

Superbowl of Birding XXII: 2025

by Kathryn Frieden and Becky Suomala

January 25, 2025, dawned cold and clear with first light at 6:35 am. It was the morning of the Superbowl of Birding and we, the “Twitchers Out of the Rye” had already been out in the dark and cold since 5:00 am! It was six degrees on the car thermometer when we started, and it only warmed up to 28 degrees during the entire day, and I am going to keep going on and on about how cold it was for this whole report! (Just kidding, I will not mention it again because Becky says 28 degrees is not that bad for a January winter day.) The Superbowl of Birding is a friendly but intense competition run by the Massachusetts Audubon’s Joppa Flats Education Center every January. Birding teams compete for prizes in several categories, counting bird species within Essex County, MA and/or Rockingham County, NH. The “Twitchers” pioneered the idea of a Townie Award by limiting the area of birding to only one township, originally Rye, NH. We have birded in other towns since 2019, hence the “Twitchers Out of the Rye” team name.



First light by Kathryn Frieden.

The success of the day really hinges on work done prior to the starting time of 5:00 in the morning. A big thank you to Captain Becky Suomala for all her hours of planning and scouting, along with help from driver Susan Wisley and navigator Jenna Rosen. A very special thank you as well to Holly Bauer for hosting us with a gourmet dinner and comfortable beds on Friday night, and then with a warm lunch stop on Saturday afternoon complete with feeders to watch (although the hoped-for Red-winged Blackbird never materialized).

We were competing for the Townie Award and once again chose Hampton. Last year we had no owls, so this year we decided to try some new owling spots. At 5:00 in the morning, right on time, we started on Gale Road with Susan whistling the call of the Northern Saw-whet Owl. At 5:09 a Barred Owl flew in and landed on a branch above our heads, its outline just visible in the pre-dawn darkness. We were off to a great start! After several other owling stops with the usual whistling, hooting, and screeching, three of us were able to hear the hoot of a Great Horned Owl on North Shore Road. This satisfied the competition rule that the majority of the team members must identify each species, so we now had two owls on our list. (That’s 200 percent more than last year!)

By 7:01 am, the official time of sunrise, we already had a respectable number of songbirds along with an American Crow. It was now time to be at the shore to greet the high tide. We started at Plaice Cove because American Pipits had been seen there off and on since January 10. This was an important species to get since it is a five-pointer. Sure enough, we not only saw five pipits, but there was a lot going on out on the water and we added 16 more species to our list. We were doing really well despite missing the 3-point bonus on the pipits.

Competition rules state that you must call a five-point sighting in to headquarters so other teams have a chance at it. Periodic announcements of 5-point birds are posted to the NHBirds email list which we (and other teams) monitored. If you are the first team to call in a 5-point species you get a three-point bonus. Becky thought that waiting for sunrise to look for the pipits was a good strategy, but the Broad-



One of our American Pipits by Susan Wisley.

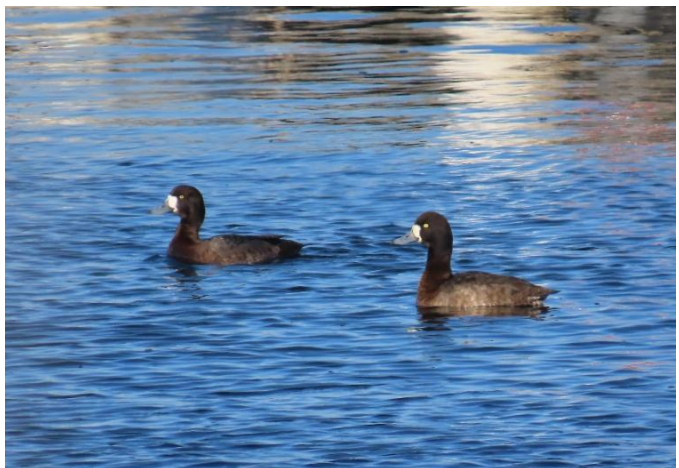
wings team had done its homework and discovered the pipits arrived well before then and they were on hand to get the 3-point bonus.

Another important species that we wanted to find was the American Bittern (also a five-pointer) that Susan had spotted at the north end of Meadow Pond when she and Becky were scouting on Thursday. Susan had even seen it through the reeds from the moving car! We zipped up High Street to the area where it had been for a quick look but, alas, no bittern. However, we did manage to flush out a Great Blue Heron, which is a good three-point species.

The next activity on our plan was to do a “Big Sit” as an added competition category at Hampton Beach State Park. On the way south to the park, we stopped briefly at Henry’s Pool off Winnacunnet Road to look for the Common Merganser that had been scouted there earlier in the week. The pond was completely frozen over, but thankfully the merganser was still there on the other side of the road in a little bit of open creek water. It is always satisfying when a “scouted” bird stays put for the day of the competition! One of the conditions affecting this year’s competition was the limited supply of open fresh water due to the recent cold snap. This made it harder to find species such as fresh-water ducks, and birds that fish, such as Belted Kingfisher.

At Hampton Beach State Park we did not see many species, but the ones we did see were important. We got our first alcid of the day—a three-point Razorbill that Jenna spotted. Three specialty species for the park (and all worth higher points) were thankfully present: Snow Bunting, Horned Lark, and Lapland Longspur. After 30 minutes of “sitting,” it was time to move on, so we drove over to Hampton Harbor for high tide and took a quick look from two spots—the State Marina and the mudflats. Jenna spotted a flock of Dunlin (another three-pointer) in the grasses on the far side of the harbor, and we managed to complete our trifecta of scoters. We had seen Black Scoter and White-winged Scoter while sea-scanning at Plaice Cove, so it was a relief to find a Surf Scoter in the harbor. Two elegant Greater Scaup rounded out the findings.

We had three important locations to keep checking where high-scoring birds had been scouted. One was the north end of Meadow Pond where we had already looked for the American Bittern. Another was High Street Cemetery where a five-point Chipping Sparrow had been coming to a feeder. The third was the Old State Road Covered Bridge near Hurd Farm where a Wood Duck had been hanging out with a group of Mallards in the small area of open water on either side of the bridge. As we headed inland Susan commented that we needed to see some raptors. Within a minute, a Northern Harrier soared over the nearby marsh providing us with great looks. And then a few minutes



Greater Scaup by Becky Suomala.

later, a Red-tailed Hawk flew over, so now we really could not complain about a lack of raptors. We ended up with a grand total of eight red-taileds for the day, including this watchful pair.



Red-tailed Hawks by Jenna Rosen.

On our way inland we went to Tide Mill Road where we drove slowly along to look and listen. Rolling down our windows, we all immediately heard the welcome ti-ti-ti of a Golden-crowned Kinglet, a species that can be hard to find in Hampton. After arriving at High Street Cemetery, we spent 30 minutes looking for the Chipping Sparrow, but no luck. However, Susan spotted a Turkey Vulture flying overhead, an excellent 4-point sighting! Our last stop before lunch was at the bridge off Timber Swamp Road where we saw plenty of Mallards but no Wood Duck. But it was nice to see the 4th and Longspurs team there!

Lunch at Holly Bauer's was fun, tasty, and warm, but then it was out into the field again looking for more birds. Bicentennial Park, known for attracting winter rarities, was not as useful this winter due to much needed repair work being done on the parking lot. But it was still a good spot to do some sea-watching. We found another alcid—a Black Guillemot—and two Red-necked Grebes, but no unusual gulls. At least we did see plenty of Rock Pigeons, which was important because we were famous for missing them back in 2018 when we were still the "Twitchers in the Rye." Luckily, Jenna got a documentation shot which we could send to the donor who threatened a \$5 penalty if we missed them! During the afternoon we did a lot of crisscrossing and back-and-forthing, looking for new species and checking locations for important scouted birds. It was on our fourth trip to Meadow Pond that we finally found the American Bittern. We knew it had to be there because the "Broad-Wings" team and seen it (and scooped us again on the 3-point bonus). After following a snowy trail into the marsh along the edge of some reeds, we saw the bittern just sticking out from a nearby point of land. This was our highlight sighting of the day, but we had to be careful celebrating so as not to fall into the mostly frozen marsh.



Rock Pigeons by Jenna Rosen.

After the relief of finding the American Bittern, we headed down to Ashland Street in the southern-most section of Hampton, just south of the Route 1A bridge. We had two goals for this stop—Sanderlings and a Red-throated Loon and we found them both. Feeling quite pleased with ourselves, we went out to High Street Cemetery for our fourth and last chance at that elusive Chipping Sparrow. No sparrow, but we did see a Northern Flicker which is a three-pointer.

As the afternoon was winding down, we made one last try for the Wood Duck. No luck, but we were surprised to see the Mallard and



The Twitchers, after finding the American Bittern. Photo by Steve Mirick, Captain of the Fourth & Longspurs who we helped find the bittern.

American Black ducks settling down for the night in leaves under large rhododendron bushes on the bank above the water.

We decided to finish our day of competition at Glade Path, which extends out into Hampton Marsh. From there we could look south over the marsh, view the water tower on Church Street, and watch a stand of trees where it was possible a Short-eared Owl could be roosting, waiting to surprise us at dusk. No owls flew out, but we did see two Bald Eagles overhead. Sunset was beautiful at 4:40 pm, and the sky was darkening as 5:00 pm and the end of the competition approached. Then, just as we began the drive back down Glade Path, a Peregrine Falcon, a three-point bird, flew in and landed on the top of the water tower! But it was 5:03 pm and the competition was already over! Who, in their youth, has not answered just one more question after time was called during a standardized test? Well, we did the right thing, of course, and (sadly) did not add the peregrine to our list.



Sunset and the end of the competition by Jenna Rosen.

All in all, it was a great day of birding, competition, and companionship. To top it off, we won the Townie Award with 65 species (our second highest ever total) and 109 points! The American Bittern was a new species for the Twitchers. Three other species were new for us in the town of Hampton: Black Guillemot, Winter Wren, and American Pipit. The wren, pipit, and Lapland Longspur were seen for only the second time ever. There are three shorebird species that are usually present somewhere on the coast during the Superbowl: Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper, and Sanderling. This is only the second time we have had all three expected species; the only other time was in Rye and last year we missed all three.

Of course we had our misses. It is some consolation that no one else found the Chipping Sparrow or the Wood Duck on competition day. Pileated Woodpecker and Red-winged Blackbird had both been found during scouting, but did not appear as hoped. Brown Creepers can be a challenge in Hampton but how did we miss Hairy Woodpecker and Cooper's Hawk?

Pledge Stories

Thank you to all those who donated to support the Twitchers and to those who made pledges. So far, we have raised more than \$6,000, well over the goal of \$4,000. Yay! It's never too late to [add your support](#).

One of our team challenges is fulfilling the pledge requirements that will increase the amount our wonderful donors will be giving to *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH Audubon. Each year we receive some fun, creative pledges and bonuses for things such as new species for the Twitchers, birds with a color in their name, 5-point species, all three Corvids, two species of loons and grebes, and any alcids, owls, or warblers. It's fun to try and meet all pledges, but for some, the birds just don't cooperate.

This year an exciting pledge required us to not only find but to describe the rare *Archaeopteryx* dinosaur-bird. Unbelievably, we not only found tracks but then the bird! We each had to provide a description of the bird which we share with you below.

Becky

“I couldn’t believe it when we saw the Archaeopteryx! First Kathryn pointed out the tracks, but how could that be? They were supposed to be extinct! But then we saw the “bird” itself. Wow, their “killing claw” was scary! No wonder it was sitting on a gravestone in a cemetery. Below it were the remains of some poor creature it had shredded with its sharp teeth. Its feathers were remarkable—they were orange! That’s sure to shake up the researchers. And the wings were so broad—no wonder it could fly. Its bony tail was covered with orange feathers that it spread out when it flew making it look a bit like a kite. We were so privileged to have seen this rare creature, especially on the Superbowl of Birding!!!”

Susan

“Let’s just call it Archy for short, had great pointy, brilliantly white teeth. I suspect it has been using whitening strips. It was a blur of colors as it tried to dart away. When we finally cornered it, it tried to bite me! I admit, we had been warned about that!”

Jenna

“I distinctly remember it having a featherless, scaly, blue face outlined in feathers with a beak-like mouth full of teeth. Its feathered wings had claws. It appeared to be wearing feather pantaloons and had a long, feathered tail. It was either really brightly colored - almost like a parrot or really drab with no distinctive features. Maybe it was like a chameleon and changed color to suit its mood. Hard to say really as it moved very fast.”

Kathryn

“The Archaeopteryx was quite an astonishing bird. Despite its frightening appearance—large teeth, claws everywhere, and a bony tail that could really hurt if you got whacked with it, the bird had quite a sweet song. Not only that, but it was singing in English! I distinctly heard these words: “I feel pretty, oh so pretty, I feel pretty and witty and bright.” It must have been peeking in someone’s window while they were re-watching ‘My Fair Lady’.”



Archaeopteryx tracks!!! by Jenna Rosen.



Kathryn pointing them out by Rebecca Suomala.

2025 Official Species List

(Weather: Low of 6, high of 28, sunny with only light winds and low seas)

Bold indicates a 5-point species

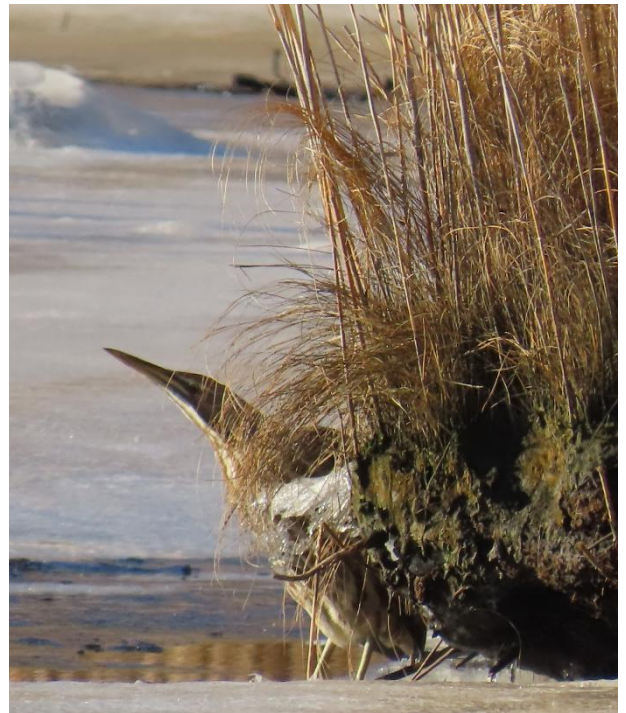
*** indicates a new for the Twitchers*

** indicates a new for Hampton.*

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
Common Merganser
Red-breasted Merganser
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Sanderling
Dunlin
Purple Sandpiper
Black Guillemot*
Razorbill
Ring-billed Gull
American Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Horned Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Red-throated Loon
Common Loon
Great Cormorant
American Bittern**
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Bald Eagle
Red-tailed Hawk
Great Horned Owl
Barred Owl
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Blue Jay



Can you see the American Bittern? Photos by Becky Suomala.



Sanderlings and one Dunlin by Susan Wisley.

American Crow
 Common Raven
 Horned Lark
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Tufted Titmouse
 Golden-crowned Kinglet
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 Winter Wren*
 Carolina Wren
 European Starling
 Northern Mockingbird
 Eastern Bluebird
 American Robin
 House Sparrow
American Pipit*
 House Finch
 American Goldfinch
 Lapland Longspur
 Snow Bunting
 American Tree Sparrow
 Dark-eyed Junco
 White-throated Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 Northern Cardinal



Snow Buntings at Hampton Beach State Park by Susan Wisley.



Twitchers enjoying a gourmet dinner courtesy of Holly Bauer, Photo by Rebecca Suomala.



Twitchers scanning the ocean by Mark Suomala.

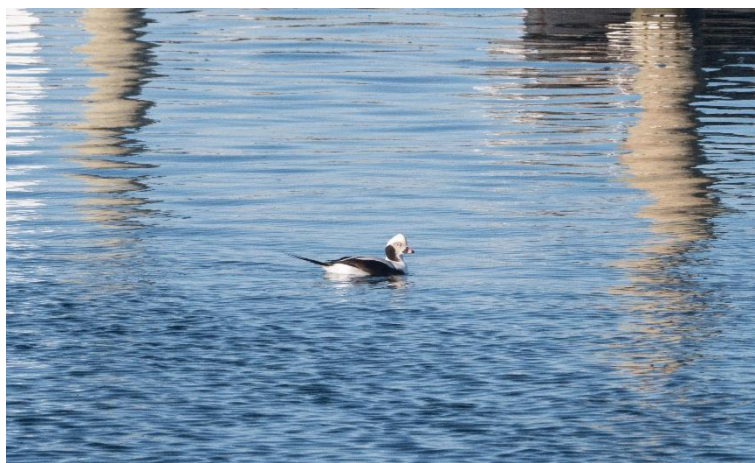
2025 Twitchers Donor List

A big thank you to everyone who supported the Twitchers in the Superbowl of Birding!

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Blake & Nancy Allison
Widge Arms
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Mark & Alison Vernon
Allie Vyne
Peter Wrisley
Phyllis Yaffie
Lynn Zeltman
Anonymous (3)



The Twitchers smiling despite the cold by Mark Suomala.



Long-tailed Duck by Jenna Rosen.