



Birding Big Day

9 May 2005

Dear friends,

The 2005 Earlham College Birding Big Day fell at the end of a protracted cool period that saw bouts of snow, sleet and record low temperatures in the weeks leading up to the day, 6 May. Reconnaissance preceding the Big Day showed that many migrants had not yet arrived and chances for a big list were dismal. That didn't dampen our spirits as more than 30 participants prepared for the day. Lee Barnes (EC '66) was in from Seattle; Rick Burian (EC '76) from Portland, OR; Matt Miller (EC '04) from Key Largo, FL; and Corey Hadden (EC '96) up from North Carolina. Current students (including graduating seniors, one of them with her parents), staff, faculty, and friends of the College made up the observers — some going out as teams, others solitarily. Two of Jim Cope's daughters (Marianne and Marie) and two of his grandsons (James and Chris N.) were there. When they heard a Barred Owl in the early morning, they could not help but think of Jim.

Many teams worked areas they had been designated. One team (Corey, Damon, James and Matt) decided to make a run for a high, single-team count to challenge me for the longest list of the day by covering a variety of locations. Taking up their challenge and being a bit cocky, I spotted them 20 species and the competition became a fun sidebar to the day.

Several groups were out well before dawn on a calm and clear night with only a sliver moon appearing just before daylight. The night sky offered no calls of migrating birds and the prospect of a clear and warm day gave little hope for dramatic birding after the early morning hours.

At the first hint of light, birds started to be heard. Three groups had Barred Owls, three had American Woodcocks, one each had Great Horned Owl and Eastern Screech-Owl. Within an hour after daylight, it was apparent that while some of the later migrants were just beginning to arrive, many were not yet here. The final tally for the day showed that few of the northern, long-distant migrant thrushes (only one Swainson's Thrush), warblers (no Magnolia, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Wilson's, Connecticut, Mourning or Canada Warblers) and sandpipers (only a few species) were present. We missed Veery and Bobolink for the first time ever on a Birding Big Day.

While some species had not arrived, others were lingering late. Some of these provided the best birds of the day. For example, Jim Seaney had a late female Bufflehead (first ECBBBD record), Todd Elliott had the latest ever record for Fox Sparrow (first ECBBBD record), Chris Warren had a flock of American Pipits, etc. Bonaparte's Gulls were still in unusually large numbers (47). The best bird of the day fell in this category and was discovered by Chris Warren (EC '05): a Greater White-fronted Goose — a rare bird at any season, a late one on this date. Chris received a pretty serious "IIT" ("Interesting, if true") challenge at lunch; but several of us saw the bird later in the day.

The ever self-motivating team of Corey, Damon, James and Matt decided early on that anyone on their team who made a misidentification would have to wear his underwear on his head to the lunchtime tally. Three arrived adorned with boxers, the fourth had been driving and decided it was best not to take his hands off the wheel on the way to the meeting!

The midday tally was attended by most of the observers but a few groups couldn't make it then. By 1:30 p.m. we had tallied 133 species, a pretty paltry list. Some folks had to call it a day after lunch; others headed back out to try to fill gaps in our list.

Significant changes in the regional avifauna have been reflected in the history of the Birding Big Day counts. Jim Cope and I discovered the first modern nesting of Osprey in Indiana on an early count. This year there are two new nest sites in the Whitewater Valley and their numbers are growing statewide. This spring produced the first nesting of Bald Eagles in the Whitewater Valley and one of the birds reported on this year's count was one of the breeding adults. Bald Eagles are likely to become a regular on future ECBBDs.

Encouragingly we recorded a total of 12 Cerulean Warblers this year, more than average. Many conservation biologists are concerned about its declining populations in the eastern United States. We had unusually high counts for several species this year: more than 100 House Wrens, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Yellow Warblers and Baltimore Orioles. In one area dammed up by beavers we discovered lingering Pied-billed Grebes, Blue-winged Teal and American Coot — a new area for these very local, and sporadic breeding species.

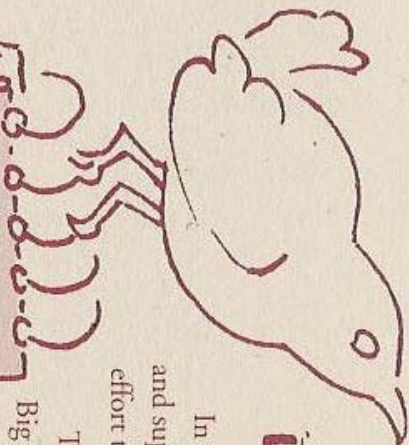
After a productive and enjoyable morning, but only moderately productive afternoon and evening we convened for a final tally over dinner. Some of the folks who couldn't be at lunch were there. Phone calls from other folks (e.g., senior students who were entertaining their parents before the next day's Commencement) helped fill out our list. The challenge of Corey, Damon, James and Matt against me turned out to be a dead heat with the 20 species handicap: 105 species to 125 species! [This is added evidence that it is time for Bill to look into hearing aids.] At the end of the day our grand tally for the ECBBD was 149 species, a respectable, but not spectacular number. Every year can't be above average...

I want to thank you all for your support of the Birding Big Day; your gifts to the College are significant in many ways. Visit <http://www.earlham.edu/alumni> for a recent article on the Big Day and what it means to Earlham. I hope you will participate again next year — perhaps even by showing up to help out in the field!

Sincerely,



Bill Buskirk
Professor of Biology



Dear Birding Enthusiast:

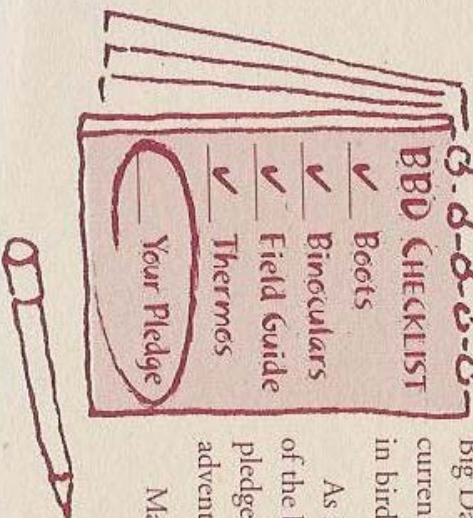
In 1983 Jim Cope and Bill Buskirk began the Earham College Birding Big Day as a way to combine their great loves: birding and support of Earham College. On a day in early May, when bird migration is peaking, they scoured the Whitewater Valley in an effort to see as many birds as possible and, in doing that, raise funds to support Earham College and its students.

The ECBBDD has become a great and enjoyable success. But, with Jim's passing in March, 2002, the first era of Birding Big Day ended. In 2003, Bill opened a new era in the tradition. The Big Day is now a wider, community activity. Alumni, current students, staff and faculty will go out in teams to see just how many species they can find. Anyone with an interest in birding is warmly welcomed to join the rabble — just get in touch with Bill soon.

As in the past, we hope that all interested folks will pledge to spur us on to great efforts — coaxing those extra birds out of the bushes and onto our day's list. With luck and hard work, a total of 150 species is possible. You can help by noting your pledge on the reverse of this card and returning it in the postage-paid envelope. We will send you a report of our Big Day adventure and ask you to honor your pledge before June 30, the end of our fiscal year.

Many thanks to Liza Donnelly ⁷⁷ who created the enjoyable wren for the logo on our Birding Big Day stationery.

—Thanks and warm regards to you all.





Earlham College

Birding Big Day List

May 6, 2005

Whitewater River Valley



Participants: Lee Barnes, Scott Barton, Rick Brooks, Rick Burian, Bill Buskirk, Josie Caton, Michael Cramer, Halley Crum, Hannah Crum, Denise Crum, Don Crum, Max Driffill, Todd Elliott, Damon Hearne, Corey Hadden, Andrew Hoffman, Christine Larson, Eric Miller, Matt Miller, Mollye Nardi and parents, Christopher Nicholson, Marie Cope Nicholson, Elizabeth Schwartz, Jim Seaney, Arunima Sen, Matt Smith, James Sterrett, Marianne Cope Sterrett, Chris Warren.

Species List:

Common Loon	American Woodcock	N. Rough-winged Swallow	Prothonotary Warbler
Pied-billed Grebe	Bonaparte's Gull	Bank Swallow	Worm-eating Warbler
Double-crested Cormorant	Ring-billed Gull	Cliff Swallow	Ovenbird
Great Blue Heron	Herring Gull	Barn Swallow	Northern Waterthrush
Great Egret	Rock Pigeon	Carolina Chickadee	Louisiana Waterthrush
Green Heron	Mourning Dove	Tufted Titmouse	Kentucky Warbler
Black Vulture	Black-billed Cuckoo	Red-breasted Nuthatch	Common Yellowthroat
Turkey Vulture	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	White-breasted Nuthatch	Hooded Warbler
Canada Goose	Eastern Screech-Owl	Carolina Wren	Yellow-breasted Chat
Greater White-fronted Goose	Great Horned Owl	House Wren	Summer Tanager
Mute Swan	Barred Owl	Marsh Wren	Scarlet Tanager
Wood Duck	Common Nighthawk	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Eastern Towhee
Mallard	Chimney Swift	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Chipping Sparrow
Blue-winged Teal	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Eastern Bluebird	Field Sparrow
Ring-necked Duck	Belted Kingfisher	Hermit Thrush	Vesper Sparrow
Lesser Scaup	Red-headed Woodpecker	Wood Thrush	Savannah Sparrow
Bufflehead	Red-bellied Woodpecker	American Robin	Grasshopper Sparrow
Hooded Merganser	Downy Woodpecker	Gray Catbird	Fox Sparrow
Osprey	Hairy Woodpecker	Northern Mockingbird	Song Sparrow
Bald Eagle	Northern Flicker	Brown Thrasher	Swamp Sparrow
Northern Harrier	Pileated Woodpecker	European Starling	White-throated Sparrow
Cooper's Hawk	Eastern Wood-Pewee	American Pipit	White-crowned Sparrow
Red-shouldered Hawk	Acadian Flycatcher	Blue-winged Warbler	Northern Cardinal
Broad-winged Hawk	Willow Flycatcher	Nashville Warbler	Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Red-tailed Hawk	Least Flycatcher	Northern Parula	Indigo Bunting
American Kestrel	Eastern Phoebe	Yellow Warbler	Red-winged Blackbird
Wild Turkey	Great Crested Flycatcher	Chestnut-sided Warbler	Eastern Meadowlark
Northern Bobwhite	Eastern Kingbird	Black-throated Blue Warbler	Common Grackle
Sora	White-eyed Vireo	Yellow-rumped Warbler	Brown-headed Cowbird
American Coot	Yellow-throated Vireo	Black-throated Green Warbler	Orchard Oriole
Killdeer	Blue-headed Vireo	Blackburnian Warbler	Baltimore Oriole
Greater Yellowlegs	Warbling Vireo	Yellow-throated Warbler	Purple Finch
Lesser Yellowlegs	Red-eyed Vireo	Pine Warbler	House Finch
Solitary Sandpiper	Blue Jay	Prairie Warbler	American Goldfinch
Spotted Sandpiper	American Crow	Palm Warbler	House Sparrow
Least Sandpiper	Horned Lark	Cerulean Warbler	
Pectoral Sandpiper	Purple Martin	Black-and-white Warbler	
Wilson's Snipe	Tree Swallow	American Redstart	

Total Species: 149