

Superbowl of Birding 2020 with the “Twitchers Out of the Rye”

by Kathryn Frieden

At 5:00 am on January 25, 2020 the four of us sat in Becky’s Prius on the pull-off lane at the Hampton tolls on Interstate 95. We were looking for a Great Horned Owl that had been seen perched there on at least two occasions in the past few weeks. We did not see the owl, but it was still a good start to the **Superbowl of Birding XVII**. After all, it was 36 degrees, balmy compared to the 12-degree weather we had experienced during our scouting expedition the week before. And although rain was predicted for late afternoon and evening, we didn’t have to worry about a snowstorm bearing down on us like last year.



Starting at the Hampton toll booth at 5:00 am. Photo by Rebecca Suomala.

This was the “first down” of four scheduled owling locations, based on extensive planning and organizing in an effort to refine our strategy from the previous year. We had a veteran “all-star” team: Captain and Driver Becky Suomala, Navigator Andrea Robbins, Scout Susan Wrisley, and Note-taker Kathryn Frieden. But it was only our second year of birding in Hampton for the Townie Award, so we didn’t feel as seasoned as we would have been in the old Twitcher haunts of Rye. We had to figure out not only where to look for birds, but when to be there. Where should we be at low tide, at high tide, at dawn, at dusk, and of course, at coffee-break and lunch time? Andrea worked out a detailed schedule and we had made it to the “starting line” at the Hampton tolls right on time. Then we were off to Stage Road and got lucky when a Barred Owl flew across the road right in front of the car. It was 5:30 am and we had our first species! Owls were tough to find in Hampton last year, and that was the case again this year when our next two stops yielded nothing. But there was no time to continue standing around in the dark hooting because we planned to be at North Shore Road for first light.



One of our five scouted Carolina Wrens by Rebecca Suomala.

We made it there at 6:30, and while listening to the lovely rising dawn chorus we saw our first group of birds, including Red-winged Blackbird, one of our scouted targets at this site and a Carolina Wren, a two-pointer. Last year we had missed Carolina Wren, but after spotting five of them during our scouting expedition, we were determined to get one this year. We were off and running! While we scanned the Nilus Brook area an Iceland Gull flew by, also a two-pointer, but unfortunately only two of us saw it so we couldn’t include it in our species list. At least three of the team members need to see or hear a bird for it to count. Our next stop was Huckleberry Lane where Steve Mirick had scouted a Swamp Sparrow, a three-point species, earlier in the week. No sparrows, so we “punted” off to the coast for some early morning ocean-scanning.

We started at Ancient Highway and then zipped over to Bicentennial Park. There were four Sanderlings on the beach, a nice three-point species, and only the second time the Twitchers had them in the Superbowl. There was also a good variety of water birds to add to our list, but the prize would have been the five-point Dovekie that only two of us saw, so alas, no Dovekie. (I would like to point out that, although Andrea feels bad that she didn’t see the Dovekie, I was the one who “fumbled” both it and the previously mentioned Iceland Gull.) Thanks to some local knowledge (thank you Holly Bauer), we knew there had recently been Fish Crows calling in the nearby Kings Highway area. We drove slowly around with the windows down and sure enough, heard the crow’s distinctive call, so we had our first four-point bird!



Snowy Owl at Hampton Beach State Park by Susan Wrisley.

Our next target was Hampton Beach State Park. Flocks of Snow Buntings and Horned Larks reliably gather in the grassy field near the entrance in winter, but often get spooked by cars and dogs, so it was important to get there before the crowds. Hopefully the bonus would be a Snowy Owl that had just been posted to the NH Birds email group. When we arrived, we quickly found the beautiful Snowy Owl perched on a fence, the whitest one that any of us had ever seen! Unfortunately someone was harassing it with his truck; it flew off, and none of the other teams were able to find it. Along with the expected buntings and larks, we were also excited to find the sole **Lapland Longspur** that had previously been reported at the park. This was the first new Superbowl species of the day for the Twitchers. While there, we did some ocean-scanning into a strong northeast wind. Despite at least three-foot seas we added Razorbill and Northern Gannet to the list, and spotted a small flock of Purple Sandpipers flying in to land on the rocks. Everything at the park was a higher-point species, so we were building our score slowly but surely. The wind made sea-watching colder and more

difficult, but on the other hand, had the benefit of pushing pelagic species closer to shore, so we were optimistic that we would see a few more as the day progressed. We were especially hopeful about finding another Dovekie.

Since we were close-by, we decided to try for the famous Glaucous Gull that has graced the restroom roof at the Seabrook parking area for at least the past ten years. This involves a bit of finagling to see it from Hampton (in order to comply with competition rules), but after we drove south across the bridge into Seabrook we could see he wasn't there, so we quickly turned around and headed inland. Landing Road drew us like a magnet because



Snow Bunting flock at Hampton Beach State Park by Rebecca Suomala.

recently an oriole had been seen at a feeder there. It was probably a female Baltimore Oriole, but had not returned yet for definitive identification. It would have been quite exciting to turn it up on Superbowl Day, as it would be a five-point species, but no luck. Several more drive-bys during the day were also without success. However, we did find some Eastern Bluebirds at the nearby marina, as well as a Bufflehead and a Belted Kingfisher. And then at the Hampton Wastewater Treatment Plant, Becky spotted a **Northern Harrier**! We all enjoyed watching it gliding and swooping over the marsh. This is only a one-pointer, but it was the first time the Twitchers had "scored" one in the Superbowl, and would therefore help bring in more pledge money.

The morning was moving along quickly. We needed to check for another possible five-point species that we had found during scouting the week before—a Chipping Sparrow at the High Street Cemetery. Despite a thorough search of the cemetery and nearby streets where we had seen bird-feeders, we were unable to turn up the sparrow. Since we had been the ones to first spot a Chipping Sparrow during the 2019 Superbowl, I guess we couldn't expect to get that lucky two years in a row. It was now close to 11:30 and near high tide, so time to check again for "Glockenspiel", as the Glaucous Gull of Seabrook is known. As Susan noted, once the tide is

lower, he is more likely to be off looking for food somewhere on the mudflats, so this was our best chance to see him. Sure enough, there he was in his usual spot. We drove up the little street that parallels Route 1A, clambered up the bank, made sure we had crossed back into Hampton, looked at the bird, and then took a selfie to congratulate ourselves. And our timing was good, because a few minutes later he was gone.



Black-bellied Plover on the jetty at Beckman's Point by Susan Wisley.

Although we were diverging somewhat from our planned schedule, it made sense to scan the ocean for a few minutes from the beach access at Ashland Road. This turned out to be a good choice because Andrea quickly spotted a **Black-bellied Plover** on Beckman's Point; another new species for the Twitcher's and a four-pointer! A few more stops, and then it was time for lunch (and finally, coffee!). This consisted of a quick break in Hannaford's to get a few hot food items, warm up a little, and then eat in the car. Superbowl birding is a rigorous sport—no “halftime” for relaxing in a restaurant! By 1:00 pm we were at the Route 1 crossing of Taylor River scanning the marsh. Highlights here were a Hooded Merganser as well as a Greater Scaup in the very same place we had seen one last year.

The next task was to visit several residential areas where there were lots of busy feeders. As we navigated the Hampton streets we noticed something strange going on. Susan has a distinctive car with a boxy shape and a bright green color. We had been surprised to see a similar car in front of us once during the morning. And there it was again, driving along in front of us. But, back to the birds, we added several higher-point species including Hairy and Pileated Woodpeckers, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and a Swamp Sparrow near the same feeder where we saw one last year. And then, there was that green car again! The plan was to be back out on the coast by 2:30 for some more sea-watching, so time was limited. It was a relief when Andrea spotted a Northern Flicker at Twin Drive—finally a fourth woodpecker species in the “fourth quarter” (and a fourth green car sighting).

And then it was back to the coast, starting at Hampton Beach State Park at 3:00. Two murres flew by just over the water and Susan was able to skillfully catch them on camera, so we could confirm that they were Thick-billed Murres, a four-point species. The wind was now even stronger than in the morning and it was getting tough to stand against it. We headed north to Great Boars Head which was somewhat protected from the wind on the south side. We had a beautiful close fly-by of Black-legged Kittiwakes, a Horned Grebe, and finally added a Red-throated Loon as the clock was “running out.” We finished up at 4:55 as we drove by the Hampton toll booth looking for the Great Horned Owl one more time. After 11 hours and 55 minutes of birding and 89 miles of driving, it was time to head down to Newburyport for the summation party.

So how did the Twitchers do in their second year in Hampton? We never did find another Dovekie, so that was a big miss. There have been unusually high numbers of Dovekies along the coast this winter, so several of the other teams did manage to add Dovekie to their lists. There were three species we found during scouting but



The Twitchers win the Townie Award. From left to right: Rebecca Suomala, Kathryn Frieden, Andrea Robbins, Susan Wisley. Photo by Susan Carlson, courtesy of Mass Audubon Joppa Flats.

missed on the big day: Hermit Thrush, Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrow, and Chipping Sparrow. Other misses: Wild Turkey, Red-necked Grebe, and Great Blue Heron (scarce this winter). On the plus side, we added three brand-new species to the Twitcher’s all-time list, and our total number of species was 66, topping the previous high of 63. We also set a record for Twitcher’s highest score with 119 points. All in all, it was a wonderful day with tolerable weather, good birds, and great company. And it never hurts to be a winner! For the second year in a row, we won the Townie Award.



One bonus of participating in the Superbowl every year is to raise money for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NHeBird. Thanks to everyone who sponsored the team and helped us raise a record total over \$3,800.

This year an especially imaginative pledge came from George Robbins—a \$100 bonus for every Bewick’s Wren we saw, a species never before recorded in New Hampshire (so a pretty safe bet). Imagine his shock and surprise when he saw this photo!

The full chart of our results from all years, and the write-ups from each year are on the *New Hampshire Bird Records* web site, www.nhbirdrecords.org.

Outtakes

Kathryn:

“We saw that green car like Susan’s driving in front of us five times! I counted! What would you call that color anyway? ‘Pea-soup green?’”

Andrea:

“I would say ‘avocado green’.”

Susan:

“I call it ‘lime green,’ but the official name of the color (from Honda) is ‘Kiwi Green’.”

Becky:

“Wouldn’t you really rather have a Bewick?”



The Twitchers at Hampton Beach State Park right before the Thick-billed Murres flew over. Photo by Rebecca Suomala.

2020 Official Species List

Canada Goose	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	Northern Gannet	Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier*	Cooper's Hawk	Red-tailed Hawk
Black-bellied Plover*	Sanderling	Purple Sandpiper
Ring-billed Gull	Herring Gull	Glaucous Gull
Great Black-backed Gull	Black-legged Kittiwake	Thick-billed Murre
Razorbill	Rock Pigeon	Mourning Dove
Snowy Owl	Barred Owl	Belted Kingfisher
Red-bellied Woodpecker	Downy Woodpecker	Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker	Pileated Woodpecker	Blue Jay
American Crow	Fish Crow	Horned Lark
Black-capped Chickadee	Tufted Titmouse	White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren	Golden-crowned Kinglet	Eastern Bluebird
American Robin	Northern Mockingbird	European Starling
Lapland Longspur*	Snow Bunting	American Tree Sparrow
Song Sparrow	Swamp Sparrow	White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco	Northern Cardinal	Red-winged Blackbird
House Finch	American Goldfinch	House Sparrow

* - new for the Twitchers

Note: The Team Captain forgot to collect the weather data!

Two of our missed birds that we had during scouting. Hermit Thrush (left) and Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrow (right). Photos by Rebecca Suomala.

