

Superbowl of Birding XIII with the Twitchers in the Rye – January 30, 2016

by Pamela Hunt

It was a chilly 44 degrees when I woke before dawn on the day of the Superbowl of Birding, so I wrapped my blanket more tightly around me and tried to get back to sleep. There was certainly no bird activity outside my tent at that hour, and I decided to stay bundled up until it got light enough to see.

Wait a minute! Something's not right here. Since when is 44 considered chilly on the Superbowl of Birding, and what is our fearless leader doing in a tent in January?

Oh right, I was in Florida at the tail end of a two week vacation! Let's try this again (but I *would* like to go on record that 44 degrees is pretty chilly if you don't have a sleeping bag and had spent the previous two weeks in the tropics).

In my absence, the Twitchers had bravely opted to carry on without me, and while I was shivering in Florida, they were waking up warm and toasty in Rye, having once again spent the night in a donor's cottage. The team this year included temporary captain Becky Suomala, veterans Pat Myers and Andrea Robbins, and Peg Ackerson back for her second season of the competition. This time Peg took the mantle of driver, meaning that Becky's Prius hasn't made the team for two years in a row, so at least I have one year up on our car.

Despite Becky and Andrea having stayed up into the wee hours working on bird puzzles, the team was up, ready, and out the door by 4:50 am. The weather was clear and calm, with temperatures just below freezing, and several bright planets greeted the Twitchers. This was one of those rare occasions when five planets were visible in the pre-dawn sky, but there was no time for astronomy, and they were off to look for owls. As usual, most of the next 1.5 hours were spent in mostly futile checks of supposedly reliable spots for owls. In fact, success was so limited that they only managed to find a single Great Horned Owl at 6:15, and it only called once. Better than nothing though (and still better than I had from my tent by that hour)!

Dawn found our heroines at Odiorne Point State Park, where their luck changed considerably. Not only did they find Razorbills and Red-throated Loons, species we sometimes miss entirely or don't all get to see, but a Bonaparte's Gull was an extra bonus. It turns out that this was the first time the Twitchers have found that species in our eight years of participation! Riding that wave of euphoria, they added *another* first on their way out of the park, when a stop to check a flock of bluebirds yielded a Yellow-rumped Warbler.

With Becky watching the clock closely and cracking the whip to keep everyone on schedule, the team cut across town to West Road, where a Ruby-crowned Kinglet had been coming to a feeder since mid-December. Upon arrival they learned they had missed it by 10 minutes (more



“Flitty” the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a Red-breasted Nuthatch on a feeder along West Road in Rye. Photo by Becky Suomala.

whip cracking is clearly needed next year), but with a little patience the tiny bird (nicknamed “Flitty” by the homeowners, too bad it wasn’t “Twitchy!”) reappeared, following a bonus Red-breasted Nuthatch (their only one for the day). The kinglet was *another* new bird for the Twitchers, and a four-pointer at that.

It was now nine o’clock, and time to shift into the usual “carefully planned wandering” phase of the Superbowl, in which the Twitchers check a variety of inland spots for good feeder birds or random surprises. There were none of either, and after two hours a couple of species were starting to get worrisome. One was Mute Swan, which had been *absent* from a reliable spot at Eel Pond during two attempts over the course of the morning, and the other was the usually ubiquitous mockingbird. Becky was particularly worried about the latter, since she’d seen one in passing during the forced march to the kinglet, but hadn’t allowed the team to turn around.

Luckily, Becky wasn’t haunted by missing mockingbirds for long, since one was seen by all on their way to the northeastern corner of Rye. Here, at the Wentworth by the Sea golf course, Andrea’s perseverance and strength of will netted the Twitchers their first “good birds” since the kinglet over two hours previously. First was a flying duck that Andrea tracked down to its landing spot, where it was found to be a Greater Scaup. The second was a distant blackbird, also in flight, and the team feared it would simply elude them. But Andrea commanded it to land, which it did, and revealed itself to be a Common Grackle (we’ve only had a grackle once before). The Force is strong in this one!

Heading back south along the coast, the team turned around near Wallis Marsh to check some ducks and found something much better: a Turkey Vulture! Another first for the Twitchers, this was also a five-point bird, which requires the team to call it in to Superbowl Headquarters. Presumably there were high-fives all around, but I wasn’t there to see it (by that point I was deeply embedded in a Renaissance Fair in Melbourne Florida, where I also saw Turkey Vultures). Less than fifteen minutes later two other large, dark soaring birds proved to be Bald Eagles, and the team started the afternoon in high spirits indeed.



Immature Bald Eagle near Wallis Sands. Photo by Becky Suomala.

But high spirits need to be fed, so after a brief detour to pick up sandwiches the team was back on the coast for a little lunchtime sea watching. When a couple of Black Scoters flew by, Becky and Andrea interrupted Pat’s repast so the required third person could see them, while Peg continued to dine in the car. I was having a bowl of lamb stew at about this same time, and fly-by scoters were replaced by Tricolored Herons. It was now 1:30, and there were less than four hours left in the competition. Heading back inland, the Twitchers were unsuccessful in their attempt to find a Purple Finch on West Road, and were also stymied at the Rye Central Cemetery when Becky was the only one to hear a Golden-crowned Kinglet.

Then it was back to the coast, where the Mute Swans on Eel Pond were finally located – the last new species of the day. At 4:37 Peg’s car officially left Rye and the Twitchers headed south to Newburyport for the compilation. Readers familiar with past Superbowl exploits will likely recall that teams need to report in by 5:30 or be disqualified. This time they were among the first teams to arrive, clearly indicating to their absent captain (at that point dancing to drums and bagpipes) that they could have probably found another species or two – the slackers. After all, *I* added 3-4 species to my Renaissance Fair list as I was driving out!

In the end, the Twitchers' results were right around our long-term average, with 59 species and 95 points. They had a great time at the compilation as always, where they received many compliments on their Twitchers hoodies (apparently no one was paying attention the last few years!). I, meanwhile, managed to find 26 species without really trying, fourteen of which were actually shared with the team (and no, they didn't have any Tricolored Herons). These are in bold type in the list below, just in case anyone is curious.

The list:

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| Canada Goose | Bald Eagle | Red-breasted Nuthatch |
| Mute Swan | Cooper's Hawk | White-breasted Nuthatch |
| American Black Duck | Red-tailed Hawk | Carolina Wren |
| Mallard | Purple Sandpiper | Ruby-crowned Kinglet * |
| Greater Scaup | Ring-billed Gull | Eastern Bluebird |
| Common Eider | Herring Gull | American Robin |
| Surf Scoter | Great Black-backed Gull | Northern Mockingbird |
| White-winged Scoter | Bonaparte's Gull * | European Starling |
| Black Scoter | Razorbill | Cedar Waxwing |
| Long-tailed Duck | Rock Pigeon | Yellow-rump. Warbler * |
| Bufflehead | Mourning Dove | American Tree Sparrow |
| Common Goldeneye | Great Horned Owl | Song Sparrow |
| Hooded Merganser | Belted Kingfisher | White-throated Sparrow |
| Red-breasted Merganser | Red-bellied Woodpecker | Dark-eyed Junco |
| Red-throated Loon | Downy Woodpecker | Northern Cardinal |
| Common Loon | Hairy Woodpecker | Common Grackle |
| Horned Grebe | Blue Jay | House Finch |
| Red-necked Grebe | American Crow | American Goldfinch |
| Great Cormorant | Black-capped Chickadee | House Sparrow |
| <u>Turkey Vulture *</u> | Tufted Titmouse | |

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

Twitchers in the Rye in action at Rye Ledge.



Eastern Bluebird and American Goldfinch at a feeder. The Twitchers enjoyed multiple bluebirds during Superbowl XIII. Photo by Becky Suomala.





Twitchers in the Rye rockin' their hoodies at the Superbowl wrap-up party. Left to right: Andrea Robbins, Becky Suomala, Pat Myers (hiding her team tee under a fleece), and Peg Ackerson.



What usual team captain Pam Hunt was wearing at the same time. And yes, those are authentic Medieval condiments.