

PATCH BIRDING MORNINGSIDE PARK

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I had been an independent birder for about six years when I joined Sullivan County Audubon in 1999. One of the great things about joining a group is finding out information about birds and locations that are right in your area that you were previously unaware of. That was the case with Morningside Park. A few birders had told me about the park and said there were occasionally shorebirds at that location. Having a special interest in shorebirds and always looking for somewhere new to find them in our Catskill Mountains county, that piqued my interest.

I checked out the location with a few of my friends and to be honest, it did not seem that interesting at the time. Morningside Park is a town park in Fallsburg Township, Sullivan County. It has a lake of about 80 acres, a ball field, a pavilion, a campground and is a real attraction for fisherman. It is also the destination for many local citizens. I visited the park a few times and kind of forgot about it. Then one day a friend of mine, Ed DeBellevue, called to tell me he believed he was looking at a BAIRD'S SANDPIPER on a mud flat at the lake. I arrived to find he was correct and that was when my addiction to Morningside began. Baird's Sandpiper would be seen again many times in the future.

Morningside is unique in that it is a man-made lake for which many trees were cut to extend the area. Some of the trees and all their stumps and roots were left in place. Each summer, as the water warms, gases form under the mass on of the bottom of the lake. The gases raise the remains of the trees and large mud flats come to the surface. There are also permanent islands throughout the lake that attract waterfowl, waders, and shorebirds. I started checking the lake regularly in season and it developed into a real hot spot for me. The best way to bird the lake itself is by kayak. It not only allows you to reach all areas of the islands not viewable from shore, but it allows close approach to birds that are seldom startled by the kayak. Not only is the lake a draw, but the extensive woodlands on the property support both breeding and migrating birds as well.

My next good shorebird at Morningside was a STILT SANDPIPER. After that, the birds just kept coming. A long list of common shorebirds was eventually compiled. At that point, some interesting things began to show. I discovered a SANDERLING, only the third ever for the county. It would be followed by a several more in the coming years. A special bird appeared in 2013, a RUDDY TURNSTONE! Why so special? It was a first (and only, still) record for the county and as a bonus it was banded. Turnstone #0AH was banded two years earlier as an adult in the state of Delaware. The bird has since been seen year after year in several locations, last reported in 2019. It is at least 11 years old as of the last sighting.

The following summer, six BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCKS were found by a DEC goose bander! Many lucky birders got to see and photograph these first-for-the-county birds. It did not stop there. Each year I would find new and exciting birds at the park. The shorebird list got longer and longer. In 2015, I found two new county birds in a single morning. We had had a nice fallout of shorebirds from a storm the night before and as I kayaked around the lake one good bird after another came into view. The best was a juvenile WESTERN SANDPIPER, a stunning bird! As if that was not enough, I came upon the first county LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER shortly thereafter. Many of our local birders flocked to see these two birds. The sandpiper remained for two days allowing others to get in on the action. At that time, the shorebird list for the park had grown to 23 species, the highest of any location in the county.

Waterfowl are also attracted to Morningside with two dozen species recorded. Waders like the habitat, with Great Blue and Green Herons and Great Egrets being regular there. Virginia Rails are periodic breeders on the islands and American Coot can be found during migration. All the tern species that have been recorded in the county have occurred at Morningside. Common and Black Terns have been present on many occasions while Caspian and Forster's Terns have each been seen once. Four species of gulls have been recorded as well.

Raptors are quite common at the park. Bald Eagles and Osprey can be seen at any time and Merlins seem to take up residence once shorebird migration begins. They remain through the fall. Peregrine Falcons have been present a few times as well.

Perhaps my most astonishing find occurred in July 2018 when I found an ANHINGA huddled in a tree after a thunderstorm. The bird stayed the afternoon and was seen by all who could make it there before it departed. It returned a week later for an unexpected encore. This year I have already had waterfowl, waders, and woodland birds at the park and with shorebird season just around the corner, I cannot wait to launch my kayak. To date the park has a list of 160 species and as you can see from this text, almost anything could turn up at this small birding gem in Sullivan County!

