

A YEAR OF BIRDING AT BEAVER LAKE BIRD SANCTUARY

(reprinted from the April 2009 newsletter)

Tom Tribble contributed the following. You may know Tom from EMAS general meetings, Sanctuary workdays, or Christmas Bird Counts. If you're a birder, this will give you a vicarious year of birding. If you're not a birder, this article will explain to you why we do it!

In the spring of 2007, I attended a meeting at which people were asked to introduce themselves and to identify their favorite outdoor spot in the mountains. As attendees cited their favorite hiking trail or road bike route, I tried to narrow down my many favorite birding spots—locations on the Parkway, in a National Forest or the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. What about the warbler haven of Jackson Park? All wonderful spots, but it soon dawned on me that my favorite spot is Beaver Lake!

Located just 8/10s of a mile from my house, I spend an inordinate amount of time there. The Elisha Mitchell Audubon Society's Beaver Lake Bird Sanctuary is tiny, just a few acres in size. Members of the hiking tribe can cover the entire boardwalk in less than 5 minutes; I rarely make it in less than 45 minutes.

Despite its tiny size, the sanctuary and lake attract a remarkable number of birds (see my 2007/2008 bird lists on the EMAS web site.) In 2007 I saw 104 species; in 2008 it increased to 121. My total for the 2 years was 135 and I missed at least 13 species that others saw. I don't pretend that these counts are a record. I know of one birder whose life list at Beaver Lake is 160, demonstrating the amazing number of birds who find their way to the lake—160 approaches 20% of all the birds on the North American Bird List, and over 29% of those on the North Carolina list!

I'm there a lot—91 visits in 2008. Yes, 91—that works out to 1 out of 4 days, the majority during the migration months, April and May, September and October. On weekends I may arrive shortly after first light. A swing through the sanctuary, a slow walk to the far west end and back, and another swing through the sanctuary and 3 hours or more have passed.

But many of these visits were quite short—perhaps 45 minutes before work. I arrive around 7:30 but the warblers sleep in until 8:05 and I spend 10 frantic minutes before I tear myself away. Ok, boss, sometimes I push the time and I'm 5, well 10 minutes late to work. Other visits are after thoughts—a 30minute stop on the way home after a day of birding with friends at Max Patch or Mt. Mitchell. Perhaps my favorite times are the 20-30 minutes in the fading light at the end of the work day that allow me to arrive home with a calm heart.

Memories are many—One early winter day, I watched a Great Egret stab at the grass along the shore and come up with a . . . mouse! Before swallowing the mouse, the egret dropped it in the water a half dozen times and twice had to fly a short distance away to prevent a Great Blue Heron from stealing it.

For 5 minutes I watched a Red-shouldered Hawk stare intently at the ground 20 feet below, moving his head from side to side. Finally he dropped straight to the ground and out of my vision. A minute later he flew away. Did he get his prey? I don't know.

A slight movement in the grass along the creek below the filter pond. Then nothing. I know something is there. Three minutes later another slight movement and the shape I've been staring at becomes a Snipe.

One spring morning I reached the lake overlook; a long way out I saw a familiar profile of a grebe just before he dove. Another Pied-billed Grebe I thought, but if I'm going to add it to my day's list I better take a look. I raised my binoculars— what surfaced was a beautiful Horned Grebe in breeding plumage.

As I leave the sanctuary to patrol the lake path, Beaver Lake walkers frequently stop to ask what I'm looking at. This fall I received a call one Sunday afternoon from a fellow birder reporting an American Bittern in the weeds along the lake. I found the bittern almost immediately – in the open trying to swallow a fish. A lady stopped with the usual question and was thrilled to see the Bittern. I told her that experienced birders would be equally thrilled. After swallowing the fish, the Bittern took two steps into the weeds and disappeared.

All I have to do is scan the BLBL—you figure it out—to smile at the memory of: A Pine Warbler in January approaching the lake edge for a drink...A Wilson's Warbler skulking in the low willows...A beautiful male Scarlet Tanager singing at the top of a tree—common on the Parkway perhaps but not so at Beaver Lake...The first tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in April...A flock of 50-70 Rusty Blackbirds working the mudflats when the lake was drained...A male Kinglet continually flashing his ruby crown...A female Orchard Oriole in the fall acting so much like a warbler that it was 10 minutes before I slapped my forehead and said "Oh!"...Four downy Green Heron chicks all standing at attention around their nest seemingly at a loss because they can no longer fit...A flock of 40 Pine Siskins in a tree right in front of me and suddenly they're gone.

And of course there are memories of several lifers: A Philadelphia Vireo during fall migration...A Black-billed Cuckoo this spring, not in the sanctuary, but in a tree at the far western end of the lake...In May of 2008, a Cape May Warbler dropped down to bathe in the creek below the beaver dam. For 2 minutes he stepped in and out of the water showing me every possible view...In September a Bay-breasted Warbler, the highlight of 11 warblers that day.

Do I have a favorite Beaver Lake bird? All birders will say that naming their favorite bird is almost impossible. For several years I've looked for my first Cerulean Warbler. I've walked the Parkway from Craven Gap to Bull Creek and beyond without success. On April 25, 2007 I saw Nancy Casey at the Sanctuary—standing on the boardwalk next to the beaver dam. She casually asked if I had seen the Cerulean Warbler. "What?", my voice rising several octaves. She turned and pointed, "It was in that tree right there a minute ago. Look, it's still there." And there was my lifer Cerulean Warbler—perhaps recently arrived from Colombia and soon to be nesting at Craven Gap.

Recently my brother-in-law asked if I didn't see the same species over and over again. The answer of course is yes. On a Saturday I'll return home in late morning and write the day's list into my notebook. Often it is strikingly similar to a dozen other days over the years. The next day I'll wake up early and after breakfast consider my day. I could tackle a house project or lie on the sofa with my current book. Then I hear a voice that says "There may be a new bird at Beaver Lake" and I reach for my birding shoes. On Sunday January 18, 2009 there was a new bird. An Eastern Screech-Owl stuck his head up in the entrance hole of a nesting box. My first Sanctuary owl! We stared at each other for 20 seconds, and then he dropped back down in the box—to resume his day's sleep but perhaps not before adding a Tribble to his list.