

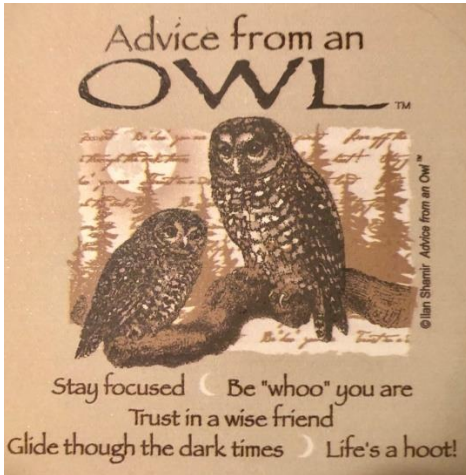
Superbowl of Birding XXI—The Twitchers are out of the Rye Again!

by Kathryn Frieden

It was 4:30 am on the morning of Saturday, January 27, 2024, and the team was suited up and (almost) ready to roll. The kick-off was at 5:00 am, and our starting line was at John Stark Lane in Hampton, our chosen town for the competition. Once again, we were competing for the Townie Award. Our veteran team players were Captain Becky Suomala, Driver Susan Wrisley, Navigator Jenna Rosen, and Scribe Kathryn Frieden. But behind the scenes we had a terrific support team. Andrea Robbins scoured eBird reports ahead of time to help with planning our itinerary. Holly Bauer hosted us at her home in Hampton the night before so we could start out rested, warm, well-fed, and close to the starting line. (She was also responsible for our second-ever Common Merganser on Meadow Pond.) And then, at half-time, Catherine Eames brought us a hot lunch at Bicentennial Park, so we stayed warmer and more well-fed than ever before. Thank you support team! Not only that, but because there had just been a story about The Twitchers in the Union Leader, we became minor celebrities for the day.

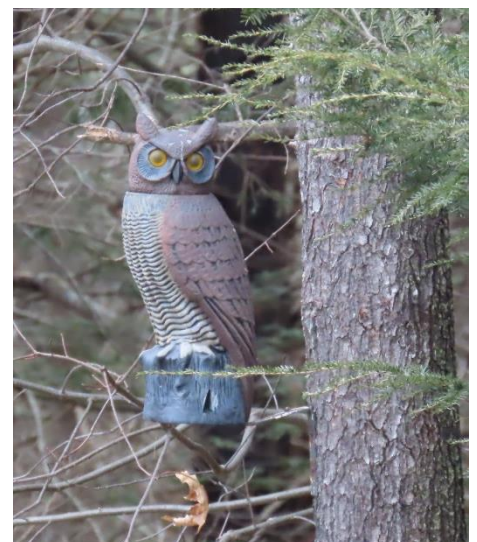


The 2024 Twitchers out of the Rye, (left to right) Susan Wrisley, Kathryn Frieden, Becky Suomala (captain), and Jenna Rosen.



The forecast was for cloudy skies and drizzle in the morning, but it only drizzled a tiny bit, and overall, the day was warmer than usual with temperatures mostly in the upper 30s. (Does anyone remember how cold it was in 2022 during the Twitcher's last Superbowl? I certainly do!) We arrived at John Stark Lane at 5:03 am, only three minutes late, which was not bad since we had to do a little car shuffling on the way there. The day always begins with owling; after all it is still dark and the other birds aren't up yet. This is done by hooting an imitation of an owl's own hoots which can bring them in to investigate, hooting in return. Becky started with what she thought was her best Barred Owl hoot, but no response came. After a few minutes Susan asked, "Wait, isn't that a Great Horned Owl call you're doing?"

And the answer, much to Becky's chagrin (and much laughter), was yes, and that she meant to do Barred Owl hoots, but the wrong owl just came out by mistake. Owling "protocol" is to start with the smallest owl you are trying to attract because once the larger ones are heard, those small ones are going to steer clear. So—no owls here, but there were five more owling stops to go. Despite doing the correct hoots for saw-whet owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, and Great Horned Owl from then on, we had no owls over the next hour and a half, which was certainly a first for this Twitcher team. We did see two plastic owls, but those don't actually count.



*Our only owls were plastic. Sigh!
Photo by Rebecca Suomala.*



Our 5-point Palm Warbler at the Hampton WTP by Susan Wrisley.

We only had two birds during that first hour and a half—a singing Carolina Wren, and a singing Song Sparrow. But then we arrived at the Hampton Wastewater Treatment Plant (WTP) as planned at dawn to maximize our chance of seeing one of the five-point warblers that have been overwintering there and things started to pick up. Sure enough, there was the Palm Warbler, right where it had regularly been seen! Five-point birds need to be called in to Joppa Flats so other birders get a chance at seeing them, and there is a three-point bonus for the first team that calls one in. The Harris Center Kestrels appeared just as the Palm Warbler did, so we shared the bonus points with them. Palm Warbler was a new species for the Twitchers. The WTP really gave us a needed boost for the day with 28 species there, partially because it also gives a good view out onto Hampton Marsh. Jenna and Susan caught a glimpse of a Winter Wren, but Becky and I didn't manage to see it, so we couldn't count

it. At least three of the four team members must see or hear the bird. And we never did find another Winter Wren. But a big boost to our team spirit was the flock of 15 Rock Pigeons we had there. (Does anyone remember that in 2018 in Rye this team did not see a single pigeon the entire day? We certainly do!)

Our next hour or so was spent driving slowly around several Hampton roads which brought us Greater Scaup and Bald Eagle. A stop at Hampton Harbor and the Hampton Marina looking for water birds brought good success. From the marina a very distant Great Blue Heron was spotted in the scope; with binoculars it just looked like a stump. This was a great find as it is a three-point bird. The next stop was Hampton Beach State Park, which certainly looked different than usual. The jetty at the south end of the beach is being enlarged and repaired, so there are tall cranes and huge boulders everywhere. The large flocks of Horned Larks usually seen in the RV camping field are absent, probably due to both the noise and the smaller available area for foraging. We did manage to find a few Horned Larks, but we missed Lapland Longspur, which often accompanies them. One of the most enjoyable sights of the day was a flock of 40 Snow Buntings. They would land on a boulder; a few would drop to the ground one by one, and then, with no obvious provocation, they would all suddenly fly up in the air and repeat the process all over again. At one point, they were all lined up on the roof of the picnic shelter, looking like decorations.

The swells and rolling seas made ocean birding a real challenge all day. The majority of our ocean ducks came from Hampton Harbor where the water was smooth. The channel at Hampton Beach State Park was also smooth until the very rough water at the mouth. Jenna spotted two Razorbills right at this edge of smooth water and Susan got on them but once again Becky and Kathryn missed them so we couldn't count them. They were our only alcids of the day.

By 11:00 am we had managed to find all the common one-point birds that we were likely to in Hampton, so we were catching up after our slow start. Our next stop was at North Shore Road at the Nilus Brook crossing where the tall trees are good habitat for



Our second new species for the Twitchers, Field Sparrow by Susan Wrisley.

Brown Creeper. After a lot of “pishing” there was still no Brown Creeper and despite many scouted locations for them, we couldn’t turn up a creeper all day. We did see and hear a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds filling a treetop with “chucking.” This was a good find since it is a three-point species. There was just enough time left to visit the High Street Cemetery before lunch. We found a Field Sparrow here during scouting and, miracle of miracles, it was still there! Another new species for the Twitchers and a four-point bird. Even better were the three Chipping Sparrows – a five-point bird, our second of the day! The only other time the Twitchers have had Chipping Sparrow was our first year in Hampton in 2019. We called it in but missed the three points because another team had already reported the species. It was a productive stop as we also saw two Turkey Vultures, a four-pointer, and a Cooper’s Hawk, a three-pointer.

Lunch at Bicentennial Park was a wonderful treat! Hot soup, corn bread, hot drinks, and home-made chocolate chip cookies got us ready to tackle the afternoon’s search for more birds. And while enjoying our winter picnic all decked out with binoculars and scopes, our “celebrity” status became apparent when a passing woman asked with enthusiasm, “Are you the group looking for birds?” After lunch, sea-watching from the park brought us a Red-necked Grebe and a Black Scoter, both two-pointers, so good additions to our list. From there we headed out to Batchelder Park on Towle Farm Road where there is a small duck pond near the road. Sure enough, there were 340 Mallards, but unfortunately, we only get credit for one of them. We also found the expected American Black Ducks and Northern Pintails (a nice three-pointer). But the big surprise was the previously unreported American Wigeon, another three-pointer, and only the second one ever for the Twitchers. *Nobody expects the American Wigeon!* (If you don’t get that joke, you really should watch some old Monty Python shows). From there, it was on to Timber Swamp Road, which turned out to be a good stop. Becky pished in a Golden-crowned Kinglet (two points!) as well as a Northern Flicker. Jenna spotted a nearly-invisible Red-shouldered Hawk that the Northern Flicker was upset about, only the second time the Twitchers had recorded one, and four points for the icing on the cake.

Time was now getting short, and there were a few places we needed to revisit to try for species we had missed earlier in the day. As we headed for the Taylor River area off Route 1, Susan commented, “It’s getting unlikely that we’ll find a Belted Kingfisher.” Five minutes later, she spotted a distant kingfisher sitting on a post in the marsh at the Taylor River. What a fun coincidence! Then it was back to the Hampton WTP to look for birds we knew were there, but we just hadn’t found yet: Yellow-rumped Warbler, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, and Gray Catbird, all extra-pointers. Sure enough, success just after we arrived. The Yellow-rumped Warbler, a three-pointer and one of six new species for the Twitchers in Hampton, presented itself right where we had seen the Palm Warbler first thing in the morning. Sadly, the other three birds stayed hidden, but we couldn’t linger for long because there were water birds still missing from our list. So, it was back to Hampton Beach State Park.

This brings us to one of our biggest misses of the day, as a matter of fact, two big misses within minutes! Here is what happened. We searched the waters in the channel off Hampton Beach State Park for our missing Red-throated Loon.



The “Twitcher Feeding Table” at Bicentennial Park provided by Catherine Eames (left) with hot soup, hot drinks, corn bread, and homemade cookies, plus a puffin!

Toward the west, the Route 1A bridge to Seabrook dominates the landscape, and beyond that lies Hampton Harbor. After about 15 minutes it was time to leave and head back north to our final destination before the competition deadline of 5:00 pm. As we waited to pull out onto Route 1A, another team was crossing the road towards us on foot, clearly just leaving the State Marina, which is located on the west side of the bridge in the harbor. They excitedly called out to us that they had just seen two Harlequin Ducks! This is a fairly rare species in New Hampshire, but there had been one seen off and on at this location since January 2. We had been hoping to find it on our earlier visit to the Marina, but no luck. And what are the chances there could really be two Harlequins now? But we detoured across the street to the Marina despite our doubts. And there, heading toward the bridge as described by the other team, were two female Buffleheads, a very similar appearing duck, especially in the dimming afternoon light. Could this be what the other team had seen? We quickly got back into the car and headed up Route 1A with just enough time left for a quick look around the High Street Cemetery again where there was a possibility for an Eastern Screech-Owl at dusk. And that's when, through the miracle of modern messaging and digital photograph-sharing, we discovered that there actually had been two Harlequin Ducks, which had moved to the channel by Hampton Beach State Park. They had crossed under the bridge to the east while we were crossing the road to the west, so we had just missed them twice! It would have been hard to do that on purpose.

There were no owls answering our hoots at the cemetery, and then suddenly it was 5:00 and the competition was over. But the fun was not, because although once again there was no in-person compilation, Steve Mirick had organized a get-together for New Hampshire teams at the Tailgate Tavern in Stratham. We are grateful to him for the chance to retell our stories of the day in such lively and friendly company.

How did we do in the competition? Our final tally was 62 species and 108 points. We had good weather, good food, and great companionship for the day. The official compilation was by Zoom the following night. We knew we'd have some tough competition for the Townie Award from Jim Sparrell and his team in Rye, but we lost the Townie Award for the first time to a team birding Ipswich, MA. As far as we know, it was the first time there was a team from Massachusetts competing for the Townie Award and the first time there were three Townie teams, so we hope that's a trend. It will keep us on our toes for next year, and after all, we aren't really doing this for the award, are we?

2024 Official Species List

Bold indicates a 5-point species, * is new for Hampton.
 Weather: Low of 34, high of 41, with mostly cloudy skies and only light winds.

- Canada Goose
- American Wigeon ***
- American Black Duck**
- Mallard
- Northern Pintail ***
- Greater Scaup
- Common Eider
- Surf Scoter
- White-winged Scoter
- Black Scoter
- Long-tailed Duck
- Bufflehead
- Common Goldeneye
- Hooded Merganser
- Common Merganser * second ever for the Twitchers
- Red-breasted Merganser
- Common Loon



Horned Grebe
 Red-necked Grebe
 Great Cormorant *
 Great Blue Heron
 Turkey Vulture
 Bald Eagle
 Northern Harrier
 Cooper's Hawk
 Red-shouldered Hawk * second ever for the Twtichers
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Ring-billed Gull
 Herring Gull
 Great Black-backed Gull
 Rock Pigeon
 Mourning Dove
 Belted Kingfisher
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Downy Woodpecker
 Northern Flicker
 Blue Jay
 American Crow
 Horned Lark
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Tufted Titmouse
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 Carolina Wren
 Golden-crowned Kinglet
 Eastern Bluebird
 American Robin
 Northern Mockingbird
 European Starling
 Snow Bunting
Palm Warbler, new for the Twtichers
 Yellow-rumped Warbler *
 American Tree Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow, second ever for the Twtichers
 Field Sparrow, new for the Twtichers
 Song Sparrow
 White-throated Sparrow
 Dark-eyed Junco
 Northern Cardinal
 Red-winged Blackbird
 House Finch
 American Goldfinch
 House Sparrow



*Photos in the Species List, 1/27/24 (top to bottom):
 American Wigeon by Susan Wrisley, Northern Pintail
 female (right) by Susan Wrisley, Red-shouldered
 Hawk by Jenna Rosen, Snow Buntings by Susan
 Wrisley, 5-point Chipping Sparrow by Susan Wrisley.*

Bonus Photo Gallery



Fun During Scouting



Photos above from the Superbowl 1/27/24: Yellow-rumped Warbler by Jenna Rosen, Greater Scaup by Susan Wrisley, New Hampshire teams gathering informally at the end of the day thanks to Steve Mirick by Rebecca Suomala.

Scouting photos, 1/21/24 by Rebecca Suomala, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, and a friendly worker at the Hampton WTP.

