

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

GRAND WARBLER CIRCUIT

MAY 11-20, 2010

TRIP REPORT

Amidst pouring rain, driving wind and flooded roads, nine eager souls arrived at Detroit's international airport in search of the crown jewels of birding - the eastern wood warblers. Tiny packages of fluff, yellow, gold, orange, blue, green, gray and black, all making their annual journeys from winter to summer. Enough to drive a birder mad with desire and pleasure. Ocular sex with feathers. Each spring, along the shores of Lake Erie in northwestern Ohio, hundreds of thousands of these mighty mites alight among the trees of the Great Black Swamp at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, all seeking food to fatten up for their continuing migration to northern and western breeding grounds. A few birders are there to greet them as well. In fact, this may be the one place in North America where the birders are more densely packed in than the birds they came to see. And it doesn't seem to bother the birds one bit, so intense are they in their quest for sustenance and so abundant is the food supply. Birds dripping off trees? Warblers feeding inches from your face? That's the norm at Magee Marsh during spring migration.

Due to the weather, I almost gave up on the the chance to do even a little birding on our first afternoon, so we stopped for a bit at the beautiful headquarters of Ottawa NWR, adjacent to Magee WA. We stopped at the Black Swamp Bird Observatory HQ. Then we stopped at the Bird Center at Magee. All indoor stalling by yours truly to do SOMETHING our first afternoon that had anything to do with birding. Then, miraculously, the rain and wind paused long enough for us to pay a brief visit to the world-famous boardwalk at Magee. Driving along the entrance road, numerous Canada Geese tended to their creches of goslings and we had to be careful not to have pressed goose on our checklist. Due to the bad weather, very few birders were at the boardwalk, but the warblers had not abandoned their posts. We saw 14 very wet warbler species in about one hour before the rains resumed and we were driven away. Everyone was both startled and amazed when several black-throated green warblers fed voraciously within touching distance. Magnolias, Cape Mays, BT blues, a lovely Nashville, abundant chestnut-sided and bay-breasted warblers all graced our birding table. A prothonotary engaged in battle with a house wren over real estate rights to a nest hole while everyone cheered the show. We retreated to the safety and comfort of our motel, followed by dinner at a nearby Irish pub.

Day 2: Mist and cold with winds out of the north, the wrong direction to encourage a migratory flight into Magee. Southwest and south winds are the hoped for conditions that deliver hungry birds by the thousands to even hungrier birders. Nonetheless, we ventured forth, slowly ambulating along the boardwalk, finding birds as we went. Thrushes were very common, with veery, Swainson's and gray-cheeked all easy to find, wandering the forest floor, flipping leaves, looking for food. A female golden-winged warbler, Tennessee, northern parula, Blackburnian, blackpoll, American redstart, ovenbird, northern waterthrush, Wilson's, Canada swelled our warbler list spectacularly. Even if volume was not yet what it could be, species diversity was exceptional. We paused mid-morning to attend a most informative bird-banding demonstration at the Black Swamp Bird Observatory headquarters. Despite the cold, it was very exciting to see individual warblers and other species that had been mist-netted and banded by the Observatory and learn all about their program. Afterwards, we drove over to nearby Metzger Marsh, a large freshwater body of water with a small wood lot that often harbors migratory birds. The marsh had pairs of trumpeter swans, descendants of birds reintroduced in Ontario dozens of years ago. Black terns coursed over the windy water, hawking whatever insects they could find. Common moorhens were exactly that, with a few coots thrown into the mix. Great blue herons and especially great egrets were EVERYWHERE! At Ottawa NWR we saw a congregation of 30 great egrets in one small pool. A yellow-billed cuckoo clacked in the trees and a pair of least flycatchers "che-bek"ed to their heart's content. Purple martins soared continuously overhead, as this species is very common here. We found a good mixed flock of warblers in the woods, all seeking shelter from the wind while looking for a meal. So we did that, too, and drove over to the Blackberry Corners Tavern in the town of Elliston (home of Crystal Bowersox, for you American Idol fans). Fortified by a good meal followed by even better home-made pie, we returned to the boardwalk for the afternoon, where the birding was a bit slow, but allowed for excellent study of the birds that were around.

Day 3: More of the same. Which may sound boring, but only if you consider seeing dozens of warblers, scarlet tanagers, Baltimore orioles up close and personal boring. The wind continued from the north, slowing migration. An orange-crowned warbler put on a nice display for everyone. The highlight may have been watching two flocks of about 60 breeding plumage dunlin take off from a pool at Ottawa NWR, circle higher and higher and head north over Lake Erie to continue their migration toward their arctic breeding grounds.

Day 4: This is why we plan this trip to spend six days in the area. The wind dramatically shifted from the north to the south. The temperature went from a raw 55 degrees to a sub-tropical 80 in 30 minutes. And the birds poured in in biblical proportions. This is what we had been waiting for! Swarms of warblers filled the trees along the boardwalk, along with thrushes, tanagers and more. We saw 24 species during the day! Both yellow-billed and black-billed cuckoos were seen. Two mourning warblers dazzled the crowd with a knee-level display from the parking area. But clearly the star was a Kirtland's Warbler, found along the east beach early in the day by Kenn Kaufman. This bird stayed the entire day, flitting about one small patch of short vegetation while perching very photogenically on leafless bushes. As Kenn said, "this may

be the most photographed Kirtland's Warbler in history". During our picnic lunch, a vanguard of nine American white pelicans soared overhead. Lincoln's sparrow foraged among the numerous lingering white-throats. After lunch, we went over to Stange Road on Ottawa NWR and saw marbled godwit, American pipit and several female yellow-headed blackbirds. To celebrate all this good fortune, we could do no less than visit the Barn Creamery for ice cream, malts and milkshakes. While thus dining elegantly, an adult bald eagle soared by as if to congratulate us on our success. What could be better - a chocolate malt AND a bald eagle! Very American of us.

Day 5: Today we switched it up and trekked west to Oak Openings Metropark, just south of Toledo. We met Rick Nirschl, an expert local birder, to guide us around the winding roads of the park, and had a thoroughly delightful day. The weather was perfect, clear and warm, but not too hot. Oak Openings is a very unique eco-system of oaks and natural meadows on very sandy soil. Many species can be found here that are at the extreme northern or eastern parts of their ranges. Red-headed woodpeckers are common, as are lark sparrow, indigo bunting and a host of others. Summer tanager was a delight to find and hear singing. Hooded, blue-winged, and pine warblers provided perfect viewing opportunities and ovenbirds were abundant. At a field near the Toledo airport, we found many grasshopper sparrows and several Henslow's sparrows were singing, if you can call their quiet "see-lick" a song. Acadian flycatchers called "piz-za" throughout the forest and it was nice to see a tiny blue-gray gnatcatcher tending its tiny nest with even tinier nestlings.

Day 6: Unfortunately, the north winds returned, effectively stonewalling further migration. We tried an early morning hand at East Harbor State Park, but the birding was D-E-A-D. After a relaxed breakfast, we checked out the boardwalk, where there were still quite a few warblers, but the cold wind coming right off adjacent Lake Erie made birding a tad uncomfortable. Ottawa NWR wasn't much better, but we did find a couple of flocks of black-bellied plovers and other shorebirds along Stange/Krause Roads. Then back to Magee for the afternoon before packing it in for the day. Even on a bad day, we found 15 species of warblers, including wonderful close-up looks at both male and female Canada warblers. A scarlet tanager, besides being beautiful, chose to crap on one of our participants. Sort of a red badge of courage. It was time to move on.

Day 7: We packed up our gear and spent a couple of hours at the Magee boardwalk, but the wind was still northerly, so nothing had changed. Traveling east and then north through Toledo, west of Detroit and continuing to the south part of Saginaw Bay on Lake Huron, Michigan, we visited Nyanquing Point State Wildlife Area. Despite the cold wind (without it the mosquitoes would have had us for lunch - they still tried their best), we did pretty well. From the observation tower (that was REALLY windy), we delightedly watched an extended family of sandhill cranes chase each other around, jumping and cavorting, all in preparation for the full dances that comprise their mating rituals. A walk around the marsh brought wonderful views of dozens of yellow-headed blackbirds, sparkling like golden jewels among the dry cattails. Caspian terns floated by on the wind, from their nesting grounds around the lake. A small colony of bobolinks put on a yodeling display. From there we made one other nearby stop along the

lake, but it was so cold and windy that people were losing enthusiasm for seeing flocks of shorebirds on the sandbars. We arrived at our luxury beach front resort in Tawas, Michigan in time for a swim in their heated indoor pool and dinner overlooking the lake.

Day 8: A miracle happened overnight! The day was warm, sunny and with only a slight breeze. Much to our birding pleasure, the weather remained so for the rest of the trip. We spent the morning birding beautiful Tawas Point State Park, which was very reminiscent to me of Point Pelee. A sandy spit that juts out into Lake Huron with scrubby short trees is a natural attractant to northbound migrants looking for a place to land, rest and feed before continuing onward to their breeding grounds. Probably the highlight of the day was a sora calling from just inside a dense cattail stand. I called it out and it responded instantly and vigorously, right in front of us! I have never seen a sora calling so continuously, standing tall on its toes, bending over, saying “soh - rah, soh-rah”. I think I got the name thing now. I never appreciated the onomatopoeia before. Blue jays were also migrating in force and we watched flocks of over one hundred birds flying north up the point and then south again, as if they couldn’t make up their minds. A pair of American redstarts did a courtship dance for us, fanning out their tails and wings as if each trying to outdo the other for beauty. We also had a three merganser day! As we were walking back, a red fox and her kit frolicked alongside the path.

After stopping at a local deli and grabbing the ingredients for a picnic lunch, we continued north to Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area. Ladies and gents, this is one beautiful marsh! While we were driving along, a magnificent male golden-winged warbler popped out of the brush and posed for us on a dead tree limb. We found a parking area and picnicked, conveniently using someone’s pickup truck bed for our dining station. While feasting on sandwiches and turkey jerky, a yellow-bellied sapsucker perched right in front of us. An osprey flew over carrying a fish and started devouring it in a nearby snag. “Sure”, I said, “everyone knows it’s an osprey. But what kind of fish is it eating?” A careful scope look revealed it to be a crappie. We walked the marsh dike, where an improbable purple gallinule had been hiding, but only succeeded in finding blue-winged warblers. Three enormous trumpeter swans slowly flew by, their wingbeats sounding like a flock of helicopters. Emerging on the north side of the marsh, we wound our way west and north and finally arrived at River Road, following the beautiful Ausable River. We stopped at several scenic overlooks, enjoying the day and the views, adding a pair of singing vesper sparrows to the list. As we neared our destination of Mio, an ominous black cloud in the west marred the otherwise clear blue sky. We hoped the town wasn’t on fire. It wasn’t, but a huge forest fire had erupted that afternoon just to the west and was burning out of control. Ultimately, the fires burned over 10,000 acres of jack pine forest, making the endangered Kirtland’s warblers very happy, but not the several cabin owners whose homes were engulfed in the blaze.

Day 9: We got up early and drove to the nearby Mio District US Department of Agriculture headquarters. The still burning fires fortunately did not disrupt our plans for a tour of the Kirtland’s warbler nesting areas. After watching a very dramatic and highly informative video about the warbler and how the land is now being successfully managed to perpetuate this

very endangered species, we caravanned out to a scrubby area of jack pines with our guide, a young man from the Bahamas, where the Kirtland's makes its winter home. Wandering out among the once-burned area, we heard and saw three adult male Kirtland's, each perched atop a jack pine, proclaiming its territory for the coming season.

After the tour, we did a bit of exploring on our own, winding through the forest, birding Wagner Lake and enjoying the sunny day. Until, that is, I took an encouraging shortcut on a dirt road to get back to the main highway. After successfully navigating, with some skill, I might add, about 4.9 miles of narrow sandy 5.0 mile road with the 15 passenger van, within 100 yards of the main road, I totally buried the van in foot-deep sand, well beyond any hopes of getting out on our own. Triple "A" to the rescue! In less than an hour, we had been winched out and on our way again. The sand was so bad that even the tow truck almost got stuck trying to yank us out. We merrily continued on the Jack Pine Loop Drive, visiting Mack Lake campground and several magnificent overlooks of the Ausable River Valley. Our farewell dinner was at O'Brien's Restaurant, an extraordinary gourmet dining establishment in the middle of nowhere. As is FOFA's custom, we did the "greatest hits", revealing our favorite birds and experiences for the trip. Clearly the Magee Marsh boardwalk was the winner when it came to experiences, with everyone citing how nice it was to bird, often cheek to jowl, with such a pleasant and helpful group of fellow birders. For birds, the golden fellow from the south, prothonotary warbler, stole the show, closely followed by Kirtland's and mourning warblers. People talked about how they had "doubled" their ability to identify warblers by being able to see them so closely and so often.

Day 10: For our last morning, we made a beeline for the Rifle River Recreation Area. We only had a couple of hours here, but I would definitely love to spend a couple of days! The area is a fantastic combination of deciduous woodland, lakes and marsh, hosting large numbers of breeding northern species and migrants moving through. At one lake, we were thrilled to see a pair of common loons feeding just offshore, close enough to see their jewel-red eyes. We found a pair of redstarts building a nest. Tennessee warbler sat out in the open while northern waterthrushes called loudly from their boggy lairs. The clock was ticking, however, and we had to abandon this paradise to get to the airport for flights home. Move 'em up, move 'em out!

Despite the somewhat poor weather, the trip was very successful. We saw 171 species of birds, including 30 warbler species and 14 sparrow species. We even saw 11 species of mammals. I will probably not be doing this trip next year, but if you are interested for future years, please let me know. Also, if you would like a copy of this year's checklist, I will be glad to e-mail one to you. Lots of trips coming up in the future, so if you are interested in hitting the road with Flights of Fancy Adventures, just let me know.

Best wishes and good birding!

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