Twitchers in the Rye (l-r: Len Medlock, Becky Suomala, Pat Myers, Pam Hunt).

