

BirdQuest 2017 ***A Day with the Birds of Gem Land Company***

The radar imagery on our mobile phones painted the predawn skies in broad swaths of phosphorescent blue. The heavens appeared to be aglow with reflectance colors associated with migratory birds at the start of *BirdQuest 2017*. Enshrouded in a dense fog, Elliot Schunke and I could pick out call notes of Swainson's Thrush and Indigo Bunting, but there were many *zweets* and *pips* and *pwees* that we simply didn't know. Elliot is one of the best birders anywhere and my listening skills are not too shabby, but all we could say definitively was that we likely were missing several species that we might not see later in the day.

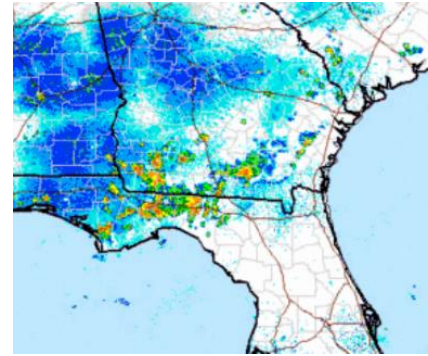


Figure 1. Radar scene on the night before BirdQuest 2017. The blue shading represents birds on the move; other colors reflect rain and clouds

BirdQuest 2017 was conducted on the beautiful Gem Land Company properties in northern Leon County. The properties have been owned and carefully managed by the Ingalls family for over 70 years and buffer two of our largest lakes (Lake Miccosukee and Lake Iamonia). We started the day on *Ring Oak Plantation*, which sits on the western side of Lake Miccosukee. With 40 minutes to go until sunrise, we stopped first where a large live oak stands firmly in the middle of an unpaved portion of Old Magnolia Road. The venerable oak may date back to the time when cotton was hauled south along the road to the port of Magnolia. If so, it's also likely to be the first round-about ever created in Leon County.

Elliot and I turned quickly from the call notes above to the real predawn priority – owls. Out came the Bluetooth portable speaker as we pushed away the radar image and pulled up a phone app with calls of the Eastern Screech-owl (and hundreds of other species). One screech-owl responded within a minute and then another and another and another until we were surrounded by half a dozen owls offering up haunting tremolos in a pre-dawn chorus. We shut off the playback off and basked in the nocturnal surround sound for a minute or more. In the background, we could also heard the call notes of Carolina Wrens, Northern Cardinals, and Northern Mockingbirds just starting to rise as well as a lone Great Horned Owl far off in the distance. It was still pitch dark, but we left the oak and round-about with a half dozen species logged.

The name "Ring Oak" apparently harkens back to circular cuts that Native Americans made around live oaks on the property. The cuts were designed to kill the tree so the wood could be repurposed as canoes and other items, but many trees survived and have noticeable rings at their bases. The Google Earth map provided on our phones suggested another novel piece of information (at least for us) with a Native American twist: the Central Florida Muscogee Creek Tribe lists its home office at a nearby address on Ring Oak Lane.



Figure 2. Swainson's Thrush -- one of the many migratory species whose call note we do know well.

The open fields and mature pinewoods on *Ring Oak* were thick with migrating Indigo Buntings, Blue Grosbeaks, and Common Yellowthroats as the morning sun cut through the fog. There were also dozens of recent arrivals -- Palm

Warblers and House Wrens that don't breed in our area -- darting across fields and into shrubby patches. We had to react quickly at one stop to log a species not seen later in the day. A flock of 20+ crows passed silently overhead that had the look and mannerisms of Fish Crows. Fish Crows are difficult to distinguish from American Crows unless you hear the call, but these shiny black crows were not saying anything and moving away quickly. Fortunately, the crows took a turn and began circling in a kettle as we fumbled to get the calls of Fish Crows pulled up on one of our phones. The nasal, two-syllable "anh-ahh" was broadcast through the portable speaker; one individual in the group offered up a faint two-syllable response and gave us species number 34.



Figure 3. A Golden-winged Warbler, a species of conservation concern throughout its range.

We ventured down slope into hardwood forests along the edge of Lake Miccosukee. The many cherry trees, southern magnolias, dogwoods, and other berry-producers along the lake edge provide a favorite food resource for migrants, but we had to look hard and high to spot anything. The weird positioning led to a bit of warbler neck for me. I've spent most of my field time lately watching nuthatches through a spotting scope, not bending backwards and staring straight above with binoculars. The birding-specific muscle strain was well worth it, however, because we logged 10 different species of warblers in the early morning hours, including personal favorites such as the Yellow-throated Warbler and Chestnut-sided Warbler. A couple of exceptional encounters also occurred when we saw a boldly patterned Golden-winged Warbler and a Cape May Warbler in a matter of minutes of each other. The Cape May Warbler was a Leon County "lifer" for Elliot who, like many birders, carefully tracks the different species he sees in different settings (# 286 for the county). To underscore its rarity, consider the fact that Herbert Stoddard collected only 4 Cape May Warblers during the many autumns he spent collecting birds at the base of the WCTV tower. Thanks to this pair of warblers and the many other colorful vireos, thrushes, and grosbeaks that we saw in the trees, we were sitting at 46 species by 10 AM.

We next hit several spots along Lake Miccosukee hoping to add some wadingbirds and perhaps an osprey or eagle to the list. We added Laughing Gull, Common Moorhen, Purple Gallinule, and Anhinga, but we struck out with several other species we were hoping to see as well. A control structure built on the southern end of the lake in 1954 has helped to stabilize water levels, but it also has led to changes for a lake that naturally dries out irregularly. There are now loads of large, floating tree islands on the lake as well as dense mats that may make the foraging a bit tougher for some species.



Figure 4. Cape May Warbler, a real Red Hills rarity in Fall.

Our last stop on Ring Oak was a long grass runway once used by David Ingalls, the original owner of the property and the Navy's only World War I flying ace. We were hoping to flush an Eastern Meadowlark or spot a Loggerhead Shrike amid the open expanse but came up blank. The landing strip would probably be used by these and other species not yet seen at some point that day, but having a plan and maintaining the pace are key priorities in big day birding. We had many places we still needed to visit, so we parted *Ring Oak* with 71 species in hand and headed north to *Norias Plantation*.



Figure 5. Yellow-throated Warblers are regular along lake and river edges and can be seen year round in the Red Hills

Dry Creek runs through the northwestern edge of *Norias Plantation* and yielded a Hooded Warbler and a pair of Noisy Ovenbirds. We also added Summer Tanager, Loggerhead Shrike, and Brown-headed Nuthatch while roaming the fields and open pines of the property. We could see the tall TV tower located in Metcalfe, GA, from *Norias*, which reminded us that one *BirdQuest 2017* contributor had said we could count almost anything avian, including roadkills and dropped feathers. Stoddard found that the overcast conditions present at the start of our day typically led to lots of lethal collisions for migratory birds. We speculated briefly about the new species or two that we might find with a quick trip north, but we let the thought pass quickly and returned to counting only the many living songsters on Gem Land Company properties.

Elliot had to head back into town around 1:30 PM to pick up his son at school, so I dropped him off at our rendezvous point and headed north solo for the final leg of the day on *Cherokee Plantation*. We were sitting at 80 species, which represented an especially important milestone this year. One of the imaginative contributors to *BirdQuest 2017* based their pledge on a sliding scale that began at \$1 per species and reached a maximum of \$10 for each species encountered above 80. For the rest of the day, there was value-added incentive to find any and everything that I could.

The afternoon was unseasonably warm and featured a tropical sky with large cumulous clouds that were gray edged below and shimmering white above. I could regularly hear the cars and trucks rushing along US 319 as I roamed the woods on *Cherokee Plantation*, but it turns out that I was the source of some of the most annoying noises as the day wore on. I stopped regularly during the final 4 hours and played calls of many different species that we'd not yet seen: Cooper's Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, Field Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, and others. I was pretty tired of listening to the calls after the first hour, but I continued dutifully hoping to hit the 90-species mark. I sighted Green Heron, White Ibis, House Sparrow, Bald Eagle, Eastern Meadowlark, and Song Sparrow that all put me close, but I ended the day around 5:30 PM with 86 species on the list.

Many thanks to Steve Conlin, Redmond Ingalls, Derek Harden, and all the other folks associated with Gem Land Company for providing us with such a wonderful setting for *BirdQuest 2017*. It was a privilege to roam the properties and see such great land stewardship on display. We also recorded the most species ever on *BirdQuest*. Pledges are still coming in, but it looks as though met our goal of raising \$8000 to support our important work with rare and declining species. For those who missed the chance, you can still support the *Stoddard Bird Lab* by contributing after the fact [here](#). We deeply appreciate each and every contribution, as do those colorful subjects of our research and conservation efforts.

The 86 Species Found on BirdQuest 2017

Wood Duck
 Northern Bobwhite
 Pied-billed Grebe
 Double-crested Cormorant
 Anhinga
 Great Blue Heron
 Little Blue Heron
 Green Heron
 White Ibis
 Turkey Vulture
 Bald Eagle
 Red-shouldered Hawk
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Purple Gallinule
 Common Gallinule
 American Coot
 Laughing Gull
 Common Ground-Dove
 Mourning Dove
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo
 Eastern Screech-Owl
 Great Horned Owl
 Barred Owl
 Chimney Swift
 Belted Kingfisher
 Red-headed Woodpecker
 Red-bellied Woodpecker
 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
 Downy Woodpecker
 Northern Flicker
 Pileated Woodpecker
 American Kestrel
 Eastern Wood-Pewee
 Acadian Flycatcher
 Eastern Phoebe
 Loggerhead Shrike
 White-eyed Vireo
 Yellow-throated Vireo
 Red-eyed Vireo
 Blue Jay

American Crow
 Fish Crow
 Tree Swallow
 Carolina Chickadee
 Tufted Titmouse
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 Brown-headed Nuthatch
 House Wren
 Sedge Wren
 Carolina Wren
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
 Eastern Bluebird
 Swainson's Thrush
 Wood Thrush
 Gray Catbird
 Brown Thrasher
 Northern Mockingbird
 Ovenbird
 Golden-winged Warbler
 Black-and-white Warbler
 Tennessee Warbler
 Common Yellowthroat
 Hooded Warbler
 American Redstart
 Cape May Warbler
 Northern Parula
 Magnolia Warbler
 Chestnut-sided Warbler
 Palm Warbler
 Pine Warbler
 Yellow-throated Warbler
 Bachman's Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 Eastern Towhee
 Summer Tanager
 Northern Cardinal
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak
 Blue Grosbeak
 Indigo Bunting

Eastern Meadowlark
 Red-winged Blackbird
 Brown-headed Cowbird
 Common Grackle
 Boat-tailed Grackle
 House Sparrow

John



Figure 6. Scanning for wading birds, eagles, and ospreys on Lake Miccosukee.

*Thanks for your
 generous
 support!*