

FBC Blandy Experimental Farm, Sky Meadows and Short-eared Owls Outing

January 20, 2018

Report and Photos by Jeff Pozner

The promise of 50 degree temperatures and sunshine sent 19 birders from the Fredericksburg Birding Club to Blandy Experimental Farm/State Arboretum of Virginia. The one and a half hour drive was made easier with visions of Red-headed Woodpeckers and Short-eared Owls dancing in our heads. We hoped our combined niceness would overcome any naughtiness and we would be successful in our quest.

Many of us were greeted by as many as 15 White-tailed Deer upon our entry to the Arboretum property which is part of Blandy Experimental Farm, a 700 acre research center for the University of Virginia.

The first birds to really catch our eye were both Turkey and Black Vultures. There were a dozen or more perched in trees as we started our walk and some were soaring at tree top level above us.

It is difficult for a group this large to stay together so smaller groups formed as birders headed in different directions and at different paces. We were informed of a Loggerhead Shrike being seen regularly on the opposite side of the grounds and decided to head over and hopefully find it.

A large variety of birds were out and about people watching (the birds call it peopling) in the beautiful weather. One was overheard commenting about a male in a short sleeve shirt in the middle of winter and called it a rarity. Many species of woodpeckers were spotted including Red-bellied, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker Downy, Pileated and Northern Flicker. We ended the day with all 8 possible species.

At a small area of open water and marsh, we spotted Field, Fox, Song, White-throated, Swamp and Savannah Sparrows.

We slowly headed in the direction of the open fields to search for the Shrike. Occupying the field were numerous Mockingbirds and their similar coloration to the Shrike brought a number of false alarms. The Shrike was then spotted and treated us to a fairly lengthy show as it perched for a while, dropped to the ground in an open area directly in our field of view, no doubtedly looking for lunch, and flew back up to a perch in a leafless tree allowing a good amount of observation time.



After 3 hours of birding Blandy, we drove to The Lone Oak Tavern for a leisurely lunch. What would 19 birders talk about during down time?

Then it was off to nearby Sky Meadows State Park to hopefully find Red-headed Woodpeckers. Luck, as well as sun, shone down, as some of the group spotted the first from their car on the drive into the park. We were directed to a small copse of Oak Trees and almost immediately found 3 flying back and forth among the trees. Most of the group then headed uphill on a walk, while a few remained behind to observe, and hopefully photograph, the woodpeckers.



After a few relaxing hours at Sky Meadows, we headed to another location to look for Short-eared Owls. About a mile from our planned observation point, owls were spotted by some of the drivers. At the observation point, no owls were seen and some in the group decided to head back to the point where the drivers had seen the flying owls. A few stayed behind just in case, but after 10 minutes or so with no owls, they joined the rest of the group.

It was a real treat to watch the owls. Some were perched and scopes were brought out. About 4 or 5 owls were flying at different times. Out in the field about 20 yards, someone noticed a possum making its way through the grass. The possum turned into a skunk. Thankfully it took no notice of us. We certainly weren't going to bother it and it didn't bother us. PHEEEEW! Otherwise it could have been P U. Again, luck shined down on us even though the light was dimming. An owl was spotted flying toward a fence about 50 yards away and landed. Like the shrike, the owl gave us a lot of up close viewing time. Scopes were immediately aimed and wonderful close up views were enjoyed by all.



For some, the Short-eared Owl was a life bird. The chance to observe it up close and personal was a thrill for all. Eventually a car spooked it, and off it flew into the gathering twilight. The day ended with a brilliant orange sunset. The drive home was a time of reflection and gratefulness for being granted such a wonderful day.



Group Photo by Tim Stamps

Total Species 46

Canada Goose
Mallard
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Bald Eagle
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Ring-billed Gull
Rock Pigeon
Short-eared Owl
Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
American Kestrel
Loggerhead Shrike
Blue Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Carolina Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Field Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
White-crowned Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
House Finch

Trip Participants

Sally Knight
Scott Byrd
Mike Lott
Jim Goering
Bev and Jim Arnold
David and Georgia Paton
Jeff and Joan Pozner
Linda Chaney
Alton Dick
Michelle Chowaniec
Lily Graham
Tim Stamps
Maureen and Ben Hamm
Michael and Lynn Barrows