

Thanksgiving Trip to the Outer Banks November 26-29, 2015

By Emily Tyler, Trip Leader

Participants: Dennis and Lynn Burnette, Becky Loyacano, Roberta Newton, Anne Presnell, Jim Strickland, Emily Tyler, and Ann Van Sant

The weather for Thanksgiving 2015 was warm and balmy, quite a contrast to the 2014 trip when it was very cold and windy.



Eight Piedmont Bird Club (PBC) members sojourned to the Outer Banks of N.C. for this annual birding extravaganza during the Thanksgiving weekend. Some drove down early Wednesday to check out Lake Mattamuskeet and some stayed an extra day, picking up species for the alternate list, species not seen when birding with the group. This was the first PBC Thanksgiving trip for three of the participants.

Most of the group assembled Wednesday evening to enjoy the seafood and other specialties at the Lone Cedar Cafe on the sound between Manteo and Nags Head. This was the first of four evening meals we shared together at local restaurants.

We met the next morning, Thanksgiving Day, for the hour's drive to Lake Mattamuskeet, as this was the only day during the weekend, except for Sunday, when hunting wasn't allowed on the refuge. We arrived about 9:00 a.m. From the observation kiosk near the main entrance to the refuge, scopes were quickly set up and focused on the many ducks and other waterfowl in the canals and marshy areas along Wildlife Drive, as well as flying overhead. Everyone was enthusiastically calling out what species they were seeing and offering others an opportunity to see through the scopes.



It's always a treat to see a Bald Eagle majestically perched on a snag, surveying the landscape. Lynn Burnette spotted this bird almost as soon as she arrived at the entrance to Lake Mattamuskeet. What a welcome!



For Anne Presnell, Emily and others, a favorite sighting here was of a female Merlin that flew in and landed right in front of us, lingering long enough for all to get a great view. If only I'd had my camera!

After our picnic lunch near the old observation tower, often referred to as the "lighthouse," we drove through other areas of the refuge. A special sighting was four or five Snow Geese lifting out of the impoundment as we cruised the far side of Wildlife Drive. These were the only Snow Geese we saw all weekend! Last year there were hundreds on Lake Mattamuskeet, making quite a racket which we heard from at least a mile away. With all the rain this year the lake levels were higher than normal,

causing many of the usual waterfowl to seek other locations for feeding.

Nearly all of us walked the mile round trip to the end of the south dike at North Pond (Pea Island NWR) to the observation tower. From the dike we enjoyed good views of White Pelicans, Tundra Swans, Gadwalls, Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, Redheads, Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, one Red-breasted Merganser, American Black Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, American Wigeons, a flyover Osprey, and more species. Most notable was a Red-throated Loon which John Wright identified. John was co-leading the Friday morning hike at North Pond with his wife Paula and Neil Moore. The loon was a life bird for Anne Presnell and two others.

Later, most of our group accompanied John Wright, whom some of us knew from Carolina Bird Trips trips long ago, to a location farther south which was new to all of us. It was accessed off Rt.12 near a temporary bridge. John was able to get a scope on a Lesser Black-backed Gull and described its distinguishing field marks in detail. Conveniently, Great Black-backed Gulls were nearby for comparison. Also present were both species of Yellowlegs. Sorting through the shorebirds mingling on the distant bars was a challenge.

Becky described the considerable hike to get a better view of the birds on the sandbars as such: "The unexpected hike along mudflats was through waist-high prickly grass in the salt marsh (ouch!). But it was well worth the chance to get a special look at all the shorebirds on the sandbars. My favorite was the Marbled Godwit."

This year we spent most of a day birding Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Although we found some areas with a variety of ducks, the waterfowl usually seen in the flooded fields on Sawyer Road and elsewhere were scarce. We concentrated instead on other parts of the refuge. This included a nice stroll along a half-mile boardwalk at the end of Buffalo City Road, which we had all to ourselves. Although there weren't too many birds to be seen, it was a delightful walk, especially in the mild weather. Several focused on plants (some in bloom!), others on butterflies, and some other creatures. Dennis spotted two Red-bellied Woodpeckers climbing on the same tree and captured a nice photo. All seemed to enjoy seeing the variety of wildlife and gaining from the knowledge of other participants. This was Anne Prenell's first time on this boardwalk and her favorite memory of the weekend.



From this wooded habitat we moved to the wide-open fields to look for Northern Harriers and other birds. Becky Loyacano's sharp eyes spotted something white on the dark, cultivated soil as our caravan of vehicles was driving past. She stopped and soon notified those whose cars had already passed. Once assembled, the group spent a few minutes studying a pair of sandpipers. The final consensus was that they were Least Sandpipers. Nearby we counted 99 Killdeer!

This was Jim Strickland's memory of this lucky discovery. "Suddenly we realized the cars behind us had stopped about a quarter mile back and we went back to see what had been spotted. To our surprise there were two Least Sandpipers. When I rode by them originally, I saw them but dismissed them as white rocks."

Dennis Burnette provided the following when participants were asked to share a favorite sighting or experience: "I always enjoy the wealth of birds on the Thanksgiving trip, but I was very happy to

see six butterflies of four species in late November and absolutely thrilled to see and photograph a Red Bat catching insects beside the visitor's building at Lake Mattamuskeet NWR!"

Roberta Newton shared these observations: "I was able to practice and successfully identify most waterfowl after taking the Cornell Ornithology Seminar Series on "ID Waterfowl by Locating the White." Seeing over 100 of the same species also helps! However, identification of female ducks is still challenging. The birding locations were rich in a variety of species including one mammal, a bat."

Ann Van Sant's trip memories: "The highlights of my first Thanksgiving trip to the Outer Banks included sneaking up on Tundra Swans at the Alligator NWR, walking across the salt marsh at Pea Island to get closer views of shore birds grazing the edge of the marsh, and seeing first hand a raft of pintails at Lake Mattamuskeet. But, I particularly enjoyed the opportunities to spend time with and learn from the expert birders on the trip."



This was also Becky's first PBC out-of-town trip. She added three life birds to her list, the Surf Scoter, Black Scoter, and the Red-throated Loon. Her favorite memories include: (1) "Watching A flock of over 40 long billed and strikingly marked American Avocets standing in the shallows at Pea Island's South Pond. What a beautiful thing! (2) It was magical to stand amidst thousands of wintering Tundra Swans at Lake Mattamuskeet, where their soft, melodious bugling calls filled the air. (3) A spectacular sight on that cool, brisk morning on the Beach at Pea Island ... thousands of Double-crested Cormorants streaming by, migrating along the Atlantic Coast flyway to their wintering grounds."

Our last birding stop as a group during the weekend was at Jeannette's Pier in Nags Head. Here we saw an amazing view of two species of scooters (Surf and Black). They were in a couple of large rafts not far from the end of the pier. Through scopes the birds could be easily identified. What a great view compared to the usual sighting when seeing them flash by quickly from a distance.

Becky enjoyed this interaction at the pier: "Some of us observed the amusing behavior of two Boat-tailed Grackles trying to get another Boat-tailed Grackle to look up into the sky, so that they could steal its fish!"



Another lucky find by the Burnettes: "Lynn and I stopped at Lake Mattamuskeet on Sunday on our way home. As we were driving from the Visitor's Center toward the main entrance, I caught a glimpse of a bird out of the corner of my eye. I backed up about 100 feet and scanned one of the little islands on the south side of the Wildlife Drive. What I had seen was an American Bittern standing very still, leaning forward in a typical bittern pose just above the dead grasses of the same color as its plumage. As we watched, it slowly lowered its body even with the tops of

the grass. It completely blended in. If we hadn't watched this, we never would have known that we were looking at it."

The 2015 trip to the Outer Banks for the Thanksgiving weekend will stand out in the participants'

memories for years to come. This trip differed in several ways from Thanksgiving trips to this area in the past decade. Not only was the number of species greater than in the last several years but this was certainly the warmest weather we have experienced in late November in recent memory. Daytime temperatures ranged from the 60's to the 70's.

Though the warm weather resulted in fewer species of ducks and other waterfowl that hadn't yet moved this far south, the group actually logged a higher number of species during this trip (104 plus five on the alternate list for a total of 109 species) than during Thanksgiving weekends in recent years. In 2013 we had a total of 92 species. In 2014 the total was 84 species (86 counting those on the alternate list).

The contributions to this report by the other participants are greatly appreciated. Except for the photo of the female Merlin taken by Jim Strickland, Dennis Burnette took the accompanying photographs.

THANKSGIVING TRIP BIRD LIST
OUTER BANKS (PEA ISLAND, BODIE ISLAND, ALLIGATOR RIVER NWRS
JEANNETTE'S PIER AT NAGS HEAD, LAKE MATTAMUSKEET NWR
NOVEMBER 26-29, 2015

Snow Goose	Great Blue Heron	Laughing Gull
Canada Goose	Great Egret	Ring-billed Gull
Tundra Swan	Snowy Egret (30)	Herring Gull
Gadwall	White Ibis	Lesser Black-backed Gull
American Wigeon	Turkey Vulture	Great Black-backed Gull
American Black Duck	Black Vulture	Rock Pigeon (60)
Mallard	Osprey	Mourning Dove
Northern Shoveler	Bald Eagle	Belted Kingfisher
Northern Pintail	Northern Harrier	Red-headed Woodpecker
Green-winged Teal (10)	Red-tailed Hawk	Red-bellied Woodpecker
Redhead	American Kestrel	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Ring-necked Duck	Merlin	Downy Woodpecker
Lesser Scaup	Clapper Rail (40)	Northern Flicker
Surf Scoter	American Coot	Pileated Woodpecker
Black Scoter	Black-bellied Plover	Eastern Phoebe
Bufflehead	Semipalmated Plover	Blue Jay (70)
Hooded Merganser	Killdeer	American Crow
Red-breasted Merganser	American Avocet	Fish Crow
Ruddy Duck	Greater Yellowlegs	Tree Swallow
Red-throated Loon (20)	Willet	Carolina Chickadee
Common Loon	Lesser Yellowlegs	Tufted Titmouse
Pied-billed Grebe	Marbled Godwit	Brown-headed Nuthatch
Horned Grebe	Ruddy Turnstone (50)	Carolina Wren
Northern Gannet	Sanderling	Marsh Wren
Double-crested Cormorant	Least Sandpiper	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
American White Pelican	Dunlin	Ruby-crowned Kinglet (80)
Brown Pelican	Wilson's Snipe	Eastern Bluebird

American Robin
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Pine Warbler

Palm Warbler (90)
Common Yellowthroat
Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco

Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark (100)
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
House Sparrow (4)

Total species: 104

ALTERNATE LIST
NOVEMBER 25, 29, AND 30
5 NEW SPECIES

Blue-winged Teal (Seen Wednesday, November 25 at Lake Mattamuskeet by Anne Presnell, Jim Strickland, Roberta Newton, and Ann Van Sant)

White-breasted Nuthatch and House Finch (Seen Sunday, November 29 in the Elizabethan Gardens by Roberta Newton and Ann Van Sant)

American Bittern (Seen Sunday, November 29 at Lake Mattamuskeet by Dennis and Lynn Burnette)

Wild Turkey (Seen Monday, November 30 in a field near Columbia by Roberta Newton and Ann Van Sant)

Total species from all lists: 109