

Trip Report:

Coastal Virginia

January 16-20, 2021

Guide: Simon Thompson

Winter birding along Virginia's Delmarva Peninsula can be excellent and with some great birds starting to appear in the area, this upcoming week looked to be very good.

Most of us met in Greensboro our first morning to see some of the rarities that were being reported this winter. Our first stop was the local Black-chinned Hummingbird, quickly followed by the Varied Thrush in Cary and onto the Vermilion Flycatcher in Martin County, NC (complete with a wonderful wooden sign directing us to the bird!). Despite the cold wind we had a quick picnic lunch along the roadside (and several of Chris's cheesy cookies) before continuing our trek eastwards. We made several birding stops in Chowan and Perquimans Counties in NC before crossing the state line into Virginia and up to our hotel on the Virginia Beach waterfront, where we met David and Chris.

Our first walk along the beach didn't produce a lot aside from the expected Lesser Black-backed Gulls, but we scored big at Little Island Park with the 2 Dovekies that had been reported yesterday. There were also several Common and Red-throated Loons on the nearby ocean. A stop at the often excellent Rudee Inlet produced wonderful looks at Black and Surf Scoter, several beautiful (and very close) Long-tailed Ducks that again allowed for some great photo ops. Our next stop was to First Landing State Park for some previously-reported Snow Buntings, which again showed extremely well as they fed on the Sea Oat seeds, alongside an "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow. Unfortunately we were not permitted to stop and bird on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, so we had to identify birds from a moving car- well, aside from the driver of course! The Eastern Shore NWR is well-known for its population of American Woodcock, although like many crepuscular birds they can be very difficult to see. A chance encounter by Kevin enabled us to see several as they flew off through the woods and as the sun went down we were able to watch many more birds coming out of the forest to feed and maybe display in the short grass along the roadside. The coastal marshes can be good for Short-eared Owl in the winter, but even standing there in the cold as the sun went down, we did not manage to find one. A good consolation was an American Bittern that flew over us only to disappear in the coastal marsh grass – always a good bird to see.

Dinner was take-out from Sting Rays, a well-known and excellent seafood restaurant along the roadside- a great day all around.

We started MLK Day at a great viewing platform at Willis's Wharf overlooking an inlet in Hog Island Bay. We were looking for overwintering shorebirds and found a single Marbled Godwit, as well as Willet, Ruddy Turnstone and Semipalmated Plover. Thousands of Snow Geese were streaming over from their safe roosting sites in the bay to feed in the agricultural fields and several Bald Eagle were hunting over the coastal marshes. Kiptopeke State Park is always worth a visit, although this year the bay was fairly quiet with just Bufflehead and many Brown Pelicans and Great Black-backed Gulls. Red Crossbills are having an irruption year and have been recorded from the Kiptopeke woodlands. However our walk did not find any, but a few Red-breasted Nuthatches were a nice consolation. A stop by the Cape Charles Harbor was very profitable with a female Common Eider swimming around the breakwater and a real surprise was an immature Glaucous Gull we watched for a while flying over the distant rock jetties and several Surf Scoters were very photogenic – always great to see these striking ducks at close range. There were also multiple Bald Eagles at Gargatha Landing, where we stopped on our way north; the infrastructure at NASA's Wallop's Island facility rising distantly above the coastal marshes. We had time for one last stop today for our only stop in Worcester County, Maryland where we spent the night in Pocomoke City.

Our last day in Virginia was going to be spent at the wonderful Chincoteague NWR. A Snowy Owl had been reported there along the beach towards the coastguard's cottage. The walk was beautiful, with Long-tailed Ducks, Horned Grebes and more along the way. Unfortunately the owl was nowhere to be seen, so we said goodbye to Iris and Diana, who had joined us for the morning, and went to the Woodland Walk to find some more sheltered birding. The paved walk, despite only being around 1.5 miles, took it out of us a little – maybe, after a walk of almost 3 miles along the beach had something to do with it. In the past the forest had been damaged by a Southern Pine Beetle infestation and a subsequent Nor'easter that took down many of the diseased trees. The walk was very productive with Hermit Thrush, Gray Catbird and White-eyed Vireo being added to the triplist. A nice surprise was the small flock of Red Crossbills that we watched feeding high in the Ponderosa Pines and several Delmarva Fox Squirrels, a formerly endangered subspecies of the widespread Fox Squirrel which was de-listed in 2015. The rest of the day was a lot more relaxing with a visit to the sound-side salt marshes where we got our American Oystercatchers (at last!) and a very pleasant drive around the Wildlife Loop. Large flocks of Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal and American Black Duck fed quietly in the roadside lagoons, allowing us to take our time

looking at their crisp breeding plumages and feeding methods. A Northern Harrier made several passes across the marshes, scattering ducks, a small flock of White Ibis and several Wilson's Snipe. We stayed around hoping for the appearance of a Short-eared Owl, but alas, one did not appear. Dinner tonight was at one of the good local seafood restaurants where once again, many of us got to enjoy some freshly caught seafood before our homeward trek tomorrow.

It's always a little sad when a trip is over and some of us want to continue exploring and birding, plus there were a few 5 star rarities almost on our way home. It didn't take too long before several of us drove south from Virginia Beach towards the NC Outer Banks. We unfortunately dipped on the MacGillivray's Warbler after our diversion up to Duck, but quickly found the Black-throated Gray Warbler on Roanoke Island and also the Rough-legged Hawk at Alligator River NWR. Reality then set in so we drove west to Durham, NC and the end of our road trip.

We had pretty good weather overall and some great birds. What were the best? Gosh, we had plenty to choose from. There was the snappy Vermilion Flycatcher hawking insects around a farmyard; multiple American Woodcocks buzzing out of the woods, some beautiful Snow Buntings feeding directly in front of us; some super-close views of Long-tailed Ducks and maybe best of all, the very close Dovekie that fed and swam right next to the pier.

Thanks to everyone for a great trip

Simon Thompson

Virginia List

Snow Goose	American Woodcock	Red-tailed Hawk
Brant	Wilson's Snipe	Belted Kingfisher
Canada Goose	Greater Yellowlegs	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Tundra Swan	Willet	Red-bellied Woodpecker
Northern Shoveler	Dovekie	Downy Woodpecker
Gadwall	Razorbill	Pileated Woodpecker
American Wigeon	Bonaparte's Gull	Northern Flicker
Mallard	Laughing Gull	American Kestrel
American Black Duck	Ring-billed Gull	Peregrine Falcon
Northern Pintail	Herring Gull	Eastern Phoebe
Green-winged Teal	Lesser Black-backed Gull	White-eyed Vireo
Lesser Scaup	Glaucous Gull	Blue Jay
Greater Scaup	Great Black-backed Gull	American Crow
Common Eider	Forster's Tern	Fish Crow
Surf Scoter	Red-throated Loon	Carolina Chickadee
Black Scoter	Common Loon	Tufted Titmouse
Long-tailed Duck	Northern Gannet	Tree Swallow
Bufflehead	Double-crested Cormorant	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Hooded Merganser	American Bittern	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Red-breasted Merganser	Great Blue Heron	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Ruddy Duck	Great Egret	Brown-headed Nuthatch
Horned Grebe	Snowy Egret	Brown Creeper
Rock Pigeon	Tricolored Heron	Winter Wren
Mourning Dove	Black-crowned Night-Heron	Marsh Wren
Clapper Rail	White Ibis	Carolina Wren
American Oystercatcher	Black Vulture	European Starling
Semipalmated Plover	Turkey Vulture	Gray Catbird
Marbled Godwit	Northern Harrier	Brown Thrasher
Ruddy Turnstone	Sharp-shinned Hawk	Northern Mockingbird
Sanderling	Cooper's Hawk	Eastern Bluebird
Dunlin	Bald Eagle	Hermit Thrush
Purple Sandpiper	Red-shouldered Hawk	American Robin

House Sparrow
American Pipit
Purple Finch
Red Crossbill
American Goldfinch
Snow Bunting
Chipping Sparrow

Fox Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
White-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Eastern Towhee

Eastern Meadowlark
Red-winged Blackbird
Boat-tailed Grackle
Orange-crowned Warbler
Palm Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Northern Cardinal

Mammals

Inshore Bottle-nosed Dolphin
White-tailed Deer
Gray Squirrel
Delmarva Fox Squirrel
Eastern Cottontail

North Carolina List

Canada Goose
Snow Goose
Tundra Swan
Northern Shoveler
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Wild Turkey
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Ring-billed Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Double-crested Cormorant
Pied-billed Grebe
Killdeer
Wilson's Snipe
Great Blue Heron
Black-chinned Hummingbird
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk
Bald Eagle

Cooper's Hawk
American Kestrel
Belted Kingfisher
Vermilion Flycatcher
Eastern Phoebe
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Blue Jay
Fish Crow
American Crow
Common Raven
Carolina Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown-headed Nuthatch
Loggerhead Shrike
European Starling
Brown Thrasher
Northern Mockingbird
Carolina Wren
House Wren

Eastern Bluebird
Varied Thrush
American Robin
Cedar Waxwing
House Sparrow
Eastern Meadowlark
Red-winged Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
House Finch
Purple Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
Chipping Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
White-throated Sparrow
Eastern Towhee
Orange-crowned Warbler
Pine Warbler
Black-throated Gray Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Northern Cardinal