

## Superbowl of Birding XV with the Twitchers in the Rye – January 27, 2018

by Kathryn Frieden

On Saturday, January 27th at 5:00 am, the Superbowl of Birding XV began, and the Twitchers in the Rye were ready! This year was the 10th anniversary for the team, but only Captain Becky Suomala was a veteran. Previous team members were either not available or had officially retired (e.g. previous captain and Hall-of-Famer Pam Hunt). The rookie team members were Susan Wrisley, Jenna Pettipas, and Kathryn Frieden. We weren't sure quite what to expect, but we knew it would be fun. Because the Twitchers limit their birding to the township of Rye rather than



*The 2018 Twitchers, from left, Jenna Pettipas, Captain Becky Suomala, Susan Wrisley, driver Kathryn Frieden. Photo by Zeke Cornell.*

compete within the entire two counties of Rockingham, NH and Essex, MA, their chances of winning an award were slim, but this year was different. There was a new Townie Award, so we were in the running for a possible win!

The night before, Susan, Jenna, and Becky met at a generous donor's house in Rye where the Twitchers traditionally go for an early bedtime and then a short 5-minute drive in the morning to a nearby owling destination. But, before I was recruited, I had already bought tickets to see Paula Poundstone, who was performing at the Concord Center for the Arts that evening. So instead of an early night in Rye, I had a late night out and then only three hours of sleep before driving in the wee hours of the morning to meet my team at 4:30 AM. I'm glad to say I was there on time, and I managed to stay awake all day – a good thing because I was the driver. And it was worth it because Paula was very, very funny!

We started the competition with some cooperative owling with Steve Mirick's team, the 4th and Longspurs. The eight of us piled out of our cars on Love Lane and spread out along the road in the pitch dark, slowly walking and listening. The only sound was Steve hooting repeatedly to attract an owl. If someone had come upon us they might have thought it looked like a scene from "The Night of the Living Dead." No luck at Love Lane so it was on to the next owling spot. And then, success! We heard an Eastern Screech-Owl call in response so Steve's excellent imitation—our first bird of the day! The 4th and Longspurs took off and we were on our own with Becky taking on the duty of hooting like an owl. We managed to hear another call from an owl—this time a Barred Owl with a spooky screech before doing a more typical Hooah. And then we were off to a few more owling spots.

On Liberty Lane we had a close encounter with another Barred Owl. Becky was imitating the high-pitched toot of the Northern Saw-whet Owl when a large bird flew silently across the road right above our heads and landed in a tree in front of us. It was a Barred Owl coming in to find and presumably eat the much smaller saw-whet, but it turned out to be Becky instead, so she must have been doing a pretty good imitation! Our next owl encounter was near Marsh Road Pond. After doing some Great Horned Owl hooting, Becky switched to the saw-whet toot and immediately one flew up from behind us, across the road, and disappeared into the trees. Luckily Susan spotted it, and Jenna and I were able to catch a

glimpse before it was gone. This was important because three out of the four of us needed to hear or see a bird for it to count. Not only that, but it was a life bird for me!

It was getting light, but before we left we managed to hear the brief gurgle of a Wild Turkey, only the second time the Twitchers have ever had one. Later on we also saw a group of five behind Washington Rd., but it's the first one that generates the most excitement. We headed to the coast for sunrise and high tide. At Pulpit Rocks there were some "good birds" – a Northern Pintail and a Green-winged Teal. The teal was the first one ever for the team and our only new team-species that day. The pintail was only the



*The Snow Bunting at Rye Harbor State Park by Susan Wrisley.*

second ever for the Twitchers. We then proceeded fairly quickly down to Rye Harbor where we found a Snow Bunting in the exact same place on the grass where Susan had scouted it the day before. Sometimes scouting does pay off, because our next stop was a feeder on Sagamore Road where the week before Becky, my husband Roger, and I had seen a Pine Warbler. Sure enough, there was our scouted bird, along with Zeke Cornell, who was keeping an eye on that feeder. The Purple Finch we had scouted didn't make an appearance, but the Pine Warbler was a 4-pointer, and this was only the second time the Twitchers had seen one. Becky had been a little worried about our prospects this year due to the brutally cold weather in early January, (not to mention a rookie team), but at this point, we knew we were off to a very good start.

We quickly added Eastern Bluebirds, White-throated Sparrows, and American Tree Sparrows at feeders along Brackett Road. As we headed inland on Washington Road, we made a little detour down Colbourn Road and found a half-dozen Red-winged Blackbirds in a small flock of starlings. This was a relief since we had missed the group that had been at the Sagamore Road feeder, according to a source that shall not be named. (One of the Superbowl rules is that teams cannot accept help from others.) As we resumed our drive a Pileated Woodpecker flew across the road right in front of the car! It was close enough that even I could quickly identify it without taking my eyes off the road. This was a 4-point bird, only the third year the Twitchers had one in their 10 years of competing, and the first of three for the day. Not to mention that it is always exciting to see such a beautiful bird!

Our next major stop was the Rye Airfield, which was a productive area even though our scouting efforts didn't pay off for us like they had earlier. The week before we had found a Field Sparrow there. It would have been four points and a first ever for the Twitchers but we couldn't relocate it. Other teams did find it a little later, so we know it was there. However, we did find a Hermit Thrush and saw a Turkey Vulture soaring overhead that was also worth four points. Then, from the woods behind us came a sudden hoarse *kraaah*. We all looked at each other and in unison cried "Did you hear that?" The team had scored a Common Raven! Another 4-pointer and only the second one ever for the Twitchers. Now we were really "flying high."



*Turkey Vulture at Rye Airfield by Susan Wrisley.*



It was late morning by now, and time to think about lunch. On our way to the Hungry Horse Cafe to pick up sandwiches that we would eat while seawatching, two themes of the day surfaced. While exploring a few more feeder areas, a very nice woman out for a morning walk stopped and asked what we were doing, and was delighted to discover that we were the actual Twitchers that she had heard about on NHPR the evening before. We had become local celebrities! Annie Ropeik, the environmental reporter for NHPR, had contacted Becky earlier about doing a story on the Twitchers and the Superbowl. She would join us in the afternoon to gather some more information and experience some birding firsthand. If one theme was our minor celebrity, the other was pigeons. Actually, the lack of pigeons. It was just about half-time and we hadn't seen a single Rock Pigeon! Rock Pigeons had never been missed before by the Twitchers and we did not intend to be the first team to do it. After all, who doesn't see pigeons?

Our sandwiches safely stashed in the car, we needed to check the mudflats off the Wentworth by the Sea golf course at low tide. Here we found a Horned Grebe, which have been fairly scarce this year, so it was worth the drive. There were also tons of Canada Geese. Which, as you can guess, led to tons of goose poop, just another hazard of Superbowl birding that we took "in stride" (and Kathryn had to clean from her car). From there, it was on to Odiorne Point where we were meeting Annie. Interestingly, the drive to Wentworth along Routes 1A and 1B crosses into Portsmouth for about a mile, where we can't count our sightings. One of the likely species that we had missed so far was the Golden-crowned Kinglet, and sure enough, Becky heard one from the open car window while we were in Portsmouth. And, sadly, that was our only kinglet of the day despite multiple stops all afternoon looking for one.

A few minutes later we met Annie at Odiorne Point State Park. The weather had warmed up so we weren't too cold (or, as our experienced captain said, "positively balmy"). As a matter of fact, by the end of the afternoon the temperature was up to 52 degrees, the warmest ever for the Superbowl. However, there was enough of a breeze to make seawatching a little difficult. We did have some good fly-bys: a Red-throated Loon; a Razorbill, our only alcid of the day; and a Sharp-shinned Hawk, our only accipiter of the day. Even though we had seen some earlier, it was still a delight to see a flock of ten Eastern Bluebirds flying among the trees. And to add to our sense of celebrity, we were again recognized by someone who was excited to see the Twitchers at work. We then made our way south along the coast, stopping at the usual spots. We had seen two of the three scoter species but still needed a Black Scoter, and sure enough, we found one at Rye Ledge while Annie recorded our efforts. By now we were well into the afternoon and still no Rock Pigeons. As I drove to Rye Harbor and then on to Eel Pond, the others scanned the wires, posts, and buildings for pigeons while I dutifully kept my eyes on the road. Well, OK, I did peek a little. It was a first for each of us to be actually searching for pigeons.



*Annie Ropeik (left) from NHPR recording the Twitchers.*

At Rye Harbor, while checking out a group with scopes in the hopes that they were viewing a Snowy Owl, we happened to "overhear" something about an Iceland Gull at Eel Pond. Sadly, no Snowy, and no Purple Sandpipers either, but off we went to Eel Pond where, indeed, we did find the Iceland Gull. It

*The Iceland Gull at Eel Pond by Susan Wrisley.*



was fun to run into a few other teams there as well who were similarly occupied. Before finishing up her reporting for the day, Annie got to see the Iceland Gull, which will be a good bird for her to start her life list with!

And now we were in the final push to find missing species such as Hairy Woodpecker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and you guessed it, Rock Pigeon. It is important to arrive at the compilation party in Newburyport by 5:30 because there are point penalties for every minute that you are late, and eventual disqualification, so time was of the essence. We drove back out to the Rye Airfield to try once more for the elusive Field Sparrow, and although we didn't find it we did pull out a Hairy Woodpecker at last. It's easy to know you're looking at a Hairy when it lands on the tree

trunk right next to a Downy! We also spent a little time investigating a juvenile hawk sitting in full view on a wire, trying to turn it into a juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk, but sadly, in the end, it stayed a Red-tailed Hawk.

From the Rye Airfield we went back out to the coast with a few quick stops, including Central Cemetery where we picked up our third Pileated Woodpecker of the day. We made our way north past Rye Ledge, Odiorne State Park, and dozens and dozens of telephone posts but no last-minute gems were added to our list before we had to leave for Newburyport. And no Rock Pigeons either!

We arrived at the compilation site a few minutes before the deadline and donned our Twitchers in the Rye shirts and hoodies. We were proud of what we had accomplished. We were right on average for the number of species—59 for the fourth year in a row. Our point total was 104, a little higher than the average of 98. So despite a certain spectacular miss, we did well. We also managed to raise almost \$3,000 for NH Audubon's bird conservation programs – NH eBird and *New Hampshire Bird Records*. And then, to top it off, we were the first recipients of the new Townie Award! Next year, we will be the team to beat. Below is our official 2018 species list.

### **Outtakes**

Susan: *"I think the pigeons must have been banned from Rye!"*

Jenna: *"Maybe they were all eaten by Peregrine Falcons and that's why we didn't see a Peregrine either—they were all sleeping off their big meal."*

Kathryn: *"Remember that song by Tom Lehrer, 'Poisoning Pigeons in the Park'?"*

Becky: *"Stupid pigeons!"*





**Twitchers 2018 Species List** (species in bold were new for the Twitchers.)

Canada Goose	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Tufted Titmouse
Mallard	Red-tailed Hawk	White-breasted Nuthatch
American Black Duck	Razorbill	Carolina Wren
Northern Pintail	Ring-billed Gull	Eastern Bluebird
<b>Green-winged Teal</b>	Herring Gull	Hermit Thrush
Common Eider	Iceland Gull	American Robin
Surf Scoter	Great Black-backed Gull	Northern Mockingbird
White-winged Scoter	Mourning Dove	European Starling
Black Scoter	Eastern Screech-Owl	Snow Bunting
Long-tailed Duck	Barred Owl	Pine Warbler
Bufflehead	Northern Saw-whet Owl	American Tree Sparrow
Common Goldeneye	Red-bellied Woodpecker	Song Sparrow
Red-breasted Merganser	Downy Woodpecker	White-throated Sparrow
Wild Turkey	Hairy Woodpecker	Dark-eyed Junco
Red-throated Loon	Pileated Woodpecker	Northern Cardinal
Common Loon	Blue Jay	Red-winged Blackbird
Horned Grebe	American Crow	House Finch
Red-necked Grebe	Common Raven	American Goldfinch
Great Cormorant	Horned Lark	House Sparrow
Turkey Vulture	Black-capped Chickadee	



*Left: Red-winged Blackbird by Susan Wisley.*

*Right: The Twitchers by Annie Ropeik.*



**Weather Comparisons.** Data from the National Weather Service, Portsmouth, NH (KPSM, Pease).

