

Bigfoot and Baldy – Cedron Jones and Sara Toubman – 96 Species
Birdathon 2017 – the year of the “Cool” bird

Birdathon – that glorious time of year when “Spring is bursting out all over” and when we “have to” bird – aw shucks. And we did it up right this year ... taking a six day birding and hiking trip centered around two outstanding National Wildlife Refuges and some small beautiful mountain ranges.

We started with a trial birdathon at Benton Lake NWR north of Great Falls. Driving there Cedron declared we couldn't start birding until we saw a “cool” bird. (We saw several uncool birds on the way). And so the Chestnut-collared Longspurs at the entrance to the refuge started us off. In spite of fierce winds displayed by a Swainson's Hawk in a small tree hanging on for dear life, we tallied 41 species. Giant Spring State Park, the River Trail and hikes in the Highwood mountains east of Great Falls completed this trial.

We started our actual birdathon Saturday morning of Memorial Day weekend at 5 AM. Nothing like getting old to wake up at 5 AM without an alarm. We had camped along the road to Zortman Cemetery in the Little Rockies as the campground and all the dispersed recreation sites were filled to overflowing. The ubiquitous Robin started us off. The second most ubiquitous bird of the whole trip, the Meadowlark, appeared as #14. A bird ran across the highway – a roadrunner in Montana! Approaching Malta, the Milk River, mosquito headquarters of Montana, stretched west to the horizon in a straight line.

Birding Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge was pure joy. The wind kept the mosquitoes at bay! The auto tour road travels close to shore, water and marshes. The trail around the pond at headquarters provides excellent viewing. One of the highlights was literally hundreds of Black-necked Stilts on a vegetation mat in shallow water. Another highlight – we were the only people on the whole refuge. Conclusion: go to national wildlife refuges known for birding on holiday weekends (we had Benton Lake to ourselves also). It was noon when we ended at Bowdoin. The rest of the day was hard birding. It was the middle of the day and the wind was intense. (An aside: a friend who volunteers with the birds at MT Wild said that Hagar, the Golden Eagle in the display cage, goes inside ONLY when the wind is intense). The auto tour route at the CMR (Charles M. Russell) NWR and the Kipp Recreation Area in the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument yielded few new species. We had thought to end our day at Kipp. Where to go? We decided on Crystal Lake Rd. that heads into the Big Snowy Mountains south of Lewistown. Mountain habitat would be new ground for the day. However, the road to the lake was gated – a big disappointment. But we took a lovely evening walk on the road and garnered 7 new species. We also ran into a group of Amish(?) families picnicking at a spot near the closed gate. As it got dark some of them left in a covered wagon drawn by 2 horses. Later a family went by in an open wagon drawn by one horse trotting briskly along. The clip-clopping horses were a real treat.

On Tuesday, May 31, we birded for half a day from west of Harlowton through Pond 2 at Canyon Ferry Lake and had a great time and some interesting sightings. The first bird SEEN for the day was a Long-billed Curlew – a very COOL bird! (We enjoy listening to birds before getting out of bed). The most unusual bird of the whole six day trip was a Lark Bunting. They are black with large white wing patches and are quite common in eastern Montana but only occasionally seen further west. The first Robin for the day was the 25th bird seen – they had been the “junk” bird of the trip. And then a mind boggling sight: a Marmot on a guardrail! Never a dull moment.

You know we couldn't and wouldn't do a birdathon without all you wonderful people pledging money for Last Chance Audubon. This year our chapter contributed to the Golden Eagle Migration Survey in the Big Belts and supported a bird survey project on Seven Mile Creek. We also supported a fledging middle school birding group and gave a scholarship to a high school graduate. Thanks for your pledges. Please make checks out to LCAS and mail to Bigfoot and Baldy, 940 Wilder Ave, Helena MT 59601.