

## **Superbowl of Birding VII with the Twitchers in the Rye**

by Pam Hunt, Team Captain

Shortly after 5:30 am on January 30, 2010, a blue Toyota Prius pulled over to the shoulder of Love Lane in Rye, NH and disgorged four heavily bundled figures. A couple of them spent the next few minutes whistling a series of single notes into the darkness of the surrounding hemlocks. The contest had begun.

The contest in question was the seventh annual “Superbowl of Birding,” sponsored by Massachusetts Audubon’s Joppa Flats Education Center. The four bundled figures were the “Twitchers in the Rye,” known in real life as Pam Hunt, Becky Suomala, Patience Chamberlin, and Pat Myers. The Twitchers were competing in their second Superbowl, and as in our first attempt we added a twist by confining our birding entirely to the town of Rye.

Besides our whistles, the only sound was the wind in the Love Lane hemlocks, with nary a hint of the Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet Owls we had heard here last year. And what a wind it was. According to the weather records at the Pease International Tradeport, the wind speed between 4 and 9 a.m. ranged from 12 to 16 miles-per-hour, with gusts up to 22. Add these to temperatures between 2 and 5 degrees Fahrenheit and you get a wind chill of -15. The lesson: owls are far more sensible than Superbowl birders, and were presumably nestled comfortably in sheltered spaces while we struggled to keep our fingers warm.

But owls are worth good points in the Superbowl (which differs from many birding contests by assigning point values to each species – the winners are the teams that amass the highest scores), so the Twitchers continued on to a few more spots. After another hour of whistling and hooting we were no better off, and with the sun about to rise into a sky tinted Maxfield Parish blue, we shifted gears. A sparrow called in the salt marsh, a Mourning Dove whistled its way from a roost, and the chase was on.

Our strategy was to spend the morning poking around the inland portions of Rye, checking feeders and looking for birds found while scouting. Given the aforementioned -15 degree wind chill, this also afforded an opportunity to stay in the car as much as possible, although even cracking the windows more than a couple of inches risked sending the back seat into a deep freeze. Over the next couple of hours, we managed to find most of the common feeder birds, but few of the rarer species were where they were supposed to be. Along Wallis Road a flyover Red-winged Blackbird provided a nice boost to our spirits, while a Northern Flicker flew off before most people could see it, and thus couldn’t count on the list.

By this point we had been in the field for close to three hours, and nature began to call. If anyone hasn’t noticed, there is a dearth of public restrooms in Rye, and with wind chills still well below zero, we weren’t all that excited by the alternatives. A hoped for respite at a local café presented us with an “open” sign and locked door, leaving us no better off than before. Eventually the call was too strong and we pulled into the back of Central Cemetery in Rye. While some of us were otherwise occupied, Becky found our best bird of the day: a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (worth five points!) that would eventually draw the other four NH Superbowl teams into this rarely visited corner of town. It was our moment of fame.

After lunch (the café was now *really* open) we focused on the coast, with inland excursions as needed when we came level with them on our way south along Route 1A. The good news was that the wind had dropped to 7-8 mph and the temperature risen to the low 20s. The resultant wind chill of 10-14 degrees felt positively balmy! Starting at Odiorne State Park, we hardly even slowed down for the Eastern Screech-Owl that's been entertaining birders and photographers since December (finally, we find an owl!), and then parked to walk up the cove behind the Seacoast Science Center. Becky and Pam had found a Hermit Thrush feeding on flies in the wrack a week previously, but the only birds exploring the seaweed this time were starlings. But scoping the ocean was more productive, with Black Guillemots and Red-throated Loons among the more expected fare. The highlight here was a female Greater Scaup, a species not expected on the ocean.

Heading on down the coast, we ran into two other teams in quick succession, and both the "Flocking Bustards" and "Saw What Owls?" congratulated us on our sapsucker. But time was running out for all of us and there was no time to linger over pleasantries. Sanderlings continued to elude us at Wallis Sands, but Black Scoters (hard to find in Rye) and Purple Sandpipers appeared off Concord Point. Missing was the female Barrow's Goldeneye that was present on January 23. Just north of Concord Point, a Cooper's Hawk flew low along the marsh and a Northern Flicker (possibly the same bird that eluded us earlier) flew in from the opposite direction, proving all with good looks. A tally at this point revealed that we were at around 50 species, well below our total from 2009, and there was only an hour or so of light left. And it had started to cool off again.

At Ragged Neck we encountered the "Granite State Bird Watch" team, who kindly pointed out the Iceland Gull in Rye Harbor (and also thanked us for the sapsucker). Just around the corner, in the Harbor's parking lot, a small flock of Horned Larks turned out to be the last new species of the day. A few coastal and inland stops later (and another Cooper's Hawk – when it rains it pours!) it was time to throw in the towel. We needed to be at the Superbowl compilation party by 5:30 pm or be disqualified, so at 4:50 we crossed the town line and headed south. Between 5:30 am and 4:50 pm we had covered 67 miles.

We ended with a lower-than-expected 53 species and 78 points, well below corresponding totals of 63 and 112 in 2009. The wind certainly didn't help any, nor did a winter with few rarities and no irruptives. Nonetheless, we raised more than \$150 dollars in pledges to support NH eBird and *New Hampshire Bird Records*, two projects of NH Audubon. And of course we had fun.

The following day found us resting comfortably in our warm homes thinking about the slowly lengthening days before us, our thoughts no longer focused on 12 hours of birding in the brutal January cold and wind. But before we know it we'll once again be thinking of scoters, lingering sparrows, and the best time to visit Jenness Beach - and of course where the bathrooms are.

The Twitchers in the Rye species list from the 2010 Superbowl:

- |                        |                          |                         |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Canada Goose           | Red-tailed Hawk          | Black-capped Chickadee  |
| American Black Duck    | Purple Sandpiper         | Tufted Titmouse         |
| Mallard                | Ring-billed Gull         | White-breasted Nuthatch |
| Greater Scaup          | Herring Gull             | Golden-crowned Kinglet  |
| Common Eider           | Iceland Gull             | Eastern Bluebird        |
| Surf Scoter            | Great Black-backed Gull  | American Robin          |
| White-winged Scoter    | Black Guillemot          | Northern Mockingbird    |
| Black Scoter           | Rock Pigeon              | European Starling       |
| Long-tailed Duck       | Mourning Dove            | American Tree Sparrow   |
| Bufflehead             | Eastern Screech-Owl      | Song Sparrow            |
| Common Goldeneye       | Red-bellied Woodpecker   | White-throated Sparrow  |
| Red-breasted Merganser | Yellow-bellied Sapsucker | Dark-eyed Junco         |
| Red-throated Loon      | Downy Woodpecker         | Northern Cardinal       |
| Common Loon            | Hairy Woodpecker         | Red-winged Blackbird    |
| Horned Grebe           | Northern Flicker         | House Finch             |
| Red-necked Grebe       | Blue Jay                 | American Goldfinch      |
| Great Cormorant        | American Crow            | House Sparrow           |
| Cooper's Hawk          | Horned Lark              |                         |

And the more glaring misses (in addition to the scouted birds already mentioned):

- Red-breasted Nuthatch
- Brown Creeper
- Cedar Waxwing

Figure 1. Weather for Portsmouth, NH on January 30, 2010.

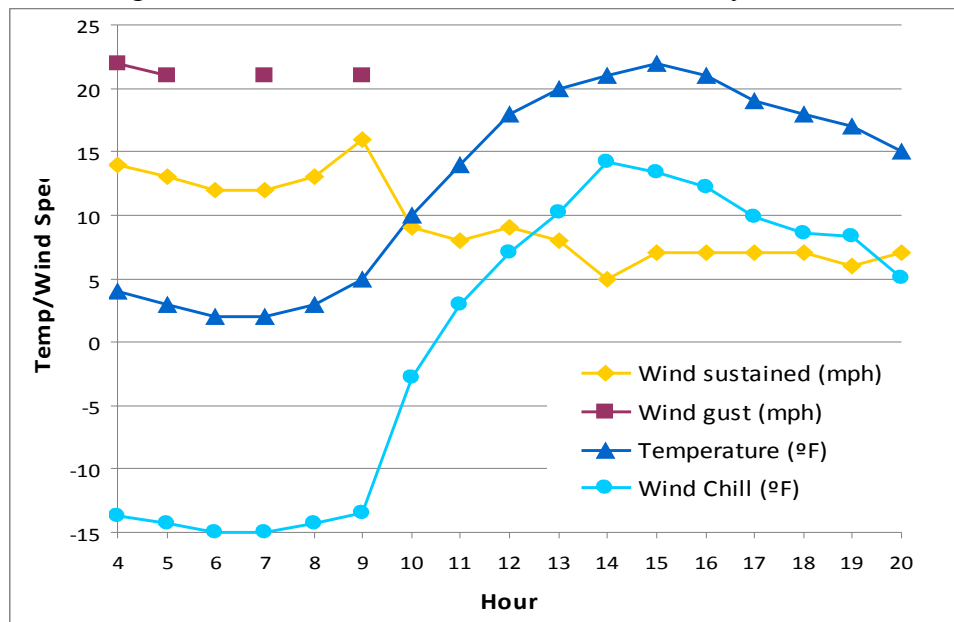


Figure 2. The Twitchers in the Rye (l-r: Pat Myers, Patience Chamberlin, Becky Suomala, and Pam Hunt). Photos by Pam Hunt.



Figure 3. A cooperative Eastern Bluebird. Photo by Pam Hunt



Figure 4. Sea smoke off Rye Harbor (Appledore Island in the background). It was a very cold morning! Photo by Pam Hunt.

