



Field Trip: North Carolina Inner and Outer Banks Expedition, February 13-16, 2020

submitted by Julien McCarthy, Trip Leader (with Jude Pate)
photos by Julien McCarthy



Chris & Lisa Frandock, Dan & Patty Dery, Tom & Stella Wear, Susie Hodnett, Nancy Lee Adamson, Jude Pate, Julien McCarthy, and Phil Khoury (photojournalist) met at 1:00 p.m. on 2/13/20 (a day of weather infamy), near the entrance to the Pungo Unit of Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). We rushed to the impoundments near Canal D Road and found them covered with Tundra Swans, Northern Shovelers, Gadwalls, Northern Pintails, and both Green-winged and Blue-winged Teals. Some of us had never seen this before and the awe for this moment was palpable. An approaching ferocious front was almost on us, but we forged ahead for the Charles Kuralt Overlook to spot Snow Geese. The bottom fell out! By the time we reached that spot, the roads were pure loam goo and we had to sit

for 20+ minutes in our vehicles waiting for a break. It came. We climbed up and found a mat of swans right in front of us, but in the distance the water appeared as if snow had stuck to the surface. It was all Snow Geese—tens of thousands of them. They began to lift. They were headed out to feed and I knew exactly where. We jumped into the fleet and began the arduous feat of sloshing through the muck at 20 mph. (Do not slow down in this stuff or pay the price.) I could barely see out the window as the deluge had resumed, but in my rear view I could see waves of mud flying off the sides of the fleet. After a few miles of this we arrived at the feeding fields and found this record flock (Audubon data) falling like leaves onto the corn stubble and all cackling at the same time—what a din. Satisfied, we headed out for Martelle's Feed House and scarfed down a decent meal.



Snow Geese

On Friday, we went up to Lake Mattamuskeet and had great looks at a myriad of expected duck species, found the repulsive nutria, saw a couple of deer feeding, and walked the trail at the terminus of Canal Road, where we discovered a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. We got most of the woodpeckers, a few sparrow species, and several raptors, including an adult Bald Eagle. A highlight was a group of five juvenile White Ibis close up. We toured headquarters and did lunch on the porch. Because of the degradation of the lake's food chain, this refuge "ain't what it used to be." We dawdled all the way back to Bear With Us, Jude's & my home at Stumpy Point, and along the way discovered a nice raft of Red-breasted Mergansers in the harbor at Engelhard. We visited the folks at the Hotel Engelhard and enjoyed a surprise of snacks prepared just for us. We proceeded to the cottage where we had a nice pasta meal and laid plans for Saturday.



Sandhill Cranes

Since the Outer Banks was laid down in 20 MPH wind, which ruins birding, we decided to return to Pocosin Lakes so that we could enjoy the clear and less windy weather there—a fateful decision indeed. As we took a diversion to Nebraska

Road, we found good close looks and took pictures of Wilson's Snipe, Kestrels a-plenty, and a few other birds. On the way out the entrance road, a very close and graceful "grey ghost"—male Northern Harrier—plied the air just over Canal D and stayed just in front of us for a long time. We walked over to the impoundments and gained a more intimate experience this time. At the end of this road we walked about 2 miles and spent time at spot where we could creep up close to the bank of Pungo Lake and watch the swans and other birds quite near. We found canine tracks that were probably coyote or red wolf, and bobcat prints as well. There was some scat and print evidence of bears, too. We had a much easier exit this time, and perusing the fields was more revealing without the rain. As I radioed to Chris, who was ahead a good way, he excitedly said, "I think we have Sandhill cranes." I sped up!! Sure enough, there were seven adult cranes feeding about 100 yards out. We spent quite a time photographing them—WOW!! Departing for the exit, I saw a dark spot way out a grassy road. Yep. Bear. It was a huge boar lumbering in our direction. Eventually a couple of deer popped out of the woods in front of him waving white tail warnings about his approach. There was even a Great Blue Heron close by. At about 50 yards out he turned into a ditch, swam over, and climbed into a corn patch: his dinner table. We were fulfilled. But it wasn't over yet. Running out Pat's Road, we found the biggest flock of Snow Geese I have ever seen. Great murmurations of them descended upon us, and the 100+ acres in front of us were covered with them. They were gorgeous in the pink sky of the setting sun. Their conversation was music to our ears and they were joined by thousands of

Tundra Swans, a symphony indeed. On to a restaurant for dinner in Fairfield and then to plan a trip to the Outer Banks on Sunday with a perfect weather forecast.

Sunday was incredible. We headed to Jennette's Pier at Nags Head, and, with a nearly flat ocean, had great views of Common Eiders, Razorbills, Forster's Terns, Northern Gannets, various gulls, and other water birds. This destination is a must. From there it was on to Bodie Island, where the usual flocks of ducks were in abundance, but no great revelations. Unfortunately the Great Horned Owl usually found by Lisa Frandock nesting on channel marker #13 at Oregon Inlet was absent. So now it was out to North Pond at Pea Island NWR, where a large flock of American Avocets waltzed in their feeding pattern just in front of the blind—perfect. And if that weren't enough, here came the White Pelicans—bingo.

It was a trip full of firsts and lots of birds to see and hear—a really close-up experience worth the effort, even on day one through the deluge and wind. In spite of the challenges, this trip was the best one yet that we have led for the PBC. Perhaps this report will encourage more folks to venture to the Inner and Outer Banks in early February to see this awesome reality series put on by the wild things there.



American Avocet