

The First Annual Superbowl of Birding

David Larson

On January 24, 2004, the Joppa Flats Education Center in Newburyport hosted the First Annual Superbowl of Birding. The staff and volunteers at Joppa Flats set up this contest to publicize the great winter birding along the north coast region and to provide a welcome diversion during a month some think of as dreary, cold, and birdless. Well, it was cold, with temperatures around 0°F at the start, a high of less than 20°F, and subzero wind chills all day. But it was clear and bright, not dreary, and anything but birdless. For 12 hours (5 a.m. to 5 p.m.), 125 participants in 25 teams scoured Essex County, Massachusetts, and Rockingham County, New Hampshire. They tallied 125 species in all, breaking the January Big Day records for both states in the process. Participants came from throughout Massachusetts and New Hampshire and as far away as Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Winning a birding contest usually requires well-conceived strategy, well-planned tactics, a lot of scouting, and copious luck. In order to make this contest more interesting, the rules were crafted to require more than just finding as many species as possible. Most wintering species of birds were assigned point values based on their perceived rarity. For instance, House Sparrow was worth one point, Surf Scoter was worth two, Rough-legged Hawk brought in three points, Thick-billed Murre four, and Bohemian Waxwing was good for five points. Any species not on the official checklist was good for five points, but sightings had to be called in to Joppa Flats (and the phones were manned from 5 a.m. on) in order to count. The first team to report a given write-in species got an additional three bonus points. Hence, six teams called in a Field Sparrow (not on the list; so worth five points), but only the first team received eight points. Birds reported to contest headquarters were posted on Massbird and NH-Birds and at Joppa Flats.

Most of the teams hit the predictable winter birding spots in the area. In Massachusetts, Nahant, Marblehead Neck, Rockport, Gloucester, Ipswich, Rowley, Newburyport Harbor, Plum Island, and Salisbury Beach were all well-visited. That reliable Eastern Screech Owl on Rte. 1A in Rowley surely got a lot of attention all day. In New Hampshire, Newmarket, Portsmouth, Stratham, Hampton, and Seabrook were popular. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak at a feeder in Derry, NH, was clearly the bird of the day. Other great birds were Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Boxford), Brown Thrasher (Nahant), Northern Shoveler (Nahant), and Common Grackle (Gloucester). Twenty-one teams found Bald Eagles, but only one tallied a Merlin. Other birds found by only one team included Ruffed Grouse, Thick-billed Murre, Fish Crow, American Pipit, Bohemian Waxwing, Winter Wren, Eastern Towhee, White-crowned



THE SUPER-SILLY-UMS BY MELISSA VOKEY

Sparrow, Pine Siskin, Fox Sparrow, Turkey Vulture, and Eastern Meadowlark.

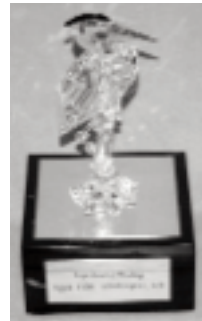
All of the teams had to check in at Joppa Flats by 5:30 p.m. (so Andrew's Point or Marblehead Neck had better not be the last stop!). The contest judges (Mark Halloran, Joyce Halloran, and Ann Gurka) examined each team's official check-list, awarded bonus points, and tallied the results. While the judges were hard at work, contestants dined on pizza and salad, chatted with friends, bragged about their findings, and tried to warm up.

After a welcome by Bill Gette, Sanctuary Director of Joppa Flats, Judge Mark Halloran awarded the prizes. The NewBies Award (2 or more team members under 18 years of age) was won by the Racing Ravens, including Marin and Gwen Gardner (ages 9 and 6), who stuck it out through the whole 12 hours. The Lifer Award was won by Adlai Faigan (age 10), who picked up 28 life birds while competing with The Shrikes. The Sitting Duck Award was won by the Sitting Duck Wannabes (John Halloran, leader), who birded all day from the Joppa Flats building (and picked up the only Snowy Owl of the contest). Steve Mirick's team, the New Hampshire 4th and Longspurs, surpassed the January NH Big Day record with 70 species and 156 points. The Director's Cup Award went to the Hit Squad and West Hill Caterers (Strickland Wheelock, leader), who tied the previous MA Big Day record with 77 species (154 points). The Swarovski Hawks (Wayne Petersen, Paul Baicich, Rick Heil, Jeremiah Trimble, and Jan Greenwood) amassed a new MA January Big Day record 79 species while winning the grand prize, the Joppa Cup, with a total of 165 points!


Everyone who competed came away with a free subscription to *Natural New England* magazine and a Mass Audubon mug. Prizes awarded included gift certificates to the Nature Shop at Joppa Flats; Mass Audubon lunch bags, travel mugs, and calendars; copies of the *Nature of Massachusetts*; and Swarovski crystal trinkets and embroidered caps. The Joppa Cup winning team will have its name engraved on the Cup, a stunning Swarovski crystal heron on a marble base, which will stay on display at the Joppa Flats Education Center.

The Superbowl of Birding was generously sponsored by Swarovski Optik; Coca Cola of Salem, NH; *Natural New England*; and The Nature Shop at Joppa Flats.

So, was it fun? All of the feedback was very positive and no fingers, toes, or noses were lost. One participant, who shall remain nameless, did venture that she did not really warm up until she was at home and in a hot bath. But heck, if you want to enter a contest and stay warm, there is always that one down in New Jersey. Gwen Gardner, age 6, having immediately spent her NewBies gift certificate, exclaimed, "This is the best day of my life!" What more could the organizers and sponsors want?



THE JOPPA CUP BY
DAVID LARSON

David Larson is the Education Coordinator for the  Joppa Flats Education Center (Mass Audubon) in Newburyport and the Production Editor for Bird Observer.