

The Semi-Superbowl of Birding 2022 (or is it the Snowbowl?—no wait, it's the Icebowl!)

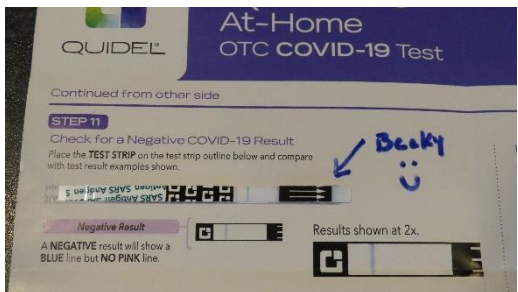
by Kathryn Frieden

This year the Semi-Superbowl of birding had to be postponed a week due to inclement weather. And to us hardy New Englanders, inclement means a huge snowstorm that actually qualified as a blizzard on January 29, the day we were supposed to be out scouring our chosen territory for as many different species of birds as we could find. Weather conditions leading up to the snow date on February 5 were touch-and-go with another storm of snow, then rain, then sleet the day before. But the next morning the skies gradually cleared, and other than the bitter cold and freezing winds, it was a great day to be out birding!



The Twitchers during our Big Sit at Odiorne Point State Park (left to right) Kathryn Frieden, Becky Suomala, Jenna Pettipas, Susan Wrisley. Photo by fellow competitor, Eric Masterson.

Our team this year, the “Twitchers’ Reunion Tour” started out with six potential members, all former “Twitchers,” but after some ups and downs due to the postponement, we were whittled down to four members: Captain Becky Suomala, Driver Extraordinaire Susan Wrisley, Jenna Pettipas, and Kathryn Frieden. We decided to go back to Rye again to compete for the “Townie Award” after several years in Hampton. We could all ride together in one vehicle, unlike under last year’s Covid restrictions, but there was no in-person compilation party (Covid again). Becky did an enormous amount of work organizing the team, watching the weather reports, and managing logistics; so she deserves a lot of credit for our success (note the foreshadowing). We also had help from some important support personnel this year. “Coach” Andrea Robbins, a Twitcher alumna, did a great job of researching birding spots and sightings, encouraging us, and promoting the “Sitting Duck” portion of our day, with excellent results. “Logistical Support Specialist” Steve Bennett was also a big help to us. Early in the morning he had shoveled out the snow in front of the porto-potty at Rye Harbor so that it was useable, which is an important aspect of infrastructure when birding on the seacoast. Then, while we were being sitting ducks at Odiorne Point State Park, he brought us tea, coffee, and donuts that kept us going for the rest of the afternoon. What service! This sets a new standard for winter birding!



Friday afternoon, we did our rapid Covid tests at home and thankfully, we all tested negative. Usually, the Twitchers stay overnight at a generous friend’s house in Rye in order to be on-the-spot in the morning, since the competition starts at 5:00 AM. It was predicted to be sleeting into the evening on Friday and not safe for driving, so we agreed to meet on Saturday morning at 4:20 AM at the Park-and-Ride in Epping instead. (I hope everyone appreciates how early that means we were all getting up!) Susan had to make the

earliest start since she was coming all the way from Hollis. Her husband Pete let us use his Jeep, so we were well-equipped to maneuver through the unplowed pull-offs along the roads. The high clearance of the vehicle did make for some tricky gymnastics getting in and out, but we all managed.

We made it to our first owling spot on Love Lane right on time, ready to start hooting and tooting at 5:00. We tried for Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, and Northern Saw-whet Owl without success. It wasn't until our fifth owling spot that three of us finally heard a Great Horned Owl at 6:29 AM, after our first bird of the day (a cardinal)! One of our pledges included bonuses if all four of us saw or heard a species, and this turned out to be the only one all day that we didn't all get, which really was remarkable. And did I mention that it was snowing again, and very cold while we were owling? Well, the snow stopped right after dawn, and since it was low tide, we headed to the coast to see what was out on the water and the rocks.



Photos by Becky Suomala and Susan Wrisley (right).

We had a good stop at Seal Rocks, boosting our slow-starting list with many typical winter sea ducks. Then we made a beeline to Rye Harbor State Park to see if the Snowy Owl, a three-point species, was still in residence. It was important to try for the owl early before it was flushed by too many visitors. Sure enough there it was, a SuperB owl perched on a rock out at the point, enjoying the peace and quiet of early morning and the dramatic beauty of the clearing sky. (How's that for anthropomorphism?) We then headed south on Route 1A. Just west of the park, we pulled over on the bridge and found the Barrow's Goldeneye that was known to be in the area, which is another good three-pointer! You may be surprised to hear that we were also excited about a flock of Rock Pigeons sitting on the bare rocks in Rye Harbor. Who gets excited about pigeons? Well, back in 2018, we had zero pigeons, a humiliating situation that we did not want to repeat, so this was an important sighting. As we continued south, Jenna spotted two Red-tailed



Hawks in a tree, and then surprisingly, two Great Blue Herons along the roadside ditch, so the morning was progressing well. Susan also spotted a Gray Catbird on Sea Road, a four-point bird, and only the second one the Twitchers have ever had!



Rock Pigeons (left) by Susan Wrisley.
Gray Catbird by Becky Suomala.



Becky holding the robin she rescued from the briar patch as Susan tries to resurrect its tail and Kathryn stands ready to help. Photo by Jenna Pettipas.

There were no gulls on Eel Pond, so we headed out to the old airfield which has good brushy areas to explore. While there, we rescued a robin! Becky noticed it struggling with its tail caught in a bramble, and she was able to safely catch it and hold it still. Susan helped untangle the tail feathers and Jenna ran back to the Jeep to get her trusty knife to cut the last strands of the vine. The robin thanked us and then was able to fly off, so hopefully it will make a full recovery.

We explored many areas in Rye and did lots of pishing, but did not call in many birds. Maybe it was too cold for them. Have I mentioned how cold it was? We also did some more hooting, but found only plastic owls. This year we had a pledge that included plastic owls, so this was not such a bad thing. Also, the whole team could see each one since they don't tend to fly away the way other birds do. Our final count for plastic owls was twelve! We did see a small flock of Cedar Waxwings to brighten the morning, not always a given for the Twitchers in Rye. And our species list did gradually get longer.

By early afternoon we were ready for the "Sitting Duck" portion of our day. This category in the competition means counting the number of species seen from one 25-foot area, or from within one building, no time requirement specified. We chose the south side of the Science Center at Odiorne Point State Park

where we could scan the water, see the trees in the park, and importantly, be in the lee of the building. That northerly wind was really cold! A bonus was meeting up with the other Rockingham County team—the "Three Masked Boobies." It was good to see Eric, Chris, and Greg! We saw the Thick-billed Murre that they had found, one of our three alcids for the day, the others being Razorbill and Black Guillemot. During the fifty minutes we were there, we had eleven species and sixteen points for our list. This doesn't sound like a lot, but turned out to be just fine. (More foreshadowing.) What we enjoyed most while being sitting ducks was the very timely refreshments provided by Steve Bennett. Thank you again!

Heading south again, we stopped at Pulpit Rocks for a photo op, and managed to pick up a Great Cormorant there. The wind was becoming increasingly gusty, and did I mention that it was also quite cold? A real treat was finding a mixed flock of Sanderlings and Purple Sandpipers at Rye Ledge. Sanderlings are not common in Rye and some years the Twitchers have no shorebirds at all. Not only that, but they were very close, and it was interesting to compare and contrast the two species. We scanned Rye Harbor and Awcomin Marsh for raptors, but didn't find the Peregrine



Steve Bennett arriving with hot drinks. Photo by Becky Suomala.

that had been seen there earlier. We did find some Horned Larks, so it was worth the effort. But now the afternoon was getting late and we needed to head north to get in all of our planned stops before the competition ended at 5:00 PM. While walking along Highland Park Avenue, we made a big discovery—a Yellow-rumped Warbler—our first and only warbler of the day! In the photo you can see how puffed out he is from the cold! We made it to Wallis Road at 4:30 to look for the Swamp Sparrow that had been scouted there earlier in the week. It was our second try for it, and the effort paid off because there it was, a good three-point species.

Another species that Susan had scouted earlier was Wild Turkey, also a three-pointer. Since we hadn't found any at other possible locations, we needed to see one at the roost she had seen in the woods along Wentworth Road in Portsmouth. Wait—don't we need all our sightings to be in Rye? As long as we are within the boundaries of Rye, the sighting counts even if the bird is elsewhere. So we needed to do a special "Turkey Maneuver" to make this one count. Here is how it worked. Susan



Yellow-rumped Warbler by Susan Wrisley.

pulled over at the side of the road just over the border in Portsmouth where we could clearly see a turkey roosting high up in a tree. We all climbed out of the Jeep and walked about fifty yards backwards to keep an eye on the location of the bird, crossing back into Rye. From there we could get a difficult scope-view of the bird, but only because we knew exactly where it was. Then we all clambered back up into the Jeep (which was getting tougher to do as the day wore on) and drove off celebrating our success. It was 4:53 and we were now down to the wire. We had a chance at one more stop at Sanders Point just up the road. From there we could scan Little Harbor, and sure enough, a three-pointer Northern Pintail flew past at 4:58 to close out the afternoon with a last-minute success. We celebrated appropriately with some Dove chocolates that Jenna had saved for the occasion, and Susan began the drive back to our cars at the Epping Park-and-Ride.

The way a "normal" Superbowl birding day ends is to drive down to Newburyport for the wrap-up pizza party and awards presentation, but that couldn't happen due to COVID restrictions. This allowed us to stay out birding until the dot of 5:00, instead of heading south by 4:30 in order to make it to the compilation in time. We also noticed the difference in the amount of light at that hour, even just a week later in the year. The awards were presented during an online meeting on Sunday evening. Our team was excited to learn that we had won the "Townie Award," and the "Sitting Duck Award". Usually teams can win only one award, but since we were the sole "Sitting Ducks," the Superbowl judges made an exception for us. We ended up with great totals for Rye: 62 species (Rye record is 63) and 106 points (Rye average is 100). There were a few big misses—where were all the Cooper's Hawks, and where were the owls? Golden-crowned Kinglets are usually around, but perhaps the wind kept them down. Did I mention how cold and windy it was? But all in all, our team felt successful and happy despite the frozen fingers and toes!



Photo by Jenna Pettipas.

Outtakes

Kathryn and Roger Frieden's indoor cat Raven (guess what color he is) pledged a bonus for any ravens that were heard "quothing nevermore." Looks like Raven will have to pay up!

Not surprisingly, there were quite a few bonus pledges for a Steller's Sea-Eagle, given its recent visit to Maine. Who knew that he had a lot of friends, and that they would hitch a ride on south on a barge just to be part of the Superbowl of Birding!

Peter Wrisley had us counting plastic owls for a nice bonus pledge. Too bad we couldn't get points for them in the competition!



And speaking of Peter Wrisley, isn't it interesting that his beautiful blue Jeep had just the right name for our team, and came with a few special birds attached



2022 Official Species List

Canada Goose	American Black Duck	Mallard
Northern Pintail	Common Eider	Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter	Black Scoter	Long-tailed Duck
Bufflehead	Common Goldeneye	Barrow's Goldeneye ²
Hooded Merganser	Red-breasted Merganser	Wild Turkey
Horned Grebe	Red-necked Grebe	Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove	Sanderling	Purple Sandpiper
Thick-billed Murre *	Razorbill	Black Guillemot
Ring-billed Gull	Herring Gull	Great Black-backed Gull
Red-throated Loon	Common Loon	Great Cormorant
Great Blue Heron	Bald Eagle	Red-tailed Hawk
Great Horned Owl	Snowy Owl	Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker	Hairy Woodpecker	Blue Jay
American Crow	Common Raven	Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse	Horned Lark	White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren	European Starling	Gray Catbird ²
Northern Mockingbird	Eastern Bluebird	American Robin
Cedar Waxwing	House Sparrow	House Finch
American Goldfinch	American Tree Sparrow	Dark-eyed Junco
White-throated Sparrow	Song Sparrow	Swamp Sparrow
Yellow-rumped Warbler ²	Northern Cardinal	

* - new for Rye

² – only the second record ever for the Twitchers



Sanderlings and Purple Sandpipers (above) at Rye Ledge and one of our Great Blue Herons. Photos by Becky Suomala.

Thank you to those who pledged their support to the Twitchers in 2022.

Tim and Karen Acerno
Peg Ackerson
Blake and Nancy Allison
Elizabeth W. Arms
Kathy Barnes
Holly Bauer
Steve Bennett
Nat Brown
Tricia and Paul Casey
Patience Chamberlin
Wendy Chatel
Zeke Cornell
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Garry and Mary Stewart
Larry Sunderland
Becky Suomala
Mark Suomala
Phyllis Yaffie
Mark Vernon
Lesley Waldron
Ruth White and George Green
Peter Wisley

Thank you to Unity Dienes for setting up donations on Facebook, and to those who donated through that venue.

If we have missed your name or something is incorrect, please let me know.

Becky Suomala



The Twitchers with their delivery from Dunkin' Donuts, courtesy of Steve Bennett who also took this photo.