

## **A 2010 NASSAU COUNTY “BIG YEAR”**

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After recording a modest 35 species at my usual assignment of the South Nassau CBC on 2 Jan 2010, it occurred to me to attempt the rather interesting though limited endeavor of a Nassau County Big Year. Having seen American Bittern and Razorbill that day, and knowing these to be nice finds on any day within Nassau County, I had the extra incentive to take on this endeavor. Initially, I wasn't sure what the birding community would think of this project, but most turned out to be very supportive. Only a small number of my comrades thought that limiting a “Big Year” to just one county was too restrictive. Factoring in the “Realistic” factor—knowing in advance how much available time I would have for the field—was another important component in limiting this project to the county in which I've been a life-long resident. Knowing my birding would be confined to weekends and a minimal number of late afternoons forced me to tap into all of my skills in terms of utilizing seasonality, tides, and weather patterns in the best and most sensible ways possible.

Diligent record keeping made for easy retrieval of hours spent in the field and locations visited, keeping in mind that many of my regular birding locations outside of Nassau were also visited, mostly for chasing rarities, or for out-of-Region 10 vacation time, but generally for limited periods. Most of the 36 locations visited were in the southern sector of the County, which includes three State Parks (Valley Stream, Hempstead Lake and Jones Beach), each of which I worked regularly. Nineteen of the 36 locations were visited repeatedly; the most frequently visited location was Jones Beach State Park where the most productivity was at the West End. In a total of 180 hours and 50 minutes recorded in the field, 108 entries were documented within 69 dates. Roughly another 25 hours of unproductive birding went unrecorded. 15 hours and 45 minutes were spent sea-watching within parts of 17 of those recorded outings. There were no pelagic trips.

This synopsis represents the highlights and some of the “Hits and Misses” as well as notable observations recorded during the calendar year. Of the 238 recorded species, there were several species personally seen for the first time in Nassau County. These are: Tundra Swan, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Marbled Godwit, White-winged Dove, Loggerhead Shrike, Cave Swallow, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Nelson's Sparrow. Here are some notes related to the first timers as well as other significant observations and findings. Comments on individual species relate to my recent records and recollection of my birding experiences in Nassau County since the early 1970s.

Greater White-fronted Goose: Hempstead Lake SP - 24 Jan. With Canada Geese moving around mainly at the north end of the reservoir.

Tundra Swan: Massapequa Preserve - 22 Feb. On the pond near the Pittsburg Ave. entrance. Up to two birds wintered within the preserve and were seen by many.

Eurasian Wigeon: Mill Pond, Oyster Bay - 21 Nov. Was reported moving around this area for about a week and seen at this location the previous day.

Redhead: Hempstead Lake SP - 27 Feb. Four birds on the South Pond at the southwest corner, a typical location for these, but not seen every year.

Harlequin Duck: Point Lookout - Up to only three birds on multiple dates wintering around the jetties, rarely missed in the last 15+ years at this location.

Ring-necked Pheasant: Jones Beach West End - 9 May; Bay County Park - 30 May. Both calling. Getting harder to find in recent years.

Wilson's Storm-Petrel: JFK Memorial Wildlife Refuge at Tobay - 13 Jun. Five birds darting around fairly close, generally moving west.

American Bittern: Jones Beach SP - 2 Jan. In flight moving north, seen from Field 10.

Turkey Vulture: East Norwich - 21 Feb. Seen from Rt. 25A, the only one found for the year.

Red-shouldered Hawk: Valley Stream SP - 24 Jan. A bright adult bird was a nice sighting for this date. Occasionally immatures will turn up at this location, most often in March and November.

Virginia Rail: JFK Memorial Wildlife Refuge at Tobay - 6 Jun. A single calling bird; a group of up to three heard from the same location on an unrecorded date in August may have been a family group.

American Avocet: Marine Nature Study Center, Oceanside - 29 Aug. A well-monitored bird that stayed around for several days and was seen by many. Only my second record in Nassau.

Whimbrel: Island Park - 26 Sep. Seven birds seen off the channel which runs behind "Peter's Clam Bar" Restaurant on Long Beach Road. A nice surprise and always a nice find in Nassau.

Marbled Godwit: Jones Beach West End - 11 Sep. Well-reported by many during Sep. and Oct. on the sandbar at the West End, sometimes multiples.

Western Sandpiper: Jones Beach West End - 4 Sep. and 9 Oct. Both singles with most of the other peep species.

White-rumped Sandpiper: Seen in high numbers at many locations during many visits. Definitely the strongest showing I've seen for these on the South Shore.

Baird's Sandpiper: Jones Beach West End - One or two birds seen on three dates from 4 Sep. to 11 Sep.

Stilt Sandpiper: Marine Nature Study Center, Oceanside - 29 Aug. A roosting and well-hidden bird among Short-billed Dowitchers, I would have overlooked it without help. Only my second Nassau record.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: Jones Beach West End - 18 Sep. On the grass near the Field 2 exit. The only one for the year, this bird was found by others who quickly alerted me to its presence.

Wilson's Snipe: Jones Beach SP - 24 Oct. The only one for the year, found between Fields 3 and 4 on a tip. High water levels in Spring, when they're usually not too hard to find, had kept these away from their normally occurring places.

Black-headed Gull: Point Lookout - 11 Dec. An adult, with about 12 Bonaparte's Gulls between the west jetties, on the water feeding and preening. This was the final species recorded for the year.

Iceland Gull: Jones Beach West End - 5 Mar. A first-year bird, seen on the sandbar.

Roseate Tern: Jones Beach West End - 22 Aug. One bird, seen in flight after leaving the sandbar and moving out over the ocean. One had been reported from the tern colony at Nickerson Beach around this time.

Razorbill: Jones Beach SP - 2 Jan. One bird, seen in flight from the fishing piers at Field 10 moving east. Single Razorbills are occasionally found at this location in Winter, sometimes close in when the food is good.

White-winged Dove: Jones Beach West End - 2 May. I was already at the West End with others when a call came in on this bird, which was with the pigeon flock at the parking area near the Coast Guard Station. It stayed for about 1.5 hours, long enough for many others to see it, but then took off to the west and was not relocated, leaving many observers coming up empty.

Northern Saw-whet Owl: Jones Beach West End - 7 Nov. A single bird was found by others around a known roosting area.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher: Jones Beach West End; Valley Stream SP - 11 Sep. Two birds at the beach, one bird at Valley Stream on the same day suggests this

species was likely well represented within this migration corridor. My last Nassau record goes back to perhaps the 80s or early 90s.

Loggerhead Shrike: Jones Beach West End - 30 Oct., 4 Dec. This and the White-winged Dove would have to be the most significant findings for the year. Having been in the area at the time of its original appearance, I was lucky to get on the bird seconds after its discovery. Initially ID'd as a small Northern Shrike, the bird was well scrutinized and later found to be a Loggerhead.

White-eyed Vireo: Muttontown Preserve - 22 May. One wouldn't think of this species as hard to find in any year, but for some reason, I didn't turn up any other than two vocalizing birds that were well hidden and probably associated with a nest nearby. Other birders had similar comments regarding low numbers for this species.

Philadelphia Vireo: Valley Stream SP - 6 Sep. A target species, as they were well reported in Region 10 around this time. This was a single bird in loose association with some No. Parulas. Seen on average four out of every ten years.

Cave Swallow: Jones Beach West End - 24 Nov. With a few birds reported on this day and in recent days along the South Shore, I managed good looks at one bird, possibly two birds total, both in fading light. With a few Tree Swallows around, I was able to get a nice comparison even while not being able to appreciate any distinct markings or coloration. The ID was confirmed through its flight style, slightly broader wings and wide, squared-off tail while the bird was not in tight association with the Tree Swallows.

Eastern Bluebird: Stillwell Woods CP - 13 Nov. Having struck out in Spring, this was a serious target bird for this date. A group was reported in Oyster Bay in recent days providing some optimism and this location features plenty of suitable habitat. Only three birds were seen.

Lapland Longspur: Jones Beach West End - 26 Nov. A group of eight birds took off from the swale west of the Nature Center moving east, some calling all the way.

Tennessee Warbler: Valley Stream SP - 15 May. One female, on a "fallout" day across the area. I've recorded this species on average only 1-3 times every 10 years.

Orange-crowned Warbler: Hempstead Lake SP - 18 Apr. A fairly cooperative bird that had apparently wintered around the stream at the south end, I was tipped off on its appearance on this day and treated to a few vocalizations as well.

Cape May Warbler: Jones Beach West End - 29 Aug. One first year female by

itself in the pines near the Field 2 exit.

Kentucky Warbler: Valley Stream SP - 9 May and 10 May. Initially seen by others, I was able to get a few bursts of song on these days while never getting to see the bird. Dense foliage as a result of an early leaf-out made for some nice habitat for this species, which lingered up to four days. This park is a good spot to listen for this species during appropriate migration times.

Yellow-breasted Chat: Seen on two different dates in late Summer and early Fall, both at South Shore coastal locations. This species seems to be picking up in numbers in recent years in Region 10.

Lark Sparrow: Jones Beach SP - 7 Nov. A nicely marked adult was well reported and seen by MOB around the Zach's Bay area.

Nelson's Sparrow: Marine Nature Study Center, Oceanside - 17 Apr. One bird seen well but briefly in suitable habitat. Saltmarsh Sparrow was reported around this time, but none were seen on this day.

Dickcissel: Point Lookout Town Park - 18 Sep. Two males feeding together in the "rockpile" area, perhaps loosely associating with a few Song Sparrows. A nice surprise and a save for the year.

The following are what I would classify as the "Bad Misses" for the year:

Canvasback: These are getting tougher to find with each passing year. Smith's Pond and Mill River, both in Rockville Centre, used to be reliable locations for this species, but not in at least six years.

Barrow's Goldeneye: An annually occurring bird seen mainly from points in Bayville and Centre Island was never turned up despite multiple attempts. Others were on hand for some of these efforts offering plenty of help in scanning.

Wild Turkey: A few tame birds have been notoriously loafing about around Sagamore Hill, but deemed non-wild. Though increasing in Suffolk County, reports on established populations are sketchy.

Red-necked Grebe: One can often find one or two from the Point Lookout side of Jones Inlet in most winters.

Shearwater species: None were picked up despite plenty of effort, though all of the expected shearwaters were found by others a few miles to the east at Robert Moses SP.

Tricolored Heron: Have appeared irregularly at Cow Meadow Park, Freeport

and Marine Nature Study Center, Oceanside but getting harder to find in recent years. A few single birds were recoded in remote areas during the year around some of the South Shore marshes, only seen by boat. Many local birders commented on how this species is getting scarcer throughout the entire Marine Region.

Cattle Egret: Many obliging birds were reported in Brooklyn, Queens and Suffolk Counties, but only a flyover bird was reported from Nassau that I'm aware of. This species is obviously expanding its range and showing up in much stronger numbers, thus rendering it a "Bad Miss".

Bald Eagle: I probably had one flying over the marshes north of Lido Beach; however, this was during a non-birding event with no optics, so I'm not comfortable with the call. There were some reports of eagles moving through around that time in late September.

Long-billed Dowitcher: Formerly reliable at the Pittsburg Ave. Pond at Massapequa Preserve. Scanning groups of Short-billed Dowitchers at appropriate times may be the best way go. Along with Jones Beach, perhaps looking north at the flats from Tobay Beach in late summer could be a good bet.

American Woodcock: One or two can usually be flushed up in Spring from a variety of locations with suitable habitat. The same applies in late Fall, when I made an all-out effort to find one without success. As a consolation, I did turn up a bird on 1 Jan. 2011 on the South Nassau CBC.

Black Tern: Basic plumaged birds have turned up fairly regularly at Jones Beach West End near the sandbar and around Jones Inlet in late Summer, but not in recent years. Given the effort, I'd still consider this a "Bad Miss".

Black-billed Cuckoo: This species was apparently scarce in the entire region with only scattered reports throughout the year. A few observers commented on this in my travels, noting it to be rather odd. I've found Black-billed to be generally more often occurring than Yellow-billed over the long term; however, the last few years have shown a decrease in Black-billed and an increase in Yellow-billed Cuckoo, primarily during Spring migration.

Great Horned Owl: This one was undoubtedly missed due to a lack of proper nocturnal effort. Several attempts were made during the day at known roosts, including Shu Swamp, Welwyn Preserve and Stillwell Woods. I didn't connect with a reported bird at Hempstead Lake SP during the Winter, which was seen by many.

Acadian Flycatcher: After a failed breeding attempt in 2009 at Valley Stream SP, I thought this seemingly increasing species would continue to be fairly easy to find in late Spring. Apparently not too many were reported in the area for

some reason, possibly showing a preference for points west and east of Nassau. I've recorded single birds on roughly 50% of Spring migrations in the last 10 years. Prior to that, they were only occasional at best.

Yellow-throated Vireo: Some folks may find this uniquely vocalizing species to be the worst miss of all, but my records over the years clearly show this bird to be way more prevalent in Queens County than in Nassau, and it can be easily missed.

Common Raven: I wouldn't call this a "Bad Miss" on any other year, but with a well documented successfully breeding pair reported in Roslyn, one would think this to be an easy find. Four attempts were made in hope of detecting one of these birds or their offspring while covering a broad area in that vicinity.

Gray-cheeked Thrush: These are found on about 70% of Spring migrations during my birding history, usually during late May as one might expect, but I've noticed a few to arrive 5-10 days earlier in recent years, occasionally ahead of the more common Swainson's Thrush. Interestingly, I've found several non-vocal "Bicknell's Types" moving through at Valley Stream SP in early May in some recent years, staying for only brief periods but quite conspicuous. These birds are noticeably smaller than the classic "ghost-like" individuals that most birders are used to seeing, and have strong rufous in the tail giving them the feel of a "warm", non-tail-flicking Hermit Thrush. Some of these could also be of the "Newfoundland" race of Gray-cheeked Thrush, though size points toward Bicknell's.

Worm-eating Warbler: With 29 species of warblers recorded for the count, this one stands out as the worst miss. Worm-eating seemed to be on the increase in Spring migration during the 1990s and into the -00s, but that trend may have lost some momentum in recent years.

Summer Tanager: Perhaps a bit borderline for this category; I've generally found or relocated one on 50-60% of Spring and Fall migrations over the years.

Blue Grosbeak: These have been on a steady increase in recent years as they've expanded their range northward, but still not a "given" every year. They were only "occasional" at best during the 70s and 80s.

Common Redpoll: Considered a "Bad Miss" only because they irrupted nicely late in the year and were well reported coastally, many as calling flyovers. Like American Woodcock, I had one of those calling flyover birds at Jones Beach during the South Nassau CBC on 1 Jan. 2011.

The following species occur much less frequently than most mentioned in the "Bad Misses" category and would have been realistic though ambitious finds:

Ross's Goose, Barnacle Goose, Cackling Goose, King Eider, Northern Bobwhite, American White and Brown Pelicans, Black Vulture, Northern Goshawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Sora, Common Moorhen, Wilson's Plover (tried for, but missed the reported Jones Beach bird), Upland Sandpiper, Little Gull (at least two appeared briefly late in the year with Bonaparte's, and were tried for), Glaucous Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Caspian Tern, Parasitic Jaeger, Dovekie, Common and Thick-billed Murres, Barn Owl, Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Chuck-will's-widow, Whip-poor-will, Red-headed Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Northern Shrike, Purple Martin, Cliff Swallow, Yellow-throated Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Red and White-winged Crossbills.

For purposes of comparison, my Nassau County Life List stands at 292 at the time of this writing, so given the effort, I believe 238 species for the year is a number to be proud of considering all factors.

It's important to mention that weather conditions were about as good as can be expected with nearly every weekend featuring at least one dry day, but the year didn't go without a few inconveniences; two nasty flu-like bugs and an unprecedented bout with poison ivy took me out of the field and into doctors' offices and pharmacies more than I'd like to recall.

All in all, I felt this project to be most significant in being an exercise in camaraderie more than just the birding in itself. It brought many of us together in a special way, well beyond what we'd expect in an ordinary year. With the feel of what at times felt like a prolonged CBC, the phone rang very often with friends and fellow birders leading me to a number of species which I would have missed for the year if not for their help. A special mention of thanks goes to Janice Berlinger for her support and getting me up and out early...with plenty of coffee! I am grateful to the following conscientious birders and friends for their enthusiasm and help in making this happen.

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