

Outer Banks/Mattamuskeet, NC Trip—Feb. 2-4, 2018

By Brenda Chase

The VSO sponsored its annual trip to the Outer Banks and Lake Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina on February 2-4, 2018. Our Fredericksburg Bird Club participants included Mike and Joyce Bathke, Brenda Chase, Lily Graham, Maureen Hamm, Sally Knight, and Tim Stamps. The official birding began on Friday morning as we all planned to drive and meet at Mattamuskeet. The weather was not very co-operative as we awoke to a rainy, cold morning. The trip leaders decided to delay the start a bit, but some of us headed out anyway. Even though the skies were gray and drizzly we spotted Tundra Swans in fields along Route 264 and a nice flock of Dunlin. There were no shortages of American Robins, Red-winged Blackbirds, European Starlings, and Grackles along with both Vulture species. We were treated to flyovers of Great Blue Heron and Great Egrets as well. The skies did improve as we approached Mattamuskeet and fortunately, by the time most people arrived at the refuge the rain had stopped and we were anxious to drive the wildlife loop.

Previous visits to the impoundments at Mattamuskeet in winter have always offered a wonderful variety of waterfowl and once again we were not disappointed. It's very difficult to put numbers on the amount of each species we saw, but let's just say it was a healthy mix of Tundra Swans, Northern Pintails, Northern Shovelers, American Wigeons, Gadwalls, Ring-necked Ducks, Green-winged Teals, Blue-winged Teals, American Black Ducks, American Coots, Hooded Mergansers, and Canada Geese. We also had a fun mammal sighting—three otters frolicking in the water. Our one disappointment was the lack of Snow Geese. In fact, we were



skunked on Snow Geese all weekend. On a better note, while we were viewing the waterfowl suddenly our attention was drawn to a tree where a Great Horned Owl was perched. He was very co-operative, hopping from branch to branch and giving us great views of his wings and talons—a magnificent sight!

Mattamuskeet is a reliable place to see Black-crowned Night

Hérons and we got to see them in their usual spot. In fact, we could view them as we ate our picnic lunches. After re-fueling, we took a walk through a trail that meanders through a lovely cypress forest. Along this boardwalk we picked up kinglets—both Golden and Ruby-crowned; woodpeckers—Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied and Flickers; sparrows—Song, Swamp, Chipping; and wrens—Carolina and Winter.



We also enjoyed good looks at Pine Warblers and many views of the ubiquitous Yellow-rumps! In exploring near the trail we encountered Savannah and Fox sparrows, Eastern Bluebirds and a flyby from a Red-shouldered Hawk.



By late afternoon it was time to head back toward the Outer Banks, but we were certainly not done birding. The causeway through Lake Mattamuskeet (Route 94) can be very productive as well. Before we had gotten very far we spotted some gulls in a culvert. A quick U-turn took us back to the spot to view some adorable Bonaparte's Gulls bouncing in the water.

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But, the gulls were not the only sightings on our way to Columbia. Tree Swallows flew by and while we were getting on Killdeer and Eastern Meadowlarks we flushed Wilson's Snipes from a ditch. Wild Turkeys walked through a field and suddenly a brown blob came into view near the roadside. We slammed on the brakes and savored our view of an American Bittern!



When we reached Route 64 we turned east so we could stop by Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in hopes of seeing Short-eared Owls at dusk. We enjoyed Northern Harriers flying but only got a rather fuzzy view of an owl sitting in a field—too far away to be satisfying. However, a Red Wolf was seen in another field. He too was far off but we did get some scope views. As the dark closed in we returned to Nags Head where a few of us celebrated our day of birding with some delicious seafood at Tortuga's Lie.



Saturday morning brought clear skies but temperatures had dropped significantly overnight. The Comfort Inn serves as the headquarters for this VSO trip and typically its deck is full of birders scanning the ocean in the early morning. Not so on Saturday! The birders were busy seeing how many layers of clothing they could put on to brave the winds at Pea Island and Oregon Inlet. We caravanned down to those sites and realized the birds don't mind the cold as much as we do, because there were plenty of them on the ponds. We saw many of the same waterfowl as the day before but added new species too.

Among them were American Avocets, Ruddy Ducks, Bufflehead, White Pelicans, White Ibis, Canvasbacks, Redheads, Lesser Scaup, American Oystercatcher, and a Snowy Egret. We wanted to check out the oceanfront as well so we climbed over the dunes for a brief scan. The surf was rough due to the winds, but we were able to get glimpses of a Horned Grebe and Long-tailed Duck. Sanderlings hustled around the incoming waves.

After we warmed up over lunch, Sally, Maureen and I decided to visit a home in Manteo that has had Indigo Buntings at its feeders in the past. Before we reached the feeders our attention was drawn to another yard that was bustling with bird activity. We realized we were looking at two female Baltimore Orioles, in addition to Eastern Bluebirds, Yellow-rumped Warblers, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a Red-bellied Woodpecker, and a Blue Jay. The feeders themselves only gained us Chipping Sparrows and Carolina Chickadees.

Our next stop was Jennette's Pier where the birding was great. Common and Red-throated Loons, Gannets, Horned Grebes and Surf Scoters floated or flew by, but the highlights were Dovekies and Razorbills (lifers for some of us). We only saw the Dovekies in flight, but the Razorbill treated us to a show as it would surface and dive. It was fascinating to watch it propel itself through the water with its wings.



Our last stop for the day was the Bodie Lighthouse where the observation deck affords wonderful views of waterfowl. Once again there was great diversity, but no new species. Both King and Virginia Rails had been seen in the reeds near the boardwalk so we spent a very long time waiting for them to make another appearance. Alas, it was not to be, but as we did the group tally that evening the entire VSO group had seen over 100 species so we certainly couldn't complain.

Sunday morning brought cloudy skies and a forecast for rain around midday. Some folks decided to head home, but we made another trip to Alligator River NWR as a couple special birds had been sighted there earlier in the weekend. This time we were successful in seeing our two target birds—a leucistic Red-tailed Hawk and a Rough-legged Hawk—another lifer for Maureen! We also added Greater Yellowlegs and Black-bellied Plovers to our species list and sharp-eyed Sally was able to spot more Wilson's Snipe hunkered down in the muddy grasses. After scanning more ponds and mudflats we decided it was time to head back to Fredericksburg. The weather had certainly been variable all weekend, but the birding and company was spectacular.

Photos by Sally Knight and Tim Stamps

Northern Pintails, Great Horned Owl, Cypress Swamp, Bonaparte's Gulls, American Bittern, White Ibis and Razorbill.