



Sunrise Birding, LLC
<http://www.sunrisebirding.com>

NORTH CAROLINA TRIP REPORT May 22 - 29, 2010

Leader: Luke Tiller with help from Tina Green

Pre-tour Day

With all of the participants coming from my home State of Connecticut arrangements were specially made so that we could drive rather than fly to our start point on this trip (and as luck would have it one of the participants would have been unable to even make the tour if we had not have done so!). I spent some time reworking the itinerary in such a way so as to fit in with a 10 hour drive on the first day and a somewhat backward approach to the tour and we set off from Greenwich a day early on our adventure. The tiring drive down was somewhat ameliorated by the helpful co-driving of Tina Green who assisted as co-driver on the tour. After a fairly easy drive was held up momentarily around Baltimore (which was only slightly enlivened by the appearance of a couple of 'Baltimore' **Baltimore Orioles**), we arrived at our first nights accommodation in New Bern via a rather authentic and mouth watering Bill's BBQ shack in Wilson NC. New Bern is a seemingly pretty town straddling the rivers Trent and Neuse, unfortunately our itinerary was such that we only got to admire the harbor at night before settling in for an early start looking for one of our target birds, Black Rail.

Day 1

Our tour officially started with an early dash out to an area just north and east of Croatan National Forest for an early morning foray for rails and other goodies. A short walk from the van and we were in to our first encounter with a loudly vocalizing southern specialty in the form of a **Chuck-will's-widow**. However with bigger fish to fry we were soon on our way, cutting through thick but thankfully rather bug free habitat on our way to a rather picturesque river marsh on our search for Black Rail. As we waited patiently for a hoped for kik-kee-do call we picked up some of our first birds of the trip proper: some calling **Seaside Sparrows**, a number of flyby **White Ibis**, the grunts of a few **Virginia Rails** and the croak of a nearby **Least Bittern**, all nice birds in and of themselves, but not a peep from our intended quarry. As the sun rose beautifully over the surrounding marsh we listened to the dulcet tones of an **Eastern Meadowlark** before finally getting it in the scope and enjoyed watching some eagerly hunting **Eastern Kingbirds** as they bopped around our observation platform. A flyover **Green Heron** and a **Red-headed Woodpecker** combined to make a couple of nice additional sightings as we made our way back to the van.

A nice start to the trip was complimented by a colorful stop at the local café, where the desire for tea at breakfast was met with a somewhat quizzical response. Hearty breakfasts under our collective belts, we were soon onwards and upwards towards Croatan National Forest before the rapidly rising temperatures lulled our target birds back into more sedentary activity. Driving through the park, we hot-footed it as fast as possible to a rendezvous with perhaps the trips second most sought after land bird, Swainson's Warbler. As we buzzed along the gravel roads we could barely pull ourselves away from our first sightings of resplendent **Blue Grosbeaks** or the trilling call of our first Bachman's Sparrows

and fleeting glimpses of **Northern Bobwhites** as they exploded back into the shrubby cover of the scrubby woodlands (so much more countable here than the introduced birds of our home state).

Our first stop in Croatan soon had us logging a number of southern goodies as a pair of **Prothonotary Warblers** patrolled a creek-side stop. Joining them were a few singing **Yellow-throated Warblers** which also garnered us with excellent views of this strikingly patterned bird. Highlight though was the number of **Yellow-billed Cuckoo's** moving through the trees belying their reputation in the North-east as being both uncommon and difficult to view. The final bird of the stop was an exceptionally accommodating **Summer Tanager** which posed long enough to be able to point out both the structural and plumage differentials between this bird and its more northerly east coast cousin the Scarlet Tanager.

With temperatures rising, we were soon on to our next stop, a short hiking trail off of the main Croatan drag. Another bird-song filled scene unfolded before us and my ears soon picked up the Waterthrush-like song of a nearby **Swainson's Warbler**. Through stealthy approach towards the bird we soon managed to acquire excellent views of this cryptic and skulky denizen of southern woods. A subtle beauty of a bird with an entrancing song and an impressively large bill, the soft yellow of the underparts of the bird highlighting the rusty cap of this attractive and much sought after warbler. After a suitable amount of timing spent oohing and ahing over the impressive display of this individual we were off again on a short hike.

The surrounding forest was literally alive with birds, both well known to our northern contingent (**Worm-eating Warblers** and **Common Yellowthroats**) as well as with more southern specialties such as the ridiculously cute and entertainingly chirpy **Brown-headed Nuthatches** and **Carolina Chickadees**. A **Worm-eating Warbler** put on a fine show for the group as they bathed in a path-side rain-pool and from the surrounding forest a throng of **Prothonotary Warblers** serenaded us through our woodland stroll.

With the sun starting to beat down we needed to pick up our last couple of target birds for the morning before the heat became too much for both ourselves and the birds. A stop at a likely looking 'savannah' patch amongst the loosely scattered pines soon provided us with outstanding views of another of North America's southern woods specialists, the sadly endangered **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**. This rather cryptically colored woodpecker blends beautifully with its surrounding reminding me ever so much of the American Three-toeds that I had seen in Colorado a little less than a month ago. With bird song starting to wilt in the midday heat, Penny managed to spot one of the many vocalizing **Bachman's Sparrow** that had thus far been eluding our gaze and we soon had our scopes on what is a somewhat drab species, considering how highly sought it is.

It wasn't however, only the birds that were wilting, and after an early start to the day we decided to make a beeline for the hotel, stopping just long enough to add some great looks at an earthbound **Red-headed Woodpecker** and the first of a million **Purple Martins** to our burgeoning checklist.

After quick solo scout of Fort Macon, while the group rested, we headed out for a nice early dinner at The Sanitary Fish Market and Restaurant a location that Denise had recommended as a fond memory of her time in North Carolina as a student. Here some of

us had our first encounter with the local delicacy known as hush puppies as part of our slap up fish supper.

Day 2

Or was it still day one? As we set off for a midnight run to listen for Black Rail. Obviously a night-time jaunt for this species was less likely to provide us with looks at this elusive bird but we hoped to at least hear a couple. With half of the group something of the walking wounded variety (including yours truly – tick bites seem to be an occupational hazard for birders in New England) we had already voted not to go for a midnight hike off into the marshes and to concentrate efforts on listening for the calls of this mouse-like rail from the main highway. Conditions were nigh on perfect as we encountered light winds and a moonlit night but initially no luck with the rail or much else vocalizing, however, as the evening progressed a few **Virginia** and **Clapper Rails** chirped up with a few grunts and calls and even a couple of Seaside Sparrows joined in the nocturnal marsh chorus. The Black Rails were not playing ball however until eventually one eventually ‘chuckled’ not too far from the roadside marsh. Unfortunately it was only really heard by those in the front of the van and a somewhat noisy van exit perhaps persuaded it to keep its head down after that. Before we decided to call it a night we did manage to hear the repetitive calling of a somewhat distant **Black Rail**, for me worth the trip out to the marsh but not the close encounter one might have hoped for.

After a few hours sleep we were back on the road again and a quick stop at Fort Macon State Park. The park was beautifully scenic although not as ‘birdy’ as the evening before. We picked up some nice views of a couple of first spring **Painted Buntings**, which were singing vociferously around the parking lot. Although not as gaudy as the adult male I had seen the previous day they certainly had a subtle beauty of their own. A quick scan of the waters off of the park found us our first **Northern Gannets** of the trip (a variably plumaged selection of young birds), but there was no sign of the Greater and Sooty Shearwaters of the evening before or the flyby Whimbrels. Final stop at the park produced some close views of another southern specialist, this time in the shape of a **Wilson’s Plover**. This rather intriguing looking plover with its incredibly oversized bill was a treat for us northerners, previously more common as a stray up into southern New England there hasn’t been a chaseable bird in the state for over twenty years now.

Having faired pretty well the previous day in the Croatan we decided to linger along the coast for a little more of the morning. A rather crowded beachside stop didn’t preclude spotting a few nice birds, as **Least Terns** splashed into the surf and more Gannets streamed by. Also picked up were a couple of nice shorebird sightings including a flyby **Whimbrel**. The highlight of the stop however was probably grabbed by a mammal species, in the shape of a couple of **Common Bottle-nose Dolphins** that were putting on a bit of a show just offshore.

After a quick stop we were onwards towards a little more Croatan Forest birding, where a brief stop garnered us more views of some of the regular resident birds as well as a couple of elusive **Acadian Flycatchers** that provided for only fleeting views, a **Kentucky Warbler**, **Northern Parula** and **Prothonotary Warbler** were all singing up a storm however the show was stolen by a **Swainson’s Warbler** that put on an amazing show as we watched it repeatedly over a few minutes without any recourse to such intrusions as tape playing! So much for this particular individual’s reputation as a skulky and difficult to observe species.

After settling in at our rather swanky hotel we set off on an ill fated search for Henslow's Sparrow. On the way we picked up some nice views of **Blue Grosbeaks** as one or two popped up in bare fields en route. We also managed to get some better views of **Northern Bobwhites** as they flushed from similarly barren agricultural fields. The heat of the day was working against us though with regard the Henslow's and as a thunderstorm closed in we decided to try a little birding from the van and abandon the Henslow's search for the day. This proved to be something of a bonus as we stopped to check out a couple of local catfish ponds which, while the weather raged outside, provided us incredible views of a huge number of **Bald Eagles** (estimated at 30+), **Black Vultures**, **Turkey Vultures** and **Great Blue Herons** (50+?) as well as a **Spotted Sandpiper** or two, an incredible (if not particularly picturesque) stop.

Day 3

Our Henslow's luck continued to be poor with an early morning run turning up none of these skulky sparrows before the weather closed in again. **Eastern Meadowlarks** however put on a show and **Bobwhites** called, and from surrounding trees we managed to pick up a singing **White-eyed Vireo**. With rain coming down we decided to cut our losses and head back for breakfast. However things continued to go against us, first my co-driver managed to pick up a flat tire and whilst we waited an hour or two for the lost breakdown truck, the weather cleared enough that had we still been at the Henslow's site we might have had a better shot at the elusive sparrow. We however made the best of a bad lot with the flat and birded the stretch of fields that we could scan from around the van. It wasn't the worst place in the world to be stuck, as we soon had our first **Horned Larks** of the tour and a couple of **Orchard Orioles** finally revealed themselves, and there is certainly no hardship to be had spending a couple of hours in the presence of a bunch of stunning singing Blue Grosbeaks.

Thankfully the hotel extended the time of breakfast for us and after a rather late morning 'brunch' we were on our way towards the Outer Banks. Somewhat behind schedule on the day we forewent a couple of planned stops and made a beeline for the Outer Banks. En route for our hotel we couldn't help but be delayed by a couple of nice rarities in the shape of two **White Pelicans** that were mixed in with the hordes of **Brown Pelicans** as well as a **Mississippi Kite** that was circling over the Alligator River NWR as we flew past.

We were further delayed by a brief stop to check out one of Pea Island mudflats and got great views of a number of breeding bird species. Although all fairly common stuff it was great to get good looks at **Dunlin**, **Black-bellied Plover** and **White-rumped Sandpiper** in their summer finery. As well as a nice mix of shorebirds we also managed to get some decent views of **Royal**, **Forster's** and **Sandwich Terns**.

With a pelagic trip looming in the AM we had an early dinner and before calling it a night swung past the Cape Hatteras lighthouse where we picked up a couple of nice species including **Common Nighthawks**, **Tri-colored Herons** and a flyby **Cooper's Hawk** along with squeaky prey item.

Day 4

We arrived at Brian Patteson's boat the Stormy Petrel II at about 5:45am with a slight sense of foreboding, a Northeaster had closed in and wave heights and wind were predicted to be uncomfortable at best. Although most of the gang was up for the trip, I think

it was almost a relief when Brian (and every other captain on the OBX) decided that conditions were just too difficult to head out for the day. As we waited for the decision a nice mixed flock of **White** and **Glossy Ibis** flew over and the constant chirps of the ubiquitous **Purple Martins** kept us company.

With an unexpected day on dry land we decided that if we couldn't get out to the pelagic birds perhaps we might be able to get them to come to us out on Hatteras Point. With dawn breaking we made our way out to the point and started to see what we might find out on the beach. As we arrived we were immediately impressed by the incredible surf that was crashing onto the beach and a further sense of relief that we weren't out on a boat today hit us. It wasn't an incredible mornings sea watching but we enjoyed having the stunning sandy beaches to ourselves. There was activity out there on the water in the shape of a large number of **Northern Gannets** and a nice flight of **Sooty Shearwaters**. The turbulent weather also seemed to have knocked down a number of migrant shorebirds and we soon picked up a number of attractive looking breeding **Sanderling**, some more **Black-bellied Plovers**, **Willet** and a good number of breeding plumaged **Red Knots** of sadly declining *rufa* subspecies.

After a hearty breakfast and a liaison with the rest of our group, we hot-footed it out to the beaches again and tried our luck with a few more pelagic species, terns and shorebirds. Highlights this time around included more **Sooty Shearwater** and Gannets and on the beaches Tina Green picked out another **Whimbrel**, some **American Oystercatchers** and our first **Marbled Godwit** of the trip. Having received permission from the park rangers to head out onto the beach by the tern colony, I also picked up a couple of 2nd or 3rd year **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** loafing amongst the ever-present Laughers.

After lunch the group decided they had run out of steam after the early morning start and all the fresh air and so we took a short siesta before heading out for some afternoon birding in the beach forest and a visit to do some shopping at the Hatteras Lighthouse Visitors centre. The beach forest didn't provide much in the way of birds but did highlight the interesting flora of the Outer Banks and the delicate ecological balance here on these 'islands'.

Day 5

This morning saw us heading north to do some birding on the Outer Banks renowned Pea Island. Passing up on the opportunity to go visit the Common Eiders that were causing such a fuss amongst the local birding community we focused on some of the birds that were less regular for us northerners. First stop at the North Pond proved to be a good one, with nice views of some stunning **American Avocets**, some loafing terns provided us with looks at a few **Royals**, some **Black Skimmers** and a few **Forster's**. Amongst the shorebirds were a few **Short-billed Dowitchers** as well as a few of the more regular species. Another stop a little further north produced another nice mix of shorebirds as well as a rather nice first summer **Black Tern** that was lounging around with a few **Sandwich** and **Forster's Terns**.

Pea Island has that same feel as South Beach in Massachusetts in that almost anything feels possible. We picked up a nice group of **Marbled Godwits** on the flats and a few other regular species including both **Yellowlegs**, **Willets** and **Semipalmated Plovers**. We got a good lesson in the need to 'bird every bird' when a swan that the group had written off as a distant Mute in fact turned out to be a rather beautiful **Tundra Swan** upon my inspection.

Kris Johnson then pulled out a real **Mute Swan** from the surrounding marsh to add to our day list.

A chance to up our Wilson's species count didn't quite materialize as we failed to relocate a phalarope of said name that had been seen earlier in the day, however a search of the New Field site did manage to turn up a handful of stunning **Black-necked Stilts**. They put on quite the show and even entertained a non-birding couple that had stopped to see what we were looking at. Happy with our birding forays, we called it a day early and went home to get some rest in ahead of our pelagic trip the following day. Thankful that the skies had cleared and the weather looked perfectly set for a day out on the ocean.

Day 6

With the seas becalmed and the weather set for a nice sunny day, we set off on the Stormy Petrel II for a day at sea. We had barely left the dock when a cracking **Gull-billed Tern** gave us an excellent close range flyby – giving us the up close looks that we had desired after more distant sightings earlier on in the trip. As we chugged out towards the Gulf Stream there was much to keep us entertained as **Common Terns** swirled around the boat and we were soon into some decent shearwater action with **Sooty, Cory's** and later a beautiful **Manx** putting in an appearance (a rather nice bird this far south). We whizzed by an **Arctic Tern** that appeared close enough to the boat to pick out a couple of salient ID features and a **Red-necked Phalarope** that only really allowed a passing glimpse even though Brian circled the boat in an attempt to relocate it.

The next bird for me was one of the highlights of the boat trip, a striking **Long-tailed Jaeger** that flew close in to the boat providing incredible close range views of this, the most sought after of Jaeger species. It was an absolute cracker of a bird resplendently bedecked in creamy yellow with its incredible steamers trailing behind it as it buzzed the boat. It wasn't long before we were in to one of its more muscular cousins in the shape of a **Pomarine Jaeger**. Compared to the almost tern-like Long-tailed this was a beast of a bird and the extreme darkness of this individual dark morph certainly lent it a more menacing air.

We were already picking up some nice species and an **Audubon's Shearwater** was a nice addition to our tally of four separate shearwater species. However we hadn't yet encountered any of the more southerly birds that were our main quarry for the day. The warm currents of the Gulf Stream seemed to have been pushed further offshore than usual and the swells that should have brought some of the rarer species seemed not to have been aided by the big Northeaster that had pushed through just days before. However with two boat rides already cancelled this week and beautiful weather I think the group was just pleased to have managed to get out at all.

There was certainly plenty of bird action to keep everyone entertained through the duration and the mammal show was certainly doing its best to keep everyone entertained. **Short-finned Pilot Whales** popped up every now and then to make an appearance and **Common Bottle-nose Dolphins** (obviously of the deep water ecotype, which are larger than their inshore brethren) also came in to check out the boat. We also had passing encounters with **Risso's Dolphin** but best of all was the appearance of a huge pod of **Atlantic Spotted Dolphin** (endemic to the gulf stream apparently). The Spotted Dolphins put on quite the show, playfully engaging with the boat and riding along with us for quite a

while. Most impressive was the leaping show they put on as another pod came bounding in towards our boat and all on board looked on with amazement and pleasure. What a cool encounter and a great distraction (I think at that point a frigatebird could have flown over the boat and no-one would have even noticed).

We were soon however back onto the birds though and the throngs of **Wilson's Storm-petrels** following the slick of fish oil drew in a few other goodies including more shearwaters and a good number of stunning Pomarines. They also drew in another species of Storm-petrel that caused a wave of excitement to flicker across the boat, initially called as a Band-rumped (although for how long that species name will continue to have any meaning due to proposed splits) we were all a little disappointed that it was eventually re-evaluated as a **Leach's** (I have to say I was wondering about the call), a nice trip bird but one that would be more expected in the waters off of New England.

After much searching and a few nerves that we might even miss the most expected rarity of our trip I finally spotted a **Black-capped Petrel** arcing high across the horizon. Steve Howell one of our expert spotters on the day quickly confirmed my ID and we were soon onto the bird. More sightings started to drift in and soon the boat was picking up a few of these birds including rather good looks at one individual sat on the water not far from the boat.

Before our journey back we had the rare treat of actually hearing the little chirps and tweets of a feeding flock of **Wilson's Storm-Petrels** as they fed right next to the boat. Although we had dipped on a couple of the hoped for species on the trip everyone was at least kept entertained by the near constant action and were particularly pleased by the attentive work of Brian in his role as captain and the extensive knowledge of his crew and expert spotters.

The return journey was brightened by a few **Portuguese Man o' Wars**, and a rather close encounter with both **Loggerhead Turtle** and **Sun Fish**. As we approached dry land again we managed to see the rather active offshore seabird colonies in full swing picking up groups of nesting cormorants, pelicans, terns, skimmers and gulls.

Another hearty fish supper and we were on our way to Nags Head for a well earned and good nights sleep.

Day 7

Our last full day of the trip and still much to do! After a genial breakfast we were on our way to the primordial looking swamps of Alligator River NWR. We had just a short time to stop but it soon proved to be productive. **Prothonotary Warbler** was almost a trash-bird here and sang from every few meters of woodland. Joining its chorus were a handful of **Ovenbirds**, and one of the coastal subspecies of **Black-throated Green Warbler** '*Dendroica virens wayneii*' a declining and interesting coastal specialist subspecies of the BT Green. **Prairie Warblers** also sang along with a few **Pines**. A buzz of activity lead me to a mixed flock of small land birds including more **Brown-headed Nuthatches**, **Carolina Chickadees** and a couple of mixed in birds including **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** and **Yellow-throated Warbler** that were harassing a **Barred Owl** that soon got sick of the attention and disappeared back deeper into the surrounding swamp.

We were soon on our way again however and winging our way south to Wilmington. Although it seemed a little mad to be heading south on our last day it seems that wherever you leave from in North Carolina you were always eleven hours drive from home. The draw of a last night in the beautiful city of Wilmington and a couple of specialist birds kept us going for the long drive until we arrived in the city.

Wilmington's Greenfield Lake Park was a great stop with beautiful scenery complimented by some nice birds as well. **Yellow Warblers** sang from the surrounding trees. A quick stop at a likely looking pullover lead us to our first Alligator encounter of the trip and this one was quite a beast – probably about 12ft in length. You certainly wouldn't want to take a dip in the water here however appealing it might have seemed during the heat of the day! Eying the 'gator nervously were a small group of **Wood Ducks** (plus rather cute chicks). In the middle of the lake another southern specialty in the shape of a 'snake bird' or **Anhinga** and picked out across the far side of the lake a cracking **Common Moorhen** that Betty picked out as it weaved in and out of cover.

A wander over to the USS North Carolina site was fun but didn't yield any new birds but rather than hanging around we decided to call the trip to a close and head for a nice meal and a couple of well earned Margaritas or Beers as desired. Wilmington is a beautiful town and we enjoyed a post dinner stroll along the dockside and checked out some of the eclectic market stalls.

Day 8

A final sunrise in North Carolina and then home on a long but stress free drive back to Connecticut, arriving just in time for supper. We spent most of the trip home pitying those deciding to take the beach/holiday run in the opposite direction.

All in all a fine trip with a nice mix of interesting North American bird species. Slightly disappointing to have been limited to just the one pelagic but weather is the one thing you can't plan for. North Carolina provides an interesting state to visit with much natural beauty, local color as well as historical interest, and for a relaxingly paced birding trip a number of excellent and difficult to find North American bird species. I look forward to coming back next year.

Report by Luke Tiller

Special thanks to Tina Green all of her help on this tour!



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