

The First Annual Big Sit By The River: Foggy Flats and a Seabird Surprise

Rob Gough

As most area birders know, the Joppa Flats site along the southern bank of the Merrimack River in Newburyport is a very rich birding location. For decades, birders have come to Joppa Flats to observe waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and many other species. During spring migration, Joppa Flats is especially productive.

In celebration of the diversity of this area's wildlife and in honor of International Migratory Bird Day, the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Joppa Flats Education Center in Newburyport staged the First Annual "Big Sit By The River" on Saturday, May 8, 1999. During this event, we listed all of the bird species seen or heard from within a twenty-five foot diameter "count circle" during a 24-hour period, beginning at midnight.

The idea to conduct a "Big Sit By The River" was adapted from the New Haven Bird Club Big Sit!, an event held every year in mid-October, and now cosponsored by Swarovski Optik. During this international event, groups conduct counts from within a seventeen foot circle in many locations across the country. Although we widened the circle to twenty-five feet (making it large enough to include a shelter, chairs, a barbecue, etc.), and we conducted our event on a different date, to coincide with International Migratory Bird Day, we otherwise adhered to the guidelines of the New Haven based event. These guidelines include the following: 1) Observations can be made only from within the designated circle. 2) There is no limit to how many people can occupy the area (other than obvious spatial limitations). 3) If a bird is seen or heard from within the circle but is too distant to identify, observers can leave the circle to get a closer look for confirmation. However, any new bird seen or heard while confirming the original can't be counted, unless it can be seen from the circle. 4) Participants can work in shifts. No one person needs to be there throughout the entire event. 5) The same circle must be used for the entire duration of the Sit.

Our circle was positioned just west of the center of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Joppa Flats property, located on the Plum Island Turnpike in Newburyport. The property currently includes a total of fifty-four acres along the southern edge of the Merrimack River. During this event, the property was undergoing a salt marsh restoration project (see Gette, "Habitat Restoration at Joppa Flats," this issue). Much of the joy of our Big Sit By The River event was in witnessing the diversity of bird species that were already utilizing this newly created habitat, as well as enjoying a view of the Merrimack River that was previously blocked by large stands of common reed and Japanese knotweed.

On the opposite side of Plum Island Turnpike from the Joppa Flats property is a small area of freshwater marsh, several small stands of trees, and a corner of the Plum Island Airport fields. The positioning of our count circle enabled us to view these areas across the road, and provided an excellent view of the newly created salt pannes within the restoration site. During periods when the fog would lift, we were able to see clearly

up and down the river, all the way to the mouth of the river at the north end of Plum Island.

Our Soggy Success

Our day began at 12:01 a.m., in thick fog and a light drizzle. The first species on our list came just one minute later as several American Black Ducks made a startlingly close fly-by, and splashed down at the water's edge. Things slowed down a bit over the next several hours, with vocalizing birds, including Great Horned Owl, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Greater Yellowlegs, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow, and Red-winged Blackbird slowly being added to our list.

The pre-dawn light provided the welcome advantage of sight, and the action began to pick up. The intermittent rain continued all day, and an often thick fog hung over the harbor. In the end, however, we came out of it waving a list of sixty-four species, including one very nice surprise. If good things come to those who wait, then perhaps spectacular things come to those who wait even longer.

The following is our complete list for the day:

Double-crested Cormorant	Common Tern
Great Egret	Rock Dove
Snowy Egret	Mourning Dove
Green Heron	Great Horned Owl
Black-crowned Night Heron	Belted Kingfisher
Glossy Ibis	Northern Flicker
Brant	Tree Swallow
Canada Goose	Barn Swallow
American Black Duck	Blue Jay
Mallard	American Crow
Blue-winged Teal	Black-capped Chickadee
Gadwall	Tufted Titmouse
Oldsquaw	White-breasted Nuthatch
Bufflehead	Carolina Wren
Red-breasted Merganser	Marsh Wren
Northern Harrier	American Robin
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Northern Mockingbird
Cooper's Hawk	Brown Thrasher
Merlin	European Starling
Black-bellied Plover	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Semipalmated Plover	Northern Cardinal
Killdeer	Field Sparrow
Greater Yellowlegs	Song Sparrow
Lesser Yellowlegs	Swamp Sparrow
Willet	White-throated Sparrow
Least Sandpiper	Red-winged Blackbird
Common Snipe	Eastern Meadowlark
Parasitic Jaeger	Common Grackle
Bonaparte's Gull	Brown-headed Cowbird
Ring-billed Gull	House Finch
Herring Gull	American Goldfinch
Great Black-backed Gull	House Sparrow

Some Notes on the Parasitic Jaeger

The Parasitic Jaeger gave us looks at four different times throughout the day. It was first seen at 11:00 a.m. and last seen at approximately 4:30 p.m. The bird was initially seen following several Herring Gulls; later it was chased by a Great Black-backed Gull. During our third and fourth look at this beautiful bird, it flew by the edge of the salt pannes in front of us and landed on the water at the near edge of the river. At one point, it landed atop a small patch of Spartina and preened before our delighted eyes. This light morph, breeding-plumaged adult showed us great views of its field marks, including the characteristic rusty toned collar around the chest and beneath the tail, as well as the absence of any pale underwing patch at the base of the primaries.

Lessons Learned

This event proved to be a wonderful day, filled with many laughs and great birds. We are already looking forward to the Second Annual Big Sit By The River on May 6, 2000. Special thanks go to David Davis, Brooke Stevens, Lynette Leka, Karl Reidl, and all others who stopped by and participated in this admittedly strange endeavor to celebrate International Migratory Bird Day. Together we made some interesting observations on the habits and behavior of our area's birds, and perhaps in the process we learned a bit about the merits of patience, the value of slowing down and staying in one place for a time, and the joy of "sitting." ↗

Rob Gough is Education Program Coordinator at MAS's Joppa Flats Education Center in Newburyport.

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