

Special Day, Once a Year

My first ever Birdathon was in 2005. Mary and Susan from Wild Birds Unlimited were gracious and invited me to join their “Gone Pishin” team. I forget just how far we went, but later in the day we were on Hwy 98 heading east towards St Marks and I stated my intention to add Wild Turkey to our list. My friends in the front seat gave muffled responses, indicating their skepticism regarding my pronouncement. I had been on a turkey-sighting roll, didn’t they know? Why in the world wouldn’t my luck extend to this important day? I kept looking down the fire lanes, squinting into country back forty’s. Then along the electric line clearing, there they were. After Mary and Susan realized I wasn’t joking, we turned around and all got to behold two wild turkeys, as I recall. One was a dandy tom.

We got even luckier that Birdathon. Our team won “Best Name” and better yet – we all received the new big Sibley’s Guide to Birds which I had been coveting for months. Yes, it was a propitious start to my Birdathon career (even though I sat out in 2006.) In 2007 Tim Smith asked me to join him and his fiancée and we went to Lake Seminole / Three Rivers State Park. My favorite memory that day was learning - the hard way - what a Summer Tanager sounds like. Again, my team won for best name - “Two Turkeys Walk into a Park.” I still love that.

Somehow in 2008 I finagled my way onto Mike Tucker’s team, “All Tuckered Out.” You’ll have to ask Elizabeth Platt the source of that team name. We had a large crew loaded into Mike’s VW Vanagon, including my biking and kayaking buddies Pam Flynn and Fred Dietrich. Fran Rutkovsky was excited about our mileage - we were going to be the most fuel efficient team that year, she was sure. I do believe we won recognition based on that merit. More importantly though, it got me thinking about having an Eco-team for 2009. You know, birding on bikes and in watercraft, avoiding using fuel! This sounded like the right thing to do for the birds so I kept blabbering to Pam and Fred about it - they had little choice but to go along with my idea. Soon after I read an NFL listserve posting by the energetic Luke DeGroote who biked / birded all the way to St Marks, looping his way back to maximize birding spots. I asked Luke to join us along with Bill Hudgens. Hence, the team Pedaling Petrels was hatched.

We finally managed to find a day when everyone could go birding - April 18. Turned out to be a beautiful sunny day, one of several in a row. You know what that means as far as migrating birds go. The week before, birding madman Andy Wraithmell posted his team’s Birdathon venture in his inimitable entertaining fashion. Nonetheless, their 153 total felt a little intimidating since we were sticking to St. Marks and only spots in between. Oh well, no use comparing ourselves to a bunch of professionals. We were in it for the fun and raising some suet, I mean dough, for the birdies.

We met at the St Marks Biketrail, just south of 319 at the reasonable hour of 7:30 AM. Our first disappointment was scratching team member Bill from the roster. A fever kept poor Dude in bed. We loaded all our bikes onto Pam’s handy dandy trailer, an impressive feat unto itself. We didn’t even get out of the parking lot when we had our first Excellent

Bird Sighting of the Day: a Killdeer was in the dewey grass mere feet from us with 2 little chicks, the sun sparkling all around them.

We cruised over to Lake Munson Park just in case Limpkin decided to show, which it did not. It was surprisingly quiet so we didn't get many birds but Chimney Swift was a treat! As we made our way to the Refuge, I announced that I was concentrating on getting us a turkey. Scoffs from the front seat. Seem familiar? After we turned off 98 I kept scanning down the dirt roads when suddenly – BINGO! – TURKEY!! Oh yeah, I still got it.

We pulled into the grass by the Gift Shop, ready to change into bike mode but we realized that the “facilities” weren't open yet. We decided to park at Headquarters Pond instead so we ambled our way, hearing Acadian Flycatcher at Twin Bridges and getting some awesome looks at Prothonotary Warblers.

We saddled up and headed out behind the restrooms toward Tower Pond but we had to get off our bikes almost right away, so many cool birds lurked about! Thank goodness Luke was with us – he ID'd many birds that we would have spent a great deal of time figuring out. Best treat to start was Cape May Warbler with some White-throated Sparrows added for fun. At Tower Pond we were happy to spy gobs of shorebirds, including Wilson's and Black-bellied Plovers, Whimbrel and the ever-amusing Black-necked Stilt.

We pushed on, pedaling all the way to the backside of Stony Bayou. It's so amazing back there, no speeding trucks with boats. Just lots of quiet and water. Some cool stuff along the way: Blue Grosbeak, Blackpoll Warbler, E Meadowlark and Spotted Sandpiper. Eventually we hopped back on the asphalt and bumped into our old team, ATO, near the lighthouse. We laughed and chatted for a while, exchanging bird sightings. After parting we went only about 30 feet when we spotted shorebirds in the left hand channel. Resting in the sand was a – what was it? A Red-breasted Merganser! Just hanging out. The red orange beak glowed in the sunlight. It put on a show, doing its funny foraging aquadance. That qualified as an Excellent Bird Sighting of the Day.

Luke scoped out Amer Oystercatcher on a sandbar in the Gulf. And all day long we'd been noting the absence of Little Blue Heron and we finally got one as the day cooled off. Odd. And we'd never seen so many Tri-colored in our lives!

When we got back to the car we'd ridden 12.2 miles. Our last stop of the day was Lake Henrietta and what a sweet score that was! Thanks to Robert Lengacher for promoting that spot. Still no Limpkin, but Loggerhead Shrike and Rose-breasted Grosbeak were fine additions to our list.

Total car miles to and from our homes added up to about 64 miles. Biked miles added up to 48.8 and bird total was 116. The quality of the day was immeasurable. Watch out - next year you might have to hear from the PADDLING Pedaling Petrels!

Tracee Strohman