

Catskills Camping/Atlasing Trip Sunday, June 25, 2023

We began our final full day of birding together on a glorious, albeit wet morning, filled with the cacophony of Red-eyed Vireos that blended with the calls of Blackburnian Warblers, Dark-eyed Juncos and Chipping Sparrows, and the cries of American Robins. After organizing ourselves into our respective birding groups for that day, we ventured off ready to continue on with this important citizen science initiative. Despite the occasional rains, we were not to be disappointed with what this day held in store for us.

On Cattail Road, the thin, wispy, and of course high trills of Cedar Waxwings woke us from our reverie, and we were soon picking up the calls of a pair of extremely agitated Common Yellowthroats. We must have been a mere three to four feet from their nest situated near the road. Their behavior was well-deserving of the A (for agitated) that we marked on our checklist. As we traveled further down the dirt road, Field Sparrows whistled softly accompanied by the buzzes of Prairie Warblers. Suddenly, Mark DeDea heard and then spotted an Alder Flycatcher, but much to our disappointment, as soon as he pointed it out, it flitted down, flycatching and promptly disappeared (a mere S for Singing in our eBird checklist). We then witnessed Cedar Waxwings fly to a spruce tree with something in one of their beaks- nesting material!

At our second stop for the day, we came across a fledgling Broad-winged Hawk flying our way; his brief layover on a tree gave us enough time to confirm that he/she was indeed a fledgling by his developing plumage. We then observed an interesting phenomenon- a Gray Catbird striking a large, green caterpillar on a branch repeatedly and then scarfing it down! It left us wondering why the Catbird would feel the need to do this to its prey. Is a dead caterpillar tastier or perhaps easier to swallow?

A female Magnolia Warbler then appeared, collecting food on the edge of the road, a mere six feet from us. Mark, who had been lying (not literally) in wait for her in the brush, was able to catch her in the act of feeding one of her fledglings (FY for feeding young). She repeated this process, albeit a bit more slowly, practically posing for us while two Chestnut-sided Warblers made it their duty to constantly reveal themselves- singing from the top of tall shrubs, posing, flying over, gleaning, and carrying food (a well-earned CF).

Moving on to a new location, we were almost immediately greeted by birds such as a Red-shouldered Hawk flying over, along with Blackburnian, Black-and-White, Black-throated Green, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Soon thereafter, Peter Schoenberger called us over; there in front of us stood a tiny, fluffy and yellow-gaped fledgling Blackburnian Warbler! This was a definite highlight of our birding expedition for the day! The fledgling stared back at us, as we, at first transfixed by his adorableness, began to snap photos. We moved away, so as not to disturb him, and almost immediately, he began calling for his parents and begging for food. He hopped to the crook of a protruding branch, then flew further up the tree where he stayed clinging to the trunk, while in the corner of our vision, we took note of an adult Blackburnian standing guard over its young.

Continuing on our journey, we passed dairy barns where Barn Swallows flew about and where we spotted an adult Barn Swallow resting on a fencepost next to a young one. Suddenly, Mark raised the call that he had spotted a Bobolink flying! We rushed to investigate and came upon the Bobolink flying off, landing in a tree, then hopping about to a new perch in the tree, more concealed by leaves this time.

Continuing down the road, the loud sound of an agitated bird cut through all others. It was a male Bobolink chattering, cheeping, and hopping around on a telephone pole wire beside himself. Minutes passed and then a female appeared. Moments later she was caught in the act of carrying away a fecal sac from her nest (FS without a doubt). As we continued to explore, the buzzes of Prairie Warbler accompanied us and we were treated to a particularly beautiful male gleaning for food. As he flew, another Prairie Warbler emerged and the two birds touched beaks while hovering and then flew back into the cover. We had just witnessed the beautiful male feeding his young (FY)! Driving back, we crossed over a bridge and Peter pointed out that earlier, along that very same river, he had spotted a Belted Kingfisher burrow that we should investigate after lunch.

Lunch was followed by additional downpours, but the rain would not deter us. For many of us, the Kingfisher burrow was too great of a lure and we set out to investigate. For approximately thirty minutes we watched the Kingfisher's burrow. With no luck in spotting her or him, we decided to commemorate the burrow discovery with a group photo. Then, a flash of brown on the riverbank caught our attention. A Spotted Sandpiper – quite an interesting find deep in the heart of the Catskills and not even during migration season, but still deserving of the code H for habitat!

While photographing the sandpiper, we heard a rattling call and spotted a flash of electric blue – the Belted Kingfisher and a glimpse of silver – a meal of fish! The kingfisher landed far enough away that we had ample time to hide behind some bushes. To anyone driving by, we must have been a strange sight indeed! After several minutes of hiding we spotted it again, flying our way with a fish twice the size of its head clasped in its beak (CF – carrying food – want a fish, anyone?). The kingfisher, with its keen eyesight and binocular vision, was not to be fooled by our hide-and-seek antics; it caught sight of us in the bushes, changed direction, and landed in a distant tree. It was time to give the kingfisher the privacy she needed and a pizza party, courtesy of the John Burroughs Historical Society, was awaiting us.

Birding is wonderful at any time but even more special when one has the opportunity to bird with individuals who are willing to share their passion and extensive knowledge, as did our trip leaders Marc DeDea, Peter Schoenberger, and Wendy Tocci of the John Burroughs Natural Historical Society. We arrived at Raimondo's in Roscoe for the evening pizza party where we chatted, exchanged stories, and happily munched on our pizza feast while continuing to learn from the great birders who make up the John Burroughs Natural Historical Society. Many thanks to the remarkable and knowledgeable leaders for this magnificent trip.