Birdathon Report, 15 May 2016

Philip Martin, with Kathy Hodges and Steve Neumeth

After several days of record-breaking warmth and sun, 15 May dawned cloudy and cooler. We met at 6 AM at the Georgeson Botanical Garden, and our auspicious start was a sub-adult Goshawk perched in a nearby spruce, enduring the harassment of a Mew Gull. Scanning the farm fields yielded Canada Geese, Mallards, Sandhill Cranes, and a Northern Harrier while the gardens provided White-crowned Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird, American Robin, and a Dark-eyed Junco. Oh, yes, and a pigeon, umm Rock Dove.

The Goldstream Peat Ponds rocked to a chorus of Lincoln’s Sparrows and Wilson’s Snipe. The usual waterbirds were hanging out: Horned Grebe, Lesser Yellowlegs, Bonaparte’s Gull, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Ring-necked Duck, and Lesser Scaup. The mudflats looked empty at first, but a little scrutiny revealed Pectoral, Semipalmated, and Least sandpipers, as well as a Semipalmated Plover and an American Pipit. Flyovers included Common Redpolls, Violet-green Swallows, a Belted Kingfisher, Common Raven, Solitary Sandpiper.

We stopped briefly at the University Arboretum off of Yankovich Road for Townsend’s Warbler, and a bonus Black-capped Chickadee, then went on to Creamers Field. The short walk to the seasonal pond added Downy Woodpecker, Hammond’s Flycatcher, Wilson’s, Yellow-rumped, and Blackpoll warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Tree Swallow, and Savannah Sparrow. My favorite bird of the day – a Say’s Phoebe – perched obligingly on farm equipment and the fence by the barns.

After that, we went to a friend’s house to pay a visit to an active Boreal Owl nest box. Sadly, the owl did not respond to taps on the nest tree, but luckily for us, my friend has set up a live video feed into her living room, so we were able to view Mom and chicks in their box. I don’t know what Birdathon rules say about live video feeds - so we are counting it!

The Airport Terminal ponds gave us nest-building Red-necked Grebes and a Redhead. Our detour out the flood control dike behind the airport rewarded us with a Spotted Sandpiper, Long-tailed Duck, Common Goldeneye, Canvasback. and Orange-crowned Warblers. The East Ramp float ponds had more shorebirds, but no new species. However, there were wheeling flocks of Lapland Longspurs nervously alighting and taking off, practicing their touch-and-gos – it took us a long time to get a good look at them on the ground but it was worth the wait.

Tanana Lakes was windy and gray, but we did see a few additional species. A little flock of 6 Surf Scoters bobbed on the waves, and we spotted 2 male Gadwalls, 2 Long-billed Dowitchers, a Northern Flicker, an Arctic Tern, and Herring Gulls. A few Cliff Swallows were mixed in with the other swallows scooping up insects over the lakes. As our final effort, we drove out the Richardson Highway to North Pole to see Ospreys at their nests on the big powerline that parallels the flood control dike.

I returned home to a steady drizzle – not the most conducive birding weather, but I did manage to add one more species – a Red-breasted Nuthatch still coming to our suet feeder, as it has since last October. My total for the day was exactly 60 species, birding for 10 hours, certainly not an earth-shattering tally. More than the species count, what I will most remember about the day is the range of bird behavior drama we observed, including sex, violence, death, and scenes of tranquil domesticity. At the footbridge at Creamers, we witnessed a vicious Hammond’s Flycatcher fight that had the two combatants rolling on the ground and then locked in a motionless near-death grip. Later, we watched a Northern Harrier tearing apart a small bird (likely a longspur) at the airport. In the R-rated portion of the day, our party of voyeurs saw and heard loud and exuberant Yellowlegs copulation. In the family-friendly portion, we watched nest-building by Red-necked Grebes and Hammond’s Flycatchers, and an incubating Robin and Mew Gull. And, of course, Owl TV.

All in all, a thoroughly enjoyable day sampling Fairbanks spring birds. Thanks, Alaska Songbird Institute, for giving us the excuse to get out of the house.