

Superbowl of Birding 2019 – the Twitchers are Out of the Rye!

by Kathryn Frieden

The Superbowl took place on January 19 this year – a week earlier than usual. This friendly but intense competition is sponsored by Massachusetts Audubon’s Joppa Flats Education Center. Teams can compete in Essex County, Massachusetts and/or Rockingham County, New Hampshire. The goal is to find as many species as possible between 5:00 am and 5:00 pm, with points assigned to each species from one to five depending on its rarity. Last year the Superbowl added a new award category, the “Townie Award,” in which the team birds only within a single township in one of the two counties. Having won the debut award last year in Rye, it was time for the Twitchers to strike out into new territory. So, after ten years of voluntarily restricting their Superbowl birding to the township of Rye, the “Twitchers in the Rye” became the “Twitchers out of the Rye” and made Hampton their competition township. It was a whole new ball game!



The 2019 Twitchers with their prize, from left to right, Susan Wrisley, Kathryn Frieden, Andrea Robbins, Becky Suomala.

Although the actual Superbowl takes place over twelve hours, there are many hours of preparation that go into planning the team’s strategy. Our team members this year were Captain Becky Suomala, navigator Andrea Robbins (a returning veteran), owl scout Susan Wrisley and driver Kathryn Frieden, both second-year returnees. This year it was especially important to figure out likely spots to find different species and check out residential areas with active feeders, as well as the usual search for rarities in the hopes they will stick around for the big day. The best routes and most productive spots for Rye had long been well-established, but we needed a brand new game plan for Hampton. Andrea poured through eBird reports, checked with other birders and examined maps while Susan did some driving around Hampton and even scouted for owls. After spending a day scouting on the previous weekend (Kathryn cheered them on while vacationing in Glasgow, Scotland. Yes, in January!) Becky, Andrea, and Susan came up with an ambitious schedule (which turned out to require two teams to accomplish!).



Thanks to Holly Bauer’s scouting at Meadow Pond, we found our first Great Blue Heron of the day. Photo by Susan Wrisley.

Our team activities started Friday afternoon with a last-chance scouting expedition. While we were checking out a flock of American Robins on Liberty Lane, a Barred Owl swooped across the road in front of us. This made us pretty optimistic about our chances for finding one the next morning. And morning starts early on Superbowl day! We spent a short night at a generous donor’s house in Rye, getting up at **3:45 am** to make it to our first owling spot at 5:00 am. Venus was shining brightly, there was a quarter moon shining and not much wind. Perfect, we thought! There is a specific strategy for this kind of birding: stand shivering in the cold and dark at the side of the road, imitate owl calls, and then listen quietly for an answering owl. (All the while hoping not to attract attention for loitering.) We tried Great Horned Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, and Northern Saw-whet Owl calls with no response. Andrea has a very good screech-owl imitation, at least to our ears, but as Becky noted, “We

don't know what the real owls think of it." And our Barred Owl from the day before on Liberty Lane was nowhere to be seen or heard. We had one distant brief Great Horned Owl 6:00 am, but that was our only owl for the day. As dawn light started to creep into the sky, and we stood listening (and shivering) at the edge of a marsh, we heard first a little chip note, then a faint twitter, and within minutes there was a symphony of little sounds all around us. We were hearing the dawn chorus of winter!

We not only started out with just one owl, we were already an hour behind schedule! We headed to the coast for an early morning ocean scan off Ancient Highway, as well as checking for the Chipping Sparrow that had been scouted near there the previous day. Good ocean views, but no sparrow. We then headed to Hampton Beach State Park where we would be most likely to find a Snowy Owl if there was one around. No Snowy, but we did find the Horned Larks that frequent the RV parking lot in winter, as well as a single Snow Bunting, both species that can be tricky to find. Things were starting to pick up.

We had carefully planned a strategy to get the Glaucous Gull which has returned to Seabrook each winter for at least the last six years and frequents the roof of the restroom just south of the Hampton town line. This is a three-point species, and it would be new for the Twitchers. Since its most reliable spot is in Seabrook, we needed a special maneuver to add it to our list. The rules state that you can count a bird if you are within your territory when you hear or see it even if the bird is not. Luckily there is a small strip of land on the south end of the Route 1A Hampton Harbor bridge that is part of the town of Hampton. We drove over the bridge into Seabrook, backtracked up a small side road to that little bit of Hampton, and clambered up to the top of the roadside bank. Sure enough, we could just see the Glaucous Gull in the distance on its favorite roof. Success! Interestingly, other teams that tried for the gull later on in the day did not find it. We were there at just the right time.



"The" Glaucous Gull by Susan Wrisley.

As we headed inland for landbirds, trying to find new species and keep to a semblance of our planned schedule, we had several concerns. Would we be able to find birds at Hampton feeders? Would we ever manage a coffee stop? (At least Susan and Kathryn were concerned.) And what was going to happen with the weather? Although it was sunny and 28 degrees in the morning, a major snow storm was predicted for the evening starting around 7:00 pm. This timing would let us finish our birding, attend the compilation party in Newburyport, and just make it home before the worst of the storm. Would the snow hold off long enough?



Neighborhood Wild Turkey by Becky Suomala.

On Tide Mill Road, while scanning the marsh, we added two three-pointers, Iceland Gull and Cooper's Hawk, plus a four-pointer Fish Crow! The crow was spotted by Susan in a nearby tree, close enough and still enough that she could identify it by the small hook at the end of the bill, a subtle field mark that we had only recently learned about. Another new species for the Twitchers!

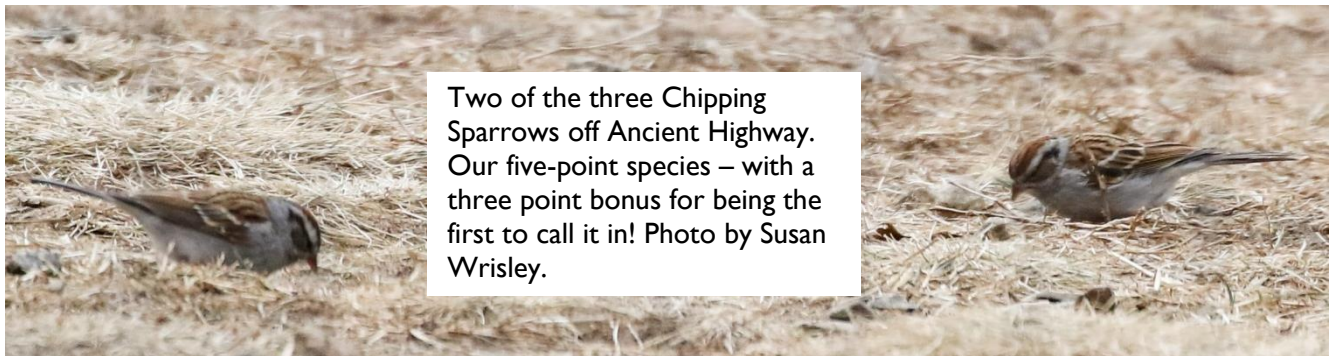
At Landing Road we had three Bald Eagles, two Great Blue Herons and a Belted Kingfisher, none of which are guarantees for the Twitchers. We were further encouraged by some good feeder activity in a nice residential area. As we drove slowly through the streets around noon, we came across the Wild Turkey we had found during scouting. It seemed to have some business at one of the houses! We then found a very busy

feeder and finally had our first sparrows of the day—Song Sparrows and an American Tree Sparrow.

The friendly homeowner came out to chat with us, which was very nice considering that we were four strangers standing around in the street staring into her yard with binoculars. She had been seeing a Carolina Wren regularly, which we missed, but might make this a good spot to get to early in the morning next year.

Our scouting paid off again when we not only relocated a Golden-crowned Kinglet that we had scouted, but also found a Brown Creeper, both species that are never easy on the coast in winter. A four-point Common Raven made this location a great stop. Shortly after, we finally stopped for lunch and coffee – whew!

We went back to the Ancient Highway area to look again for the Chipping Sparrow. This is a common bird during breeding season but they rarely overwinter in New Hampshire, so it is a five-pointer in the Superbowl. All five-pointers have to be called in to Superbowl headquarters so the other teams have a chance at seeing them. Sure enough, as we drove down a side road, Becky spotted a Chipping Sparrow! Not only that, there were three of them! She called it in and we were surprised to learn that we were the first ones to find a Chipping Sparrow that day, and therefore gained three bonus points and another new species for the Twitchers!



Two of the three Chipping Sparrows off Ancient Highway. Our five-point species – with a three point bonus for being the first to call it in! Photo by Susan Wrisley.

The sky was getting grayer and the wind was stronger and colder, but it was time for some ocean scanning at Bicentennial Park. As we arrived at the park it was actually starting to snow! This heightened our worries about the approaching storm. It was only 3:00 pm and it wasn't supposed to start snowing until 7:00 pm! Despite the difficult conditions, Andrea managed to pick out three Thick-billed Murres flying low over the water. At the last minute they landed, but Becky was in the bathroom (evidently a common place for her to be when an unusual bird is seen)! Fortunately the birds stayed just long enough for her to come out and we all managed to see them floating amidst the increasing waves before they took off and headed south. The fourth new species for the Twitchers and another four-pointer. As a bonus, Susan spotted a V-shaped flock of Canada Geese flying overhead. This may not sound very exciting, but we had not seen any geese all day.

Our last few stops at Hampton Beach and Hampton Harbor were in the cold, blowing snow which decreased visibility substantially and made it seem like sunset came early. There was no chance for gannets, kittiwakes, or other ocean birds. We abandoned plans to do some final watching for a lucky Short-eared Owl and headed to the compilation a little early.



The Twitchers ending the day at Hampton Beach in the cold, blowing snow. One day Becky will learn to use the self-timer on her camera!

So how did it all turn out? All day we felt like we were struggling and missing species but when Becky tallied the results on our way to the compilation, we were totally surprised. Our species total was 63, which tied the Twitcher's record from Rye and surpassed the previous five years' totals which had been stuck at 59. Not only that, but we had amassed a record-high 118 points! We had four new species for the Twitchers: Glaucous Gull, Thick-billed Murre, Fish Crow, and Chipping Sparrow. Our biggest misses were probably Barred Owl, Great Cormorant (although they were unusually scarce this year), and Carolina Wren.

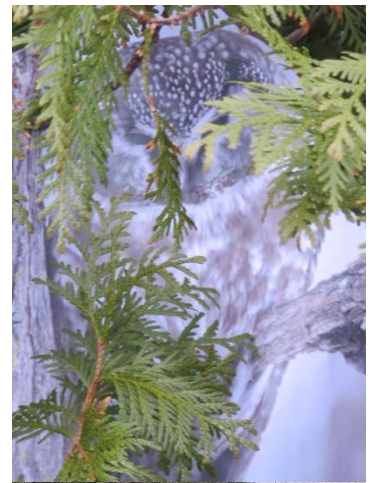
The snow kept some teams from the compilation so that all of us received a raffle prize! We compared notes with other teams, ate pizza and salad and won the

“Townie Award” for the second year in a row! We talked up the fun of being “townies” and maybe even convinced a few other teams to compete in the Townie category next year.

Why do the Twitchers keep doing the Superbowl of Birding every year? We brave the winter weather, miss out on a lot of sleep, and work hard all day to find birds without even breaking for meals. Some good reasons are for the fun of camaraderie, the thrill of competition, and the joy of birding. But another added bonus is that the Twitchers team raises money to support *New Hampshire Bird Records* as well as NH eBird. Some pledges are straightforward dollar amounts (which are always appreciated). But other pledges can be complicated formulas dependent on our success during the day. Several pledgers added five dollars per new species or per five-point species. But topping the list in creative complexity was Twitcher-emeritus Pam Hunt's pledge: “50 cents for each species seen in 2019 that was found on *all ten* previous Superbowls (there are 36 of these), *but minus* 50 cents for each of those 36 species you *miss* in 2019 (kinda like the SATs!)” How well did we do with that? We saw 35 of the 36, missing only the Great Cormorant. This year we are on track to raise \$2,700. A special **thank you** to all our supporters. This event makes a big difference to the two programs it supports.

And what about the storm? The snow on the coast was only an advance band with little accumulation and as we drove inland on the way home, there was even less snow. It didn't really start to snow in earnest until around 8:00 pm, so thankfully we managed to avoid the drama of trying to get home in a blizzard.

Zeke Cornell's pledge added a pretty safe \$100 extra if we found a Boreal Owl. What do you think, should he pay up? Or should we be accused of owl harassment (on paper)?



Outtakes:

Susan:

"I took a closer look at our group photo and realized some unexpected birds had shown up in it!"

Kathryn:

"We are all so clueless about what is going on around us."

Andrea:

"That is the funniest photo ever!"

Becky:

"What a hoot! Zeke may have to pay up after all!"



2019 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	Red-breasted Merganser
Wild Turkey	Common Loon	Horned Grebe
Red-necked Grebe	Great Blue Heron	Turkey Vulture
Bald Eagle	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk	Purple Sandpiper	Dunlin
Ring-billed Gull	Herring Gull	Iceland Gull
Glaucous Gull *	Great Black-backed Gull	Thick-billed Murre *
Rock Pigeon	Mourning Dove	Great Horned Owl
Belted Kingfisher	Red-bellied Woodpecker	Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker	Blue Jay	American Crow
Fish Crow *	Common Raven	Horned Lark
Black-capped Chickadee	Tufted Titmouse	Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch	Brown Creeper	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird	American Robin	Northern Mockingbird
European Starling	Snow Bunting	American Tree Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow *!	Song Sparrow	White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco	Northern Cardinal	Red-winged Blackbird
House Finch	American Goldfinch	House Sparrow

* - new for the Twitchers

! - five-point species

Weather Data

January 19, 2019

