

PATCH BIRDING BIRDSONG MEADOWS FARM

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As I contemplate writing this article on patch birding, I find myself wondering where I should start. There have been some great birds, and adventures have been numerous; however, before we dive into recounting bird sightings let me describe to you, at least in some detail, Birdsong Meadows Farm. Starting at 1,100' elevation and rising to 1,550' it is mostly a hilltop farm with a small stream and a few medium sized ponds. There are 80 acres of hardwood forest interspersed here and there with groves of hemlock. The other 170 acres is open pasture and hayland with several overgrown patches and fencerows for some prime bird/wildlife habitat.

The sixty cows that live on the farm are rotationally grazed, patterned to a certain extent after the bison that once roamed most of North America. This type of grazing not only produces nutrient rich milk but also gives grassland birds a much better chance of successful nesting (see photo, p. 266).

Perhaps the most bird friendly spot on the farm is the 10 acre field that has been dubbed 'The Bobolink Field'. Each year we will leave this field uncut from mid May to late July allowing Bobolinks along with numerous other sharply declining grassland birds a wonderful opportunity to raise young. Being in this field at sunrise on a June morning is an awesome experience.

Overall, when I think back to the first year compared to now, it is obvious that avian life on our farm has increased dramatically, indicating once again that humans, organic rotationally grazed cows, and birds can all work together to create a healthy, vibrant ecosystem.

January 10, 2023 marked five years since my family moved from Ohio to our current farm in Candor, Tioga County, NY. Looking back it seems like five short years but the actual moving day seems like some historic happening.

When we moved to New York I made a few goals to strive for in the world of patch birding. #1. Observe at least 150 species on the farm each year. #2. Tally 200 species on the farm during the first five years. #3 was mostly wishful thinking but it ran along the line of finding one mega rarity on the farm per year.

For the first few days on the farm, that year of 2018, it was so devoid of bird life that it seemed 50 species per year might be more realistic. However, avian life quickly increased after we put bird feeders out. Since the fields were grown up in goldenrod and tall grasses Short-eared Owls and Rough-legged Hawks were numerous that first winter.

On February 26th we saw the first big movement of geese; a sight we never saw in Ohio. I distinctly remember the first big flock since it could have ended somewhat tragically. We were installing drywall in an upstairs room when we heard the first big skein of Snow Geese overhead. I opened the window and jumped out on the roof for better observation. Unfortunately the roof was wet and very slippery and I almost took an unwanted flight to the ground. But I was able to catch myself on the window frame, and save myself from some air time and still enjoy the geese. Several days later we had what is still the farm's only Greater White-fronted Goose on the beaver pond.

Other highlights in 2018 included Olive-sided and Alder Flycatchers, 25 species of warblers, and the fall hawk migration which is another sight not seen in the Buckeye State. All in all, 2018 was a good year and wrapped up with American Pipit which was farm bird #163.

2019 yielded 18 new birds including two that could be considered mega rarities. Black Vultures and a Cackling Goose were flyovers, with the Cackling Goose seen on March 5th, the day I have deemed the best 'goose day' in the past five years. There were well over 100,000 geese along with gulls and other waterfowl including Northern Pintail, another new one. The first vagrant for the year appeared on September 16th when a farm and Tioga County first Western Kingbird showed up. True to the nature of the species it was only seen for about three hours and allowed about a dozen local birders to see it. Another western flycatcher, a Say's Phoebe, appeared on October 11th. The duration of this one's stay was even shorter at only 20 minutes and was seen by four of our family. The Say's Phoebe was flycatcher #11 on the farm in 2019 with Acadian Flycatcher being the only one we missed that is not on the state review list. This is a record that will undoubtedly be hard to repeat.

A Northern Goshawk, the sixteenth raptor species for the year, was one of the last of the 166 species of birds enjoyed on Birdsong Meadows Farm in 2019.

The first highlight in 2020 was a Great Black-backed Gull as a flyover in March. In early June Dad found the first farm/county Yellow-breasted Chat crowing away in an overgrown field just across our property line. This bird was very easy to hear but getting a good look at it was another story. It remained at that spot for one day then moved two miles down the road where it hung out for over a week, singing most of the forenoon and again in the evening, sometimes going till almost midnight.

On the evening of September 23rd I had the privilege of finding the farm's second Say's Phoebe, this time an adult. This one had better manners than the one the previous year (or was it the same one?) and stuck around for two hours, long enough to alert other birders.

Winter finches were big news in 2020 with basically the whole nine yards—Red and White-winged Crossbills (both new farm birds), Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks were observed.

Two first-timers, a Red-throated Loon and a Long-eared Owl, topped off the 2020 list at 170.

2021 was a phenomenal year, the kind of year when the pieces were all there and fit together. To get the year off to a great start were the continuing winter finches. In March a Ross's Goose joined the thousands of Snow Geese flying overhead. The spring migration was pretty good, with most of the expected and some harder-to-get passerines making it onto the list. A Least Sandpiper at the pond was a first.

The first sweep of fall migration occurred in mid August bringing a long awaited, beautiful adult male Golden-winged Warbler. A Connecticut Warbler was next in line. This bird is probably far more common than we think but so very skulky.

The fall Broad-winged Hawk migration was the best in five years with over 10,000 counted, throughout September.

Other autumn highlights were a nocturnal flyover Black-bellied Plover, its distinctive flight call clinching its identity, and a migrant Northern Shrike.

It wouldn't be fair not to mention the Yellow Rail which resided in our neighbor's field for a day. Though it was only 200 yards across our property line, despite effort, we were unable to see it from our farm and thus secure it for the farm list.

2021 ended with 181 species which was eleven more than the previous high count. I give most of the credit to a decent spring and an excellent fall migration which meant we didn't miss as many birds that can be hard to find and easy to overlook!

2022, the fifth year on the farm, started out slow, till March when we got two somewhat unexpected firsts, both as flyovers. Trumpeter Swan came first, followed shortly thereafter by several Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Beautiful weather in May did not produce any fallouts and led to what was my worst spring migration in five years. Despite this, we did hit a milestone on the 15th of May. It was 1:00 A.M. and I was sitting in a camping chair on the hilltop watching the lunar eclipse and listening to an abundance of birds overhead that were taking advantage of the light south breeze. Many flight calls were drifting out of the night sky. The buzzy notes of Indigo Bunting wafted to my ears. Black-billed Cuckoos uttered their 'Guulip' call, a Least Sandpiper creaked a few times, Green Herons called out their distinctive 'Whoosh', and at all times the lisps and chirps of warblers filled the night. It was in this setting that, directly overhead, a Common Gallinule let loose in one long cackle. The gallinule, of course, didn't know it but it got the honor of being bird #200 on the all-time farm list.

The next new bird didn't come until October when I flushed a Yellow Rail in the field we left uncut for the Bobolinks. More than 30 birders were able to enjoy the farm's first Yellow Rail. Unfortunately it was seen only one day and despite having 30 more birders show up the next day and doing an organized rail drag with a rope, we came up empty.

The last new bird in 2022 was a somewhat odd occurrence and one I totally missed seeing. On November 8th, a warm balmy day, two of my sisters, Eliza and Claudia, were cleaning out the last of the garden's bounty when to their surprise a hummingbird came buzzing to a small remaining patch of blooming petunias. Fortunately the flowers were only a few feet from where they were working, allowing for a couple of seconds of close-up hummer study before it zoomed into the woods. They noted a rusty undertail and somewhat bulky size which points to almost certainly a Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird. Everyone closely eyed the flowers and hummingbird feeder the next few days, but the hummer was gone, hopefully buzzing its way south.

2022 came to an end with 178 for the year list and 202 on the total farm list. Two of those three goals set five years ago had been met, and though I knew one mega a year would be quite a feat to achieve, I feel very fortunate to have had more than our share of truly rare birds. And the excitement continues.

A flyover Red Crossbill was a highlight the first week in January 2023, followed by a Northern Shrike and Ross's Goose in March. Skywatching on March 18th yielded a record-breaking 10 Golden Eagles; this broke my previous one-day count by six birds.

As I conclude this article on May 13th 2023, it almost seems as if I've left the most phenomenal sighting till last. On the 28th of April a first farm/county record Scissor-tailed Flycatcher showed up. The bird, a beautiful adult with a spectacular tail, graced the pasture, usually hanging out close to the cows. It was here until May 10th, and well over 100 people enjoyed this elegant bird of the southern plains. This was the first rarity on our property that stayed for more than one day and it will surely rank as one of the most exciting avian appearances on Birdsong Meadows Farm.



Figure 1. Osprey nest box built on a double-armed utility pole in Cayuga Lake, Union Springs, NY. The double arms lend critical nest stability. © Candace Cornell. See article, pp. 210-220.



Birdsong Meadows Farm, Candor, *Tioga*, © Adam Troyer. Cows are rotationally grazed, benefitting both cows and grassland birds. See Patch Birding article pp. 224-227.