

# Highland County Weekend Getaway

## June 1-3, 2018

By Jim Goehring

It was a dark and rainy weekend. Five club members embarked on the long planned outing to Highland County hoping to find Golden-winged Warbler, Mourning Warbler, and Alder Flycatcher. Armed with raingear, food, maps, binoculars, and cameras, we rendezvoused



**Doe Hill Escape - Our Weekend Getaway**  
Photo by Sally Knight

Friday afternoon at Doe Hill Escape, a pleasant and well equipped house on a working farm. It served as our base for the weekend's birding. Birds were plentiful and success was had in locating the three target species. Participants included Scott Byrd, Brenda Chase, Jim Goehring, Sally Knight, and Mike Lott.

While various members of the group birded on their way to Doe Hill Escape, birding as a group began on Friday afternoon and evening, and was limited to the area immediately surrounding our weekend home. Numerous Barn Swallows swirled around the farm, gathered mud from the driveway, and

rested on the overhead wires, where they were joined by the occasional Tree Swallow. A juvenile male Orchard Oriole sang from the trees, and Turkey Vultures and a single Red-tailed Hawk were seen soaring overhead. Three or four Killdeer frequented a fenced in dirt space beside the barn, calling frequently. Eastern Meadowlarks sang from more distant fields, and were occasionally spotted on fence posts. An evening walk down the entrance road to the farm added Field and Chipping Sparrow, a couple Eastern Wood-Pewees, and a Brown Thrasher.

Saturday morning began our first full day of birding. After breakfast, we headed north on Route 640 towards the late Margaret O'Brian's home on the West Virginia border in search of a Golden-winged Warbler. Two adult Bald Eagles were spotted in trees on the way, as well as a Red-tailed Hawk and several Turkey Vultures. The rain held off, and we found numerous birds on our walk along the mown paths at the O'Brian home site, including Indigo Bunting, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Meadowlark, American Redstart, White-eyed Vireo, and Red-eyed Vireo. A Yellow Warbler frequented a large shrub towards the front of the house leading to speculation of a possible nest. Our first sign of a Golden-winged Warbler was an unmistakable *bee-bz-bz-bz* song heard from across an open field. The bird was well hidden in the bushy border and trees that ran along the far side of the field.



**Tree Swallow**

While brief glimpses were had by various members, patience eventually paid off. The bird rose to the top of the brush where it sang in the open for a fairly long period of time allowing wonderful, if somewhat distant, views. We celebrated the sighting of our first target bird.



Golden-winged Warbler

flew to a more distant stand of trees across the road. The views were definite, though distant, leaving us wishing we had been able to find it before it flew. A second Alder was heard up stream further out in the field. As the rain began to increase, we returned to our cars after fruitlessly trying for a closer look at the Alder Flycatcher. As we were about to leave, Sally spotted the flycatcher that had returned and reappeared in the tree directly above us. We enjoyed great views in spite of the rain, clicking off our second target bird.



Alder Flycatcher

Our next goal was Paddy's Knob, where Mourning Warblers, our third target bird could be found. It lay some distance to the south. We continued in the rain along Route 642 into West Virginia and then back to Route 84 and south to Paddy's Knob. None of us knew the precise location and our maps proved of limited use in this regard. Furthermore Fire Road 55 to Paddy's



Dark-eyed Junco in the fog

Knob proved somewhat questionable given the rain and our lack of all-wheel drive. We made a number of stops to bird, though the foggy conditions made visual sightings difficult at best. At one stop, a Veery's beautiful song rang out repeatedly from the fog, which Jim somewhat miraculously (luckily) spotted sitting on a branch not far from the road. A couple Dark-eyed Juncos were found, and Ovenbirds and Scarlet Tanagers were heard. As we were about to give up on the location of Paddy's Knob and the Mourning Warblers, a local hunter stopped to ask what we were doing. He knew of the interest in the warbler and the location of the birding site. Armed with his

description, we found the side road to the old fire lookout, parked as best we could along the road, and walked up the hillside to the site. The open area at the end of the road where the old fire lookout platform stood offered no evidence of our target bird, though Mike, our best birder by ear, thought he heard the Mourning Warbler's call off down a less used path into the woods. We all followed for a while, though as the rain increased and the path became overgrown, we held back and eventually retreated. We hung at the top of the road waiting for Mike, listening and identifying more species, including a Chestnut-sided Warbler. Mike eventually returned to report that he had located and seen a Mourning Warbler. While we were disappointed in having missed the bird ourselves, everyone delighted in Mike's find and success in adding his third life bird for the trip.

Given the rain, we decided to call it a day and headed slowly back to Doe Hill Escape and dinner. There a walk down paths and along a stream on the farm yielded wonderful views and additional birds. Field Sparrows were numerous, and we had good views of an Indigo Bunting, a Belted Kingfisher, and male Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. A Common Yellowthroat was heard as well. When we returned to the porch at Doe Hill Escape, we enjoyed the usual species,



**Bobolink**

added to this time by a pair of Eastern Kingbirds and a number of male Bobolinks visible in the fields. On a more mundane side, House Sparrows and Starlings were also present, the former including adults actively feeding newly fledged young. In spite of the rain, it proved to be a wonderful day. The scenery was gorgeous, including views in the fog, the birds were plentiful, and all three target species were seen. Dinner offered a time to enjoy one another's company, remember the day's events, and talk about our shared birding passion.



**Now Which Way Do We Go?**

The following morning ended our stay at Doe Hill Escape. Scott headed back towards home, while the rest of us decided to try for the Red Crossbills that gather at the crossroads (Route 924 and Forest Road 85) near Reddish Knob. Given the heavy rains overnight and our limited familiarity with the roads, it took some time finding our way to the site. A swollen stream shut off our initial route. After some discussion and map reading, we found our way to the site. Route 924 proved beautiful. At one point, we encountered a bear that scurried off the road and into the woods. When we arrived

at the site, while we did not find any Crossbills, we were delighted at the other species we heard and saw. These included Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Black-and White Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, American Redstart (building a

nest), Ovenbird, Red-eyed Vireo, Veery, Cedar Waxwing, Indigo Bunting, and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. We all observed that it would be a great spot to return to during Spring migration.

On the way down the mountain continuing along Route 924, we picked up additional species at the small dammed lake. An Eastern Phoebe had fledglings from a nest built inside the outhouse. Two male Indigo Buntings offered great views as did an Ovenbird, a Louisiana Waterthrush was heard, and a female Wild Turkey made a brief appearance. While we were there, many cars drove by to observe the high water. An older local man with whom we spoke said that he had never seen it crossing the road in some of the places he saw overnight, and that the water level at the dam had not been that high in his recollection since the late



**Hillside View with Sheep**



**Our New Friend Ellie**

1980s. After saying goodbye, we returned to our cars and headed home together.

The weekend had proven to be a delightful and rewarding adventure. Apart from the birds, Doe Hill Escape offered a delightful space to commune and reflect on our day's experience. The scenery was gorgeous, the sheep plentiful on the hillsides, and the host delightful. Mobile connections were difficult at best, though internet could be had from the host's porch nearby. The absence of such

connections was part of the charm, compelling a return to earlier times. We awoke to sheep leaving their nightly abodes to gather near the house before heading out into the fields. Three young lambs, housed in the barn bleated as they poked their heads out through the slats to observe the flock beyond. Ellie, the farm's dog, proved to be a delightful friend. She greeted us when we arrived and whenever we returned. She sat with us on the porch, enjoying our company, as we did his. While we were warned not to leave anything on the porch overnight as she would make it disappear, it was a small price to pay for his delightful friendship.



**The Pet Lambs**

Conversations with the host opened up the world of rural life. Coyotes were on the increase, taking a toll on groundhogs and the farmer's flocks. Waking to circling vultures was not a welcome sign. Whip-poor-wills, which used to be common, were no longer heard, though no explanation for the change was offered. When we asked about the three lambs that poked their heads out from the barn, we were told that they were pets, fed from a bottle. Further inquiry led to the explanation that a ewe on occasion gives birth to three lambs, but will only nurse two. The third is removed and raised by the farmer until it is old enough to return to the flock. The farm, which had grown considerably over the years through the buying up of other farms, raised cattle too, though on fields further removed from where we were staying.

The weekend proved rewarding above and beyond its primary goal. While birding remained our focus throughout, one could not help but soak in the beauty of the landscape, the presence and sounds of the sheep, the stories of our host, and the friendship of his dog.



**The Group**  
**Jim, Scott, Mike, Sally, and Brenda**

A total of 47 species were either seen or heard on the trip. The list follows:

Turkey Vulture	Red-eyed Vireo
Bald Eagle	Blue Jay
Red-shouldered Hawk	American Crow
Red-tailed Hawk	Common Raven
American Kestrel	Tree Swallow
Wild Turkey	Barn Swallow
Killdeer	Tufted Titmouse
Mourning Dove	Carolina Wren
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	House Wren
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Eastern Bluebird
Belted Kingfisher	Veery
Red-bellied Woodpecker	American Robin
Northern Flicker	Gray Catbird
Pileated Woodpecker	Northern Mockingbird
Alder Flycatcher	Brown Thrasher
Eastern Wood-Pewee	European Starling
Eastern Phoebe	Cedar Waxwing
Great Crested Flycatcher	Golden-winged Warbler
Eastern Kingbird	Yellow Warbler
White-eyed Vireo	Chestnut-sided Warbler

Black-throated Blue Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler  
Blackburnian Warbler  
Black-and-white Warbler  
American Redstart  
Ovenbird  
Louisiana Waterthrush  
Mourning Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Scarlet Tanager  
Eastern Towhee  
Chipping Sparrow  
Field Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak  
Indigo Bunting  
Bobolink  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
Common Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Orchard Oriole  
Baltimore Oriole  
American Goldfinch  
House Sparrow

Photos by the author unless otherwise noted.