

Winter Birding 2016 at the “Inner Banks” of North Carolina

By Julien McCarthy, Field Trips Chair

I have never been birding at the “Inner Banks” during February until this year. Jude and I went this past week for four days, and Stella and Tom Wear went with us. Having heard that at this time of year a lot of birds would have departed, we weren’t expecting a whole lot but still hoping for a decent count.

We first hit wild Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in the afternoon where we found gorgeous Tundra Swans and lots of duck species up close. There were no bears sighted, which was disappointing, but then they don’t fly. Many roads were closed there due to extremely soggy conditions. We even found the refuge assistant manager who got stuck in his own truck while trying to pull his employee’s truck out of a bog. It took a third vehicle to dislodge them both. WHEW! Needless to say we had to be very careful to avoid such a situation ourselves. At the Charles Kuralt Overlook there were no birds seen on Pungo Lake. Things seemed grim. In the face of a fabulous sunset, we departed for the Engelhard Hotel and immediately noticed a huge string of Snow Geese flying through those fiery peach and pink colored clouds. What a sight!

Bob and Ursula, owners of the quaint hotel in Engelhard, greeted us and had our comfortable rooms ready. After a brief visit there, we went a few miles up the road to Martel’s restaurant for a decent seafood meal and then turned in for the night.

Next morning after our breakfast at the hotel, we headed up to Mattamuskeet NWR on North Lake Road along the northern side of the lake where we were stunned to discover both Brewers and Rusty Blackbirds together on the ground. Next thing you know we were flushing Wilson’s Snipe constantly as they fed along the edges of small flooded areas in the fields, near the road. WOW! Arriving at the Route 94 causeway, we kept a beady eye on both sides of the lake but found only the occasional Double-crested Cormorant and a few American Coots.



Red-headed Ducks Photo Credit: Julien McCarthy

Once we turned in to Wildlife Drive at the entrance, everything changed. The impoundment was loaded with waterfowl of many different species, so we spent quite a bit of time scoping them out. It was rewarding to finally be surrounded by all that juicy wildlife one has come to expect there. We proceeded to the road beside the canal where we found most of the woodpeckers and snuck up on plenty of waterfowl at openings to impoundments.

While in the visitors’ center there, we were told about Lake Landing Road. It is at the far eastern end of the lake and is accessed off Route 264. Running beside a canal, this road leads to another huge impoundment, and there we saw unimaginable numbers of waterfowl of nearly any species one could expect. In addition, we witnessed Bald Eagle predation up close and personal, as well as two swift passes by the much sought after Peregrine Falcon. What a display!

Later, back at the Engelhard for the evening, we patrolled the local waterways and turned up quite a few Common Merganser pairs as well as a large flock of Lesser Scaup. The local fishing fleet was very impressive and scenic like you see in those beautiful paintings by good artists.

So now we were heading to the “Outer Banks” with our first stop at Nagshead and Jeanette’s Pier. Boy! We found them: many Common Loons, Gannets, Black Scoters, and a Humpback Whale. In a half hour we had “loaded-up;” however, we missed the Razorbills and Red-throated Loons reported by the Carolina Bird Club. Shucks! Now it was on to Bodie Island where we got those magnificent American Avocets, a Common Yellowthroat, and Forster’s Tern. Pea Island was disappointing. Little was there so we did not tarry long but headed back to Alligator River NWR where we found nothing new.



Common Merganser
Photo Credit: Julien McCarthy

After about three days’ worth of birding we garnered 92 species and had experienced many, many exciting natural events. Watching the behaviors and activities of all that wildlife is absolutely fabulous fun. We even saw a River Otter, a Mink, White-tailed Deer in numbers, a Marsh Rabbit, Grey squirrels, and many frogs and turtles, etc.



Lesser Scaup Photo Credit: Julien McCarthy

I can’t think of a better way to spend a few days during a warmup in mid-February. We had one fabulous look after the other of almost anything expected, and some unimagined. We will return at the same time and conditions in 2017 for sure. Don’t let anybody tell you that such a date is too late, because there were plenty of birders witnessing the opposite. With the comfortably quaint Engelhard Hotel set smack in the middle of it all, you can’t beat it.

Cheeeers ! & Gooooood Birding!