

NYSYBC Camping Trip!

During the last weekend in June, the Young Birders Club had an amazing camping trip in the western Catskills! We camped out along the Beaverkill, a famous trout fishing river and a fantastic birding spot (as we discovered). On this trip, our goal was to help out as much as we could with the New York Breeding Bird Atlas (NYBBA).

NYBBA is an effort to survey all of New York's breeding birds. This community science project is held once every 20 years for a five-year period (for example, the last atlas was held from 2000-2005 and the one before that was from 1980-1985). To conduct the survey, the state is broken up into "blocks," which are 3.2 miles long and 2.8 miles wide each. These blocks are set in chunks of six and one in three of them is a "priority block" (the northwest block and central-east blocks). The mission of the atlas is to completely survey every priority block to gain a full understanding of NY's breeding birds and their population trends. To do this, atlasers watch carefully for signs of breeding. Once we found a sign, we entered a "breeding code" into eBird. The goal is to get the highest possible code, which would confirm a species as a breeding bird in the block. On this camping trip, we were exploring one of the most under-atlased regions of the Catskills to get more data for incomplete priority blocks.

Thanks to the amazing efforts of our guides Wendy Tocci, Mark DeDea, and Peter Schoenberger, all of whom are with the amazing John Burroughs Natural History Society that sponsored the trip, we were able to gather lots of critical data and have an amazing time in the process. Atlasing is really awesome. It makes even the most ordinary birds exciting and is an amazing way to learn about new bird behaviors. Every sign of breeding is exciting and getting a new confirmed code is elating.

The NY Breeding Bird Atlas III site is: ebird.org/atlasny

Friday: Arriving and Beginning

On the first day, as we slowly trickled into the campground and set up our tents, each of us marveled at the amazing array of birds – Dark-eyed Juncos with their fledglings, the high-pitched songs of Blackburnian Warblers, the tinkle of the Winter Wren, the short tune of the Magnolia Warbler, and the constant sound of Chipping Sparrows and American Redstarts. As soon as I arrived, I was itching to begin atlasing. After a short walk around the campsite, I had already racked up several new confirmed codes, including a pair of Black-throated Green Warblers collecting food, some adorable Black-capped Chickadee fledglings, a cute American Redstart fledgling, and a Blackburnian Warbler feeding his fledgling.

After more of us had arrived, a few of us began wandering around and finding more birds and confirmed codes. We heard singing Blue-headed Vireos, spotted a Brown Creeper, saw a few Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and watched a few Common Mergansers flying over. However, on a more depressing note, we did come across a dead Gray Catbird (which showed no signs of injury), a sad reminder that surviving in nature is not easy for birds.

Soon after our first adventure around the campground, it was time for dinner. A few sandwiches and conversations later, it was time to explore the Beaverkill itself. While some of us (not including me!) brought water shoes, a few of us were forced to go barefoot – and it did

not feel amazing! The water was cold and fast and the rocks were definitely slippery and treacherous, but it was still very fun. Once we navigated the river and were safely on the other bank, we ventured along the forest edge and then decided it was time to head back (which was easier said than done). Almost none of us emerged dry. I was soaked and it was drizzling. But once we reached the bank, it was time to see our next surprise. A Garter Snake! While we took turns holding it and admiring it, we all noticed something less pleasant – it had musked on us! The foul smell coated our hands and we tried to wash it off as fast as possible because snake musk can smell for days. Luckily, the musk was mild enough that we were able to get it off. And after observing it for another minute, we let the snake go back into the shrubbery and it disappeared in moments.

Once we had changed back into dry clothes and it had seemed like the rain had mostly dissipated, the whole group decided to go for an evening walk along the Beaverkill (with many of us crossing our fingers for a Mourning Warbler). Before we had even moved, we noticed a female Red-breasted Nuthatch carrying food – another confirmed code! It was clear that there were tons of birds around and most were raising families.

Continuing down the campground towards the trail, the ominous clouds seemed to threaten more rain, but we persisted. We continued to note the common species as we traveled, including Red-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos and tons of Blackburnian Warblers (there were loads along the trail as well). Over the patter of water droplets falling from leaves and the rush of the Beaverkill, hearing the birds was not very easy. But that still didn't stop us from seeing some great birds.

Along the trail, which was lined with coniferous trees on the left and the Beaverkill itself on the right, we heard more and more Magnolia Warblers and American Redstarts. Once in a while, a Veery would reveal its presence by giving its "veer" call or a Gray Catbird would shoot into the air from one of the bushes along the river, before diving back to cover. But despite our best efforts, our target Mourning Warblers were as elusive as ever.

Moments later, several of us (me included) who were lagging behind to watch birds got some amazing news – a Black Bear had just run across the trail up ahead. Racing down the trail in hopes of glimpsing the creature, we soon realized that it was hopeless. The bear was already gone. But that did not stop us from being amazed! According to those who saw it, it had moved up the bank of the river and crossed the trail into the forest. It was a young bear, but not so young that we should be worried about a mother nearby.

Moving down the trail, we eventually noticed some ducks swimming down the river. Common Mergansers! There was one adult female and seven adorable ducklings! We all raced to get good photos, but the lighting was not great. However, we still got to enjoy great views of the ducklings.

The trail ended at a covered bridge and we crossed it to the other side of the river. We continued to hear several common species, such as Red-winged Blackbirds and Song Sparrows. We also observed Cedar Waxwings and a Least Flycatcher that was calling from the forest nearby.

After lingering for a few minutes, it was time to head back and get ready for bed. But along the way, there was one last bird surprise in store for us. As I walked down the trail, I heard a familiar song – Hooded Warbler! Or was it? This was not an expected species and we wanted

to make sure it wasn't a Magnolia Warbler doing a similar song. But it passed the Merlin test, as well as our own ears.

As we got ready for bed, we had our final non-birding surprise of the day – hoodies! The generous trip leaders gave the club members wonderful hooded sweatshirts with the John Burroughs Natural History Society logo on them. They were super comfortable and we all loved them! I've already used mine a bunch and it is great. A huge thanks to the John Burroughs Natural History Society for getting us those amazing hoodies!

As we went to bed, the patter of the rain on our tents was ominous and we all crossed our fingers that our tents would not flood.

Saturday: Amazing Birds and Torrential Downpours

My Saturday probably started earlier than most other people. I was up at one in the morning (probably thanks to the sound of rain on my tent) and the birds were already active! I heard one rogue Dark-eyed Junco giving its distinctive trill and a Barred Owl giving its classic "who cooks for you" song.

But by dawn, it wasn't just two random songs in the night – the air was alive with birdsong from over a dozen species. We were all amazed by the sheer number of birds singing. It was impossible to tune it out and the name of each bird seemed to flash in my head as I heard them – Chipping Sparrow, American Robin, Magnolia Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Dark-eyed Junco, Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, Red-eyed Vireo, Blackburnian Warbler, American Redstart, and more.

When everyone was awake and outside, we all compared notes about our nights, especially when it came to how waterproof our tents were (not everyone's tent held up). After discussing our plans for the day, many of us headed out to the same trail that we had walked the previous night. However, we didn't make it very far down the trail. Simply making it to the trail was a challenge because of how many birds were around. Some highlights included Magnolia Warbler fledglings (!!!), a Yellow-rumped Warbler feeding young, and a Blackburnian Warbler in a sapling along the river. Clearly, the day was already off to a great start.

Back at the campsite, it was time to split into groups so we could cover as many priority blocks as possible. While other teams were heading off to walk along a road with a forest and another was covering a lake, the team I chose to be part of was heading off on a challenging mission: relocate a pair of Northern Goshawks that had nested during the previous year in the forest we were visiting.

My Hiking Adventure

The drive to the trailhead was mostly along a gorgeous and remote road through the forests of the Catskills. Occasionally, we did pass houses, but we were also moving through long, uninterrupted stretches of trees. Unfortunately, during the drive, it began to rain again.

At one point in our drive, we passed a large field. Slowing down to take a look, we noticed a few Bobolinks displaying overhead and singing their wacky and mechanical songs.

When we did reach the trailhead, it was hard to hear any birdsong over the downpour and we started off on the wet trail, straining our ears for any birds. Luckily, we did hear a few –

Blackburnian Warblers, Ovenbirds, Blue-headed Vireos, Least Flycatchers, and Black-throated Green Warblers. As we made it further into the forest, we passed large stands of conifers on occasion and we eventually met up with a rushing stream. Several of us were looking at it not for birds, but to see if we could find any good places that might have Brook Trout! We assumed this was the stream that would lead to our destination, Mud Pond.

We did slowly expand our list for the location, but it was impossible to confirm any species thanks to the loud rain and our own preoccupation with trying to avoid getting drenched. After passing some conifers, we noted a few Magnolia Warblers and Winter Wrens. And as we made it further down the trail, we also added Belted Kingfisher and Black-throated Blue Warbler. Luckily for us, a bright male Black-throated Green Warbler made an appearance right along the trail (on the ground, for that matter)!

While the trail seemed fairly easy (if wet), it was about to throw us the first curveball of the hike. As we reached a part of the trail that would go right along the stream, we noticed that it had been washed out – and there was a workaround that would take us up a steep hill. It was not easy to clamber up the hill – and a few of us ended up turning back because of how wet and muddy it was.

Once we were up on the hill, our main concern was reconnecting with the trail. After a few minutes of scrambling along the slope, we looked down to see the trail once again. Finally! The only problem now would be to reach it. But eventually, we were able to make it back down. We were back on course. And while the rain was still intense, we felt hopeful. However, we still had some challenges ahead.

After walking a significant distance down the trail, we made it to a split in the stream...and an end to the trail. It appeared that, once again, the trail had been washed out. Thankfully, though, Peter had a map on his phone and we were able to see roughly where the trail would go. The bad part was that our only option was to cross the stream.

It actually wasn't that bad. Amid all of the humidity, getting wet wasn't a problem for me – the real challenge would be reconnecting with the trail. According to Peter's map, we would have to climb up a hill and walk through the forest before eventually intersecting with the trail. However, we weren't sure how long it would take or how clear the trail would be.

After climbing the hill, we heard a few more birds, including a Black-throated Blue Warbler and a Veery. We also had not found the trail, so we continued into the forest. Eventually, we reached a point where we appeared to be almost on top of the trail according to Peter's map and, after a few dozen meters, we had relocated the path!

As we pushed down the trail, delighted at our success, we were amazed at the beauty of the environment (despite the rain). We had entered into a great field of ferns with high trees creating a cover. A stream ran around the field and we encountered more Black-throated Green Warblers and Ovenbirds. Continuing down past the field of ferns, we reached a sudden clearing – a small pond with a dead snag set in the middle. As we stepped out into the open, we heard the distinctive squeak call of a Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

The trail continued around the pond and back into the forest, where we found more Veeries and two male Magnolia Warblers (which we could only identify by their undertail markings – the rain had fogged our binoculars so much). We hoped we were approaching the pond, but it seemed like we still had a decent way to go.

Eventually, we reached our first major uphill portion of the hike (besides those slopes). It was not easy to walk uphill in the rainy and humid conditions. We were all hot and drenched and we had to pause frequently. When we did pause, we continued to hear the same species – Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, and American Redstart. We also added American Robin to our list for the day, and got our first two confirmed codes when we stumbled across an Ovenbird parent with a fledgling and an American Robin fledgling.

Once the trail seemed to level out, we saw water through a gap in the trees. We had reached Mud Pond! To us, this was a huge milestone. Not only were we closer to the supposed nest site of the goshawks, but we were entering a new habitat. We eagerly moved down the trail and noticed that the rain seemed to have let up.

Continuing down the trail, we eventually located a path that seemed to lead to the water. At the same time, we heard the song of a Chestnut-sided Warbler. Farther down the muddy path, we made it to a patch of dense shrubs and grasses along the water. We were quick to scan for waterbirds, but we were only able to locate a Tree Swallow. In the distance, the distinctive call of an Eastern Kingbird rang out. To our right, we noticed a pair of Cedar Waxwings moving through the bushes and perching on the highest twigs. As we made our way back to the trail, a pair of highly agitated Common Yellowthroats dove at us, scolding us and flying around in a panic. It seemed like we were right by their nest, so we made sure to move on and leave them alone.

Back on the trail, we continued along the pond and heard more of the same species, including tons of American Redstarts and Red-eyed Vireos. We also added to our list of confirmed species when we found a Wood Thrush and Veery, each with a fledgling. It was a little hard to see the water's edge from the trail, but we were still able to hear some more Cedar Waxwings and Chestnut-sided Warblers.

Eventually, we had made it past the pond and were continuing down a fairly straight stretch of trail, the final part of our hike. As we passed a stand of pines, we eagerly searched for the Northern Goshawks. It appeared that we had found the spot where they had nested. And while we did find a large nest on a dead snag, we were not sure if it was the goshawks or another raptor that had built it.

A little farther down, we found an adorable Ovenbird family creeping through the woods and an odd thrush for the location. A Swainson's Thrush! This species typically nests on mountaintops in Balsam Fir forests in the Catskills, but this individual was in a much lower deciduous forest.

Moments later, we hit a clearing with dense shrubs and saplings. It appeared to have been an orchard of some kind. At the end, a stream ran under the trail. It was quite birdy, and we found several American Redstarts, a Black-and-white Warbler, a pair of Song Sparrows, a Northern Cardinal, and a few more species. The bridge also provided a helpful secret-checking underneath, I was able to locate an Eastern Phoebe nest! Another confirmed code! Along the stream, we also found an American Redstart feeding a fledgling and some very agitated Louisiana Waterthrushes that seemed to have a nest nearby.

A few minutes later, we had reached the end of the trail. Everyone was soaking wet. However, we had still thoroughly enjoyed the hike and had made some important contributions to atlasing!

Saturday's Mourning Warbler Bonanza

Once we had changed into dry clothes and had eaten, it was time for an afternoon adventure to an incomplete priority block called "Arena CE" with Mark. One of the other groups had visited a hotspot in this block called Alder Lake, and we were keen to explore the rest of the block. Several of us hopped in our cars and we were off on our next adventure.

It was only a short drive to Arena CE and, after ten minutes in the car, we had reached the turnoff onto a dirt road that went through the atlas block. We drove slowly with the windows rolled down, and we eventually hit a clearing that looked like it would provide a nice habitat for breeding birds.

As we all exited our cars, we immediately heard a Red-eyed Vireo and a Black-throated Green Warbler. A short walk down the road revealed a Winter Wren's song. Back at the clearing, I noticed a small bit of movement in the shrubs. After a glimpse of its yellow underside and blue hood, I knew exactly what it was. A Mourning Warbler! Everyone rushed to get a glimpse, but it was gone already (in typical Mourning Warbler fashion). We decided to "pish" to see if we could draw in the birds again and, sure enough, a female popped up for a moment, revealing a mouthful of insects that she was definitely intending to feed to her young. We had our first confirmed code of the outing!

After a little more pishing, several more birds revealed themselves (though the Mourning Warblers had retreated deeper into the vegetation). An agitated female Ruby-throated Hummingbird buzzed overhead and two pairs of Canada Warblers began chipping loudly, including one that was carrying some green insects for her young. Another confirmed code! Not wanting to disturb the birds more, we stopped pishing and watched them move around the trees and shrubs. As Mark said, we were probably the only people to ever disturb these birds, so we weren't doing any damage to the environment. If people were pishing them every day, then we would not want to disturb them further.

A little way down the road, we came across a small meadow with a stream tucked amid the forest. We heard more Winter Wrens and a few Dark-eyed Juncos, and there were some begging fledgling birds calling from somewhere in the woods. Mark ventured down the path to track down the fledglings, and several of us watched the meadow. A few Cedar Waxwings and Red-winged Blackbirds flew over and a pair of Common Yellowthroats popped up. While we didn't see any breeding behavior besides "pair in suitable habitat" at first, we eventually saw the female again, but she was carrying some caterpillars. We were really racking up the confirmed codes! And when Mark returned, he announced that the begging fledglings were Ovenbirds! To finish off our sightings at this spot, we spotted some deer along the road, including a buck that was growing its antlers.

Continuing down the road, we continued to hear the same species, but we also added American Redstart, Veery, and Blackburnian Warbler. The habitat was absolutely beautiful. The endless deciduous forest was scattered with the occasional hemlock and there were birds singing constantly. To add to our rapidly growing list of species, we encountered some Tufted Titmice and an Eastern Wood-Pewee.

At a bend in the road, we found another small clearing and decided to stop. We were quick to pick out the song of an Indigo Bunting in a nearby tree and an American Redstart singing from behind us. However, a bit of pishing revealed another exciting species. Mourning

Warbler #3! She was also carrying food and, after popping up in some shrubbery for a few seconds, she disappeared into some saplings. We also found a bright male Scarlet Tanager foraging in a tall tree near the clearing, but he wasn't showing any breeding behaviors. After a few minutes of waiting, we decided to use the time to remove some non-native plants from the roadside. So, we spent the next five or so minutes viciously ripping up the invasives. It felt good to be helping out the environment. And, as a final surprise for this spot, we heard the loud and distinctive song of a male Mourning Warbler from beyond the trees bordering the clearing. We were already at four Mourning Warblers!

Back in our cars, we were discussing the events as we continued down the road. Many of us were quite surprised to be finding all of these Mourning Warblers in habitat that seemed less than ideal for the species. While it is a regular breeding bird in the area that we hoped to find, these were not the spots that we expected to find them in.

Down the road as we drove to our next spot, we encountered more exciting species, including the beautiful song of the Hermit Thrush, a classic species of these Catskill forests. We eventually found our third clearing of the day and decided to make a stop. This was quite a good spot and, besides ripping up more invasives, we managed to find a pair of gorgeous Black-throated Blue Warblers (and another singing male) and a pair of Black-capped Chickadees. We also noted several other common species, including an Eastern Wood-Pewee.

Moving down the road and with another road to check in mind, we heard a few Chestnut-sided Warblers and Common Yellowthroats, as well as a plethora of Red-eyed Vireos. We eventually hit a turn and, a few minutes later, made it to Mill Brook Road. By this point, we were no longer in our atlas block, but would be re-entering in a few minutes. Along the way, we noted the dramatic change in scenery. Now we were surrounded by clearings and farmland, rather than the dense forest habitat of our previous spots.

We made it to our location after a few minutes of driving and we eagerly hopped out of the car. We were going to do more road birding and our plan was to walk along the road, occasionally driving by stretches that didn't seem as good. We were quick to begin pishing and the loud, distinctive chips of more Mourning Warblers were quick to follow. A female had popped up in some shrubs right along the road with her beak packed with food. Our fifth Mourning Warbler and another one that we had confirmed. However, things only got better. A male also appeared, and the begging of their young could also be heard. We quickly stopped pishing. We had found a nest and the parents were delivering food! While we could not hope to see the nest, we knew it was there and we eagerly watched the parents busily collecting food for their hungry chicks. Once again, we noticed that this was not an ideal habitat for them. There wasn't much of the early successional forest that Mourning Warblers prefer. It seemed like there were so many around that they were being driven out of their typical habitat. What a crazy thing to say about this usually elusive species!

The sky, which had been cloudy, was now threatening rain once more and we tried to make the most of our time. Walking along the road, we observed several more species, including a Magnolia Warbler, another Canada Warbler, some Yellow-rumped Warblers, some fledgling Chipping Sparrows, more Blackburnian Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, Blue-headed Vireos, and a couple of fledgling Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers that Mark heard. We also heard our next Mourning Warbler and found a gorgeous Purple Finch singing from a tall spruce. Along a nearby field, we also found some Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds. However, our

luck turned against us when the sky finally opened up and it began to rain. We ran back to the cars and managed to avoid the worst of the rain, but we were still wet. We decided to drive farther down and hoped that the rain would let up. Sure enough, not long after our escape from the downpour, the rain had let up and we decided to finish up our adventure along another stretch of Mill Brook Road.

The new stretch was extremely birdy. We were quick to locate several species, including Red-winged Blackbirds, Barn Swallows, an Eastern Kingbird, Song Sparrows, Cedar Waxwings, and a fledgling European Starling (which added another confirmed code. We were really making progress). We also birded a patch of stream surrounded by shrubs, which helped us find an Eastern Phoebe, Least Flycatcher, a Gray Catbird, and a couple of Swamp Sparrows. We were about to leave, but we stopped because we came across a swarm of snails crossing the road. We tried to help as many as possible (many were getting squashed by cars) and we officially finished off the excursion with two more singing Mourning Warblers and a couple more Blackburnian Warblers (well, we did have a Pileated Woodpecker on the way back, which we can call the unofficial end to the adventure).

Overall, Friday and Saturday were two amazing days of birding. The camping trip was simply awesome and a trip I will remember for a long time. While I couldn't stay longer, I know that there were tons of great trips and sightings beyond what I recounted here.