

New England

23 October–2 November 2016

Participants

Robert Carr

Peter Lansdown

Peter Ward

Margaret Ward

Leader James P. Smith



Eastern Bluebird

We enjoyed a trip of variable weather, decent migration, very pleasant scenery and some very good birding. The highlights are detailed below.

Day 1 Our flight from London Heathrow was on-time and we met up in the arrivals hall at Boston Logan mid-evening before heading for our motel at Hampton Falls, New Hampshire. After a number of credit card “issues”, we eventually got to our rooms.

Day 2 The day dawned clear and cold as we set off for a number of visits to sites along the 18-mile New Hampshire coastline. There was a good selection of seabirds, with all three scoters close in. We found a flock of Savannah Sparrows and James showed us a bird of the Ipswich race – relatively distinct! At this late stage of the year, we were surprised to find a small flock of warblers, mostly Yellow-rumped and a single Pine. As was to be the case, they were in unfamiliar “fall” plumages. Peter L then picked out a Rough-legged Hawk coming in off the sea – the only sighting of this species. At Ragged Neck Margaret found a Wilson’s Snipe amongst the rocks; we were then treated to prolonged and exceptionally close views of two Lapland Longspurs. We later found a Field Sparrow and two very dowdy Orange-crowned Warblers with a brief Blackpoll Warbler. Later we finally caught up with the long-staying Western Kingbird, well out of range. Overnight Hampton Falls.

Day 3 An early start kitted out in wellies, for various forays into the saltmarshes. A 1st-winter Yellow Warbler tested our ID skills; we saw a Pectoral Sandpiper and a juvenile Tundra race Peregrine. Unfortunately, we could find no trace of either of the Saltmarsh Sparrows, despite extensive searching. Our next stop was at Salisbury Beach but the weather had become much worse: very cold and windy, and there was little activity. An Eastern Phoebe sheltering in the lee of the pines was the best bird. We then visited Groveland, where we saw the long-staying Tufted Duck – a rather tatty male, but still a rare ABA bird. Also present were many Ring-necked Ducks and a pair of Buffleheads. We tried our luck at the Great Bay for another rare duck, a drake Eurasian Wigeon, but the conditions defeated us: gale force winds, looking into the light and the tide was well out and the birds were little more than distant blobs on the water. Overnight Hampton Falls.

Day 4 Another cold, clear start to the day, so we headed off to some new saltmarshes and donned our wellies. This time we were more successful as James called in a Nelson’s Sparrow and we had reasonable views of this bird. We

couldn't manage to find any Sharp-tailed Sparrows but were pleased with a fly-over Osprey and a distantly perched Eastern Bluebird. Our next marsh produced a close Red-tailed Hawk, which dropped into the short vegetation and flew off with a small prey item in its talons: James was quick-witted and fired off a few shots with his camera and then we inspected the images. James was in no doubt as to the identity: a Sharp-tailed Sparrow!! Was it still alive when we saw it? Could we count it? We continued to search for others but without success: perhaps the hawk had eaten the last one. A fly-over adult Bald Eagle was an impressive sight and a flock of Snow Buntings lifted the spirits. We next visited Plum Island, a huge reserve of saltmarsh and coastal dunes. It was, however, quiet on the birding front but we caught up with Song, Chipping and Savannah Sparrows with distant Great and Little Egrets. James then drove us to Brattleborough, Vermont where we checked in to our Motel 6 accommodation.

Day 5 Even colder this morning, with a sharp frost. We walked through some local woods and eventually reached the summit where there was a clear area which served as a Hawk Watchpoint. We met the two counters, both volunteers; their thermometer read -3°C – the only metric units I saw. The raptor migration was very slow, with only a single Sharp-shinned through, so we left for some local sites around Gill, Massachusetts. As light snow began to fall, James found a Swamp Sparrow and five Wood Ducks in flight; later a Pine Warbler was typically low down, foraging. As the visibility decreased, James drove us round some sites in the Connecticut River where we could scan from the vehicle: two Hooded Mergansers were the best. A feeding station was very busy with three Downy Woodpeckers, House and Purple Finches. We finished with a visit to a snow-covered Walmart: all that was missing were the reindeer. Overnight at Brattleborough.

Day 6 The snow had mostly melted as we started on the three-hour drive to Vermont, the North-east Kingdom, home of various boreal specialities. In the event it rained nearly all day and birding was difficult. James and Peter L saw Boreal Chickadee; we were all treated to many close views of Grey Jays. There was little else of note. Overnight at Brattleborough.

Day 7 Overcast and cold, with rain on and off through the day. We revisited a number of sites in the Gill area with the best birds being a flock of c.60 Cedar Waxwings. We then made our way to Cape Cod as the weather brightened up. Our first stop was to catch up with another long-staying kingbird, a Grey Kingbird. We then spent some time looking through a large flock of gulls, with James finding our first Lesser Black-backed. We had a quick check of the seaward side and it looked very promising: lots of gulls including Bonaparte's and Black-legged Kittiwakes, as well as many Cory's Shearwaters and Parasitic Jaegers, all relatively close, thanks to the strong onshore northerly winds. Overnight Cape Cod.

Day 8 Our good fortune with the wind continued today. As we walked out to the beach at Race Point we were amazed at the number of birds: they were simply everywhere, a veritable wall of birds, like one of the montages in the Crossley ID books. The downside was that it was difficult for James to get us on specific birds, so we all missed certain sightings. Nonetheless, we all saw thousands of Northern Gannets, large numbers of all three scoters, a continuous stream of Cory's with large numbers of Great Shearwaters. We also saw a good range of gulls, including two Iceland Gulls, with many Common and Red-throated Loons. At Herring Point there were also huge numbers of Common Terns and a few Forster's, as well as scoters and loons as at Race Point; a close Red-throated Grebe was new for the trip. In the afternoon we visited a saltmarsh, where we finally got views of Sharp-tailed Sparrows, as well as good views of two Marsh Wrens. Overnight Cape Cod.

Day 9 More good fortune with the winds, which were even stronger at Race Point: this meant the birds were very fast moving and difficult to pick up at times! We saw the same range of species as yesterday, and again at Herring Point. At the latter we had good views of an adult winter Little Gull, next to some Bonaparte's, allowing a good comparison both on the sea and in flight. In Princetown Harbour there were many Common Eiders as well as hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants with a few Greats amongst them: another instructive comparison. We walked across the flats towards Race Point proper, but extreme tides stopped us short. A Ring-necked Pheasant and Ruby-crowned

Kinglet were seen. At Pilgrim Heights we saw a small flock of migrating Northern Flickers and, after many attempts on the trip, James called in a Winter Wren – a lifer for some of us following the recent split. At the Head of the Meadows we saw the “usual” shearwaters, scoters and gulls, including an adult winter Little Gull. It was finally calm and dry enough to attempt some owling, but we didn’t have any sightings. The complete lack of owls was one of the disappointments for many, but it was largely a result of the weather. Overnight Cape Cod.

Day 10 It was much calmer today, both the wind and the birds. At Race Point James got some of us on a group of fairly distant auks, Razorbills on jizz. The sea was flat at Herring Point but there was still much of interest, including a huge raft of Common Eiders and another Little Gull. However, it was soon time to do our packing and head back to Logan airport and our good-byes. On a personal note, I had three lifers and six further ABA ticks, which exceeded my expectations: a very successful trip.

Robert Carr