

Superbowl of Birding XIV with the Twitchers in the Rye – January 28, 2017

By Pamela Hunt

The story should be familiar by now. It's a little before 5:00 a.m. A blue Prius drives up a dead end road in the town of Rye. Four women get out. One of them has her eyes glued on the watch strapped to her binoculars. Two minutes, she calls out. One minute. And it's a go. Two of the women start making strange noises, albeit not at the same time.

Yes, sports fans, it's time once again to share the exploits of the "Twitchers in the Rye," one of over twenty teams that participated in the 2017 "Superbowl of Birding." If you're unfamiliar with this internationally (ok, maybe just "interstatally") renowned event (but if not, *where* have you been the last few years!), this "Superbowl" has nothing to do with a bunch of silly-looking armored men throwing a ball (it's not even round!) and bashing into each other (can you tell I'm not a football fan?!). No, this is a birding competition. It's organized by Massachusetts Audubon's Joppa Flats Education Center, and the goal is to rack up as many points as possible during twelve hours of birding in southeast New Hampshire and/or northeast Massachusetts at the end of January. Different species are worth different points depending on rarity, so a little careful strategy is always involved. Of course, the "Twitchers in the Rye" – despite at least one rabid Patriots fan in our midst – are not in it to win. We've known this since our first Superbowl nine years ago, since by restricting ourselves to the town of Rye pretty much guarantees that all the other New Hampshire teams will end the day ahead of us. Instead, we're in it to have fun.

And now back to our regularly scheduled narrative...

The four women in the Prius on this dark January morning were team captain Pam Hunt (not at a Renaissance Faire this year), driver Becky Suomala, Andrea Robbins, and new recruit Jeanne-Marie Maher. "Hawkeye" Pat Myers opted out this year, and our usual substitute Peg Ackerson didn't feel like spending a full day in the coastal cold. It wasn't actually that cold though: the average temperature of 37.6 degrees was our second highest ever, and intense winds never really appeared as forecast. Meeting us at the Rye Recreation Area was Zeke Cornell, a non-Superbowl birder who just wanted to hang out with us while we looked for owls. Pam and Andrea made saw-whet and screech-owl noises for several minutes, and we heard a tantalizing squeak from the pines that could have been the former. When nothing more definitive was forthcoming, we opted to pull up stakes and visit a second saw-whet spot along Love Lane, but we'd be back!

Love Lane was also quiet. That's not actually true, since we learned later that Zeke heard a distant Great Horned Owl, but couldn't tell us about it since he wasn't on the team. We had other spots for Great Horneds though, and at 5:30 headed back to the recreation area, where funny noise-making recommenced. At 5:37 a Barred Owl gave a spontaneous shortened call, and we rejoiced in our first bird of the day – and also a first-ever for the Twitchers. Shortly afterward we all heard another squeaky noise that we agreed was a saw-whet, and we were off (Zeke, aka the "owl whisperer," stayed back, and later reported that the saw-whet made some better calls shortly after we left). By quarter of six we were hooting unproductively along Liberty Lane, then continued the theme at Massacre Marsh and Marsh Road Pond. Some dawn-lit Canada Geese at the latter location were species number three, and in the waxing light we frantically retraced our steps in the hopes a Great Horned was waiting for us. None were, and back at Liberty Lane the songbirds were waking up. Among them was a Carolina Wren, but only Pam heard it (at least three people need to see or hear a species for it to count). We weren't worried though – there are lots of Carolina Wrens in Rye.

The rarest species are worth five points on the Superbowl, and need to be phoned in and shared with the other teams. If you're the first team to report a five-pointer, you get three bonus points (this is where strategy comes in!). American Pipits had been reported at Rye Harbor State Park earlier in January, so our strategy was to be there right after dawn – in the event it was there – and claim our eight points. This also provided us with an early opportunity to scan for ocean birds, after which we would head back inland. As we drove south on Route 1A toward the park, we ticked off our third owl species of the day: a Snowy perched atop a telephone pole (for the

record, “owl whisperer” Zeke had seen it at 4:38 a.m. on his way to meet us). Photographers were already starting to gather, but we had a pipit to find.



Dawn at Rye Harbor State Park. After pausing to appreciate this Snowy Owl (photo by Jeanne-Marie Maher), the Twitchers in the Rye walked off into the sunrise to look for seabirds (photo by Pam Hunt).

Or not. The only small bird hopping around on the grass was a Song Sparrow, but we ended up having a productive 20 minutes of sea-watching. Along with the easily found species, we added Red-throated Loon and Black Scoter, two species we’ve had trouble with in the past. The Black Guillemot that’s been frequenting Rye Harbor all winter was also obliging. Around 7:40 we left Rye Harbor with 36 species, and number 37 was a nice surprise when a large woodpecker flying over Route 1A turned out to be a flicker. In high spirits we proceeded to a feeder on West Road, where a highlight of the 2016 Superbowl had been a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The homeowner had christened the kinglet “Flitty,” and Flitty was back for a second winter! We arrived at Flitty’s favorite restaurant a little after 8:00 and waited. The local Red-breasted Nuthatch made its appearance, as did a few other species, but after 10-15 minutes we hadn’t seen the kinglet. We hadn’t seen the local Purple Finch or Carolina Wren either (remember the Carolina Wren from dawn? – you’d better!), and opted to continue birding and come back later in the morning.

The next item on our itinerary was an appointment at Rye Ledge on the rising tide to look for shorebirds, and as we passed Eel Pond a lone female merganser was variously identified as both Common (by Andrea) and Red-breasted (by the rest of us). After finding a small flock of Purple Sandpipers on the ledge, we returned to the pond and confirmed the merganser as a Common – another first for the Twitchers. For the next several minutes, those of us who’d called it a Red-breasted were suitably chagrined. But there was a Red-breasted as well as five Hooded Mergansers on the pond making for a merganser trifecta, and then it was back to West Road. This time Flitty made an appearance, and the Red-breasted Nuthatch returned, but the Purple Finch and – ahem – Carolina Wren remained elusive. No worries, however, since Becky and Andrea found **three** wrens the weekend before at an assisted living facility just up the road. You can probably guess what’s coming next...



Flitty the Ruby-crowned Kinglet visits the suet feeder along West Road. If he knew where the Carolina Wren was, he wasn’t telling. Photo by Jeanne-Marie Maher.

Of course there were no wrens, but we still had Brackett Road to cover – there’s usually something good there! An immature Bald Eagle over the southern end of Brackett was a good sign, and a quick tally revealed a list of 51 species by 11:00 – exactly the halfway point of the Superbowl (there was no time for Lady Gaga). I don’t have comparable numbers for past

attempts, but this struck us as pretty reasonable. After all we still needed a couple of reliable seabirds, Red-tailed Hawk, and Carolina Wren. Throw in a few surprises and we could easily reach 60! The Red-tailed soared low over Massacre Marsh at 11:15, and around noon we added Razorbill and Red-necked Grebe at Odiorne Point. We headed back inland to get lunch at the Hungry Horse Café (traditionally this involves a BLT on rye, but when only Becky and Pam partook it seemed a little less traditional), and took our sandwiches to West Road. Any guesses what we were looking for? And guesses on what we actually found (although Flitty made another appearance, perhaps to taunt us)? We tried again at the assisted living facility for the Wren That Shall Not Be Named, and again along Liberty Lane where Pam heard the one at dawn, but nary a teakettle was to be found. It was almost 2:00 p.m. and the tally stood at 54. The increasingly cold and quiet fourth quarter of the Superbowl stretched ahead of us and we were not in scoring position.

A Great Blue Heron had been reported in North Hampton recently, and it frequented a pond visible from the town line. We snuck into North Hampton to see if the heron was there, and when it was we tried finding a spot where we could see it while standing in Rye (our rule always having been that *we* have to be in Rye, even if the birds aren't). In the field north of the pond, a granite post and a clear difference in mowing marked the town line, and as we stood on "our" side Andrea finally saw the heron through a narrow window in the trees. A couple driving by stopped, and walked out to see what we were doing. Of course they thought we were looking for a Snowy Owl, and were suitably perplexed that it was "just" a heron! To their credit, they were not scared off by our bizarre behavior, and agreed to take our picture at the town line (see below).

The Town Line Heron Incident behind us, we returned to a little ocean scanning, during which Jeanne-Marie picked up a Northern Gannet *way* offshore (maybe 6-7 miles away). Pam and Becky were lucky enough to get on it and see it dive, and we were off. We weren't sure *where* we were off to, but there must be a You-Know-What somewhere. Maybe in the rocks along Route 1A, since they certainly weren't anywhere else. A detour to Straw Point turned up a handful of Horned Larks that Jeanne-Marie had found while scouting, and we hightailed it to the northern tip of Rye to check the mudflats of Little Harbor. Sometimes we've had shorebirds there, but this time the prize was an immature Iceland Gull around 4:15. We had half an hour left before we needed to head to the after-party, and the closest places were back at Odiorne Point. There was no Lesser Black-backed Gull at the "Wooden Bridge" on Route 1A, and we chose to make our last stand at the cove south of the park. There, just as we were packing it in, a Snow Bunting flew over: species number 59 at 4:43 p.m. We ended up with 93 points, with this and our species total being right around our long-term average.

Astute readers will hopefully recall that the Twitchers had 51 species by halftime. In the third quarter we added only three, with five more in the fourth. If nothing else this is a clear indication that we should stop by noon and do something more productive. But as always, we're not doing this for the glory, we're doing it for the fun, and as an added bonus we're on track to raise a record of just over \$2,500 for *New Hampshire Bird Records*/NH eBird, two projects of NH Audubon.

Fun it may be, but this is likely to be my last year captaining the Twitchers in the Rye. The anachronistic call of the Middle Ages is strong, and the last weekend in January also happens to be an event in Manchester that caters to my interest in dressing in Medieval garb and shopping for more of the same. Throw in a glass of mead and the idea of spending six hours looking frantically for eight more species in the cold just simply can't compete. But rest assured that the Twitchers will carry on! Becky and Andrea, and hopefully Jeanne-Marie, will recruit a replacement and be freezing their toes off in 2018. That will be the 10th Superbowl for the Twitchers in the Rye, and I wish them luck (and heck, maybe I'll even write the summary again). It's been fun, and I heartily thank all the folks who supported the team over the years. Don't stop doing so just because I'm foraging in warmer pastures!

Good birding, and fair thee well,

Pam

The list (species in bold were new for the Twitchers):

Canada Goose
 American Black Duck
 Mallard
 Common Eider
 Surf Scoter
 White-winged Scoter
 Black Scoter
 Long-tailed Duck
 Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
 Hooded Merganser
 Common Merganser
 Red-breasted Merganser
 Red-throated Loon
 Common Loon
 Horned Grebe
 Red-necked Grebe
 Northern Gannet
 Great Cormorant
 Great Blue Heron

Bald Eagle
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Purple Sandpiper
 Ring-billed Gull
 Herring Gull
 Iceland Gull
 Great Black-backed Gull
 Razorbill
 Black Guillemot
 Rock Pigeon
 Mourning Dove
 Snowy Owl
Barred Owl
 Northern Saw-whet Owl
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Downy Woodpecker
 Hairy Woodpecker
 Northern Flicker
 Blue Jay
 American Crow

Horned Lark
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Tufted Titmouse
 Red-breasted Nuthatch
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
 Eastern Bluebird
 American Robin
 Northern Mockingbird
 European Starling
 Snow Bunting
 American Tree Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 White-throated Sparrow
 Dark-eyed Junco
 Northern Cardinal
 House Finch
 American Goldfinch
 House Sparrow



Above: Twitchers in the Rye 2017 at our traditional photo-op on the town line; L to R: Andrea Robbins, Jeanne-Marie Maher, Becky Suomala, and Pam Hunt. Above right: Twitchers at the wrap-up in Newburyport. Jeanne-Marie is proudly showing off her door prize of a bird house completely coated in bird seed. She thinks the squirrels will enjoy it immensely. Right: A beautiful Eastern Bluebird at Massacre Marsh by Becky Suomala.