

## Holiday Highlights

### New York City

7 – 14 May 2016

**Leaders:** Simon Eaves and Darren Rees

**Guests:** Chris & Norman Haynes, Lyn & Dave Maslin, Val & Wayne Colson, June Forrest, Liz & Keith Barton, Margaret Dixey, John Duerden, and Angela Mackersie

**Day 1:** The routing of our flight from London takes us across the Atlantic reaching the North American continent over New Foundland. Those with views from the windows can look down on extensive loose pack-ice before the snow covered wild forests of northeast Canada stretch away forever into the distance. As we get nearer US airspace the clouds obscure the view and we land to a dry but cloudy JFK airport.

Here, there's a bit of a wait after immigration, as June's flight from Manchester is delayed but finally we are all together and boarding our shuttle bus to Manhattan. Like excited schoolkids we can only gawp at the cityscape that unfolds. Passing the sites of the World Trade Fair and Flushing Meadow stadium we cross the Queensborough Bridge with the dynamic skyline of mid-town Manhattan beyond – there's no sight like it in the world with the distinct spires of the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings taking centre stage. We get checked in to our mid-town hotel, The Wellington and freshen up before an evening meal at the local diner. Then it's a leg stretch to the bright lights of Times Square. We're in New York!

**Day 2:** We wake to a rainy New York City and the view from the breakfast diner is one of wet streets and folk going about their business with umbrellas. We have our pancakes, eggs, bacon and coffee and start our plans for the day. The forecast is for improving weather and we decide to stick to our schedule of a Sunday visit to Central Park.

When we meet half-an-hour later the rain has stopped and the walk to the subway is thankfully a dry one. A short one-stop away is 72<sup>nd</sup> Street and our entrance to the park at Strawberry Fields. We meet with old friend, Rob Braunfield, close to the memorial for John Lennon, marked with the words Imagine on the pavement. There's not much time to say hello and catch-up as the birds start popping up!

Wayne spots our first White-throated Sparrow on the ground, followed by a Rufous-breasted American Robin. We then walk to some tall trees where there are warblers calling. Within a few seconds we are onto Northern Parula, Prairie and Magnolia Warbler! Other birds are glimpsed but things really start happening when we walk to a large oak tree where several warblers are hopping around. We watch

enthralled as we work slowly through the birds on offer: Palm Warbler, Yellow, Magnolia, Redstart, Black-throated Green, Black-throated Blue, Common Yellowthroat and unusual Worm-eating Warbler. These bright gems are complimented with an array of vireos: Red-eyed, Warbling, Yellow-throated and Blue-headed Vireos with several Ruby-crowned Kinglets. There's also an American Robin on nest, our first bright red Northern Cardinal and two Red-bellied Woodpeckers are entering and exiting a nest hole. With so much to see we are rooted to the spot and after an hour we are suffering from what American birders refer to as 'warbler neck'! Even as we are walking away Simon spots another new bird – a Canada Warbler.

After a fantastic opening session in Strawberry Fields we move to the famous Ramble over the small Bank Rock bridge. We enter a quieter, more wooded area of the park and we walk a wood-chip path, that takes us along a quiet arm of the large lake within the park. In a willow tree over-hanging the water are two Black-crowned Night Herons, along with a few Magnolia and a female Black-throated Blue Warbler. Behind us, working the leaf litter is our first charming Ovenbird (it looks like a tiny thrush but is in fact a ground-dwelling warbler).

We walk across a small clearing, to a fence-line that marks the woodland edge where we can see the forest floor and leaf litter. A number of thrushes are on show and we can work through the different species. There are plain rufous Veerys; more rufous and heavily spotted Wood Thrushes; two-toned Hermit Thrushes; and buffy-spectacled Swainson's Thrushes. Several other birders are directing us to the lake shore where we get great looks at an unusual visitor to the park – an American Bittern is in a small stand of reeds on the edge of the water. A new bird for the leader!

With so many new species viewed during the morning, we head for a break and some lunch at the Boathouse, watching the Chimney Swifts overhead as we eat. Walking back into Ramble we have to stop after a short distance as in trees close to the path are vivid Scarlet Tanagers and a Baltimore Oriole – a good start to the afternoon! Walk further to where other birders are gathered, we note that their lenses are trained on a what at first looks like a lump of wood – on closer inspection we can make out the fine markings and buff tones of a rare Chuck-will's-widow. Fantastic and another new bird for the leader! The birding continues with Wayne finding a Indigo Bunting, and more looks at bright tanagers, orioles, a smart Great Crested Flycatcher and a sleeping Raccoon! At Azalea Pond we add Northern Waterthrush to the list as it picks along the edge of the water. That's quite a haul of species for our first day.

We wander back to the hotel, freshen up for our evening meal at an Italian restaurant on Broadway.

**Day 3:** After breakfast we cross 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the nearest deli to choose our sandwiches, wraps or salads for our picnic lunches. Our destination for the day is the Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge, on the south side of Brooklyn, an hour's ride away on the subway.

We arrive at Broad Channel station, then walk through the clapperboard houses towards the water for our first scan. There are lots of Brant Geese in the water and we get our first looks at Snowy and Great Egrets – a single Little Blue Heron is wading in the reeds too. Simon spots two American Oystercatchers, very similar to its European counterpart and just as noisy. Gulls about include Herring and Laughing Gulls and there are bright-winged Forster's Terns flying around. At a second viewpoint further along we see an Osprey, Greater Scaup, Glossy Ibis, Northern Mockingbird and a quick fly-over from a Merlin.

The timber buildings soon peter out and we walk along a wooded edge where we see Yellow Warblers and a confiding Northern Parula, before turning into the visitor centre and the gates of the preserve. At the well-stocked feeders there are House Finches and a Rufous-sided Towhee.

We walk through the bushes towards the shore enjoying the sun and getting close looks at the birds on show: House Wrens are singing alongside several vivid Yellow Warblers; Tree Swallows are using nest boxes and also perching on dead trees with light on their metallic blue upperparts; an Osprey perches on a tree with a large fish.

Further along we can view the nest platform for the Ospreys with both birds present. In the marsh we can scan the groups of geese, gulls and shorebirds. We see Black-bellied Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone and Red Knot. Further along we can see Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitchers.

We have our lunch in the sun, admiring the views across the bay to the Manhattan skyline. We also add Least Sandpiper, Song Sparrow, Great Black-backed Gull and Canada Goose. Afterwards we walk a second trail from the visitor centre that takes us through taller scrub and trees. There are more migrants and we see several Yellow-rumped Warblers, Prairie Warbler, Yellowthroat, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and a surprise Olive-sided Flycatcher. On the return route we see Swamp Sparrow before ending the walk back at the visitor centre. We only have to wait a ten minutes or so before we are met by our driver who takes us back to the hotel. Again the ride is particularly inspiring when approaching Manhattan with the skyline of a multitude of towers and pinnacles. It's been a great day and there's still plenty of time to explore further.

**Day 4:** After breakfast at the diner we walk to the subway and ride two stops north to 81<sup>st</sup> on the west side of Central Park. We meet again with Rob and walk into the

greenery past the Diana Ross Playground, try as we might we couldn't find the Beyonce Castle.

The path takes us up an incline through tall trees and we start noting birds: Magnolia Warbler, Blue-headed Vireo, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Simon finds a Red-tailed Hawk perched on one of the buildings over-looking the park. At The Summit we can look at the tree canopy at eye-level (along with the keep fit fanatics), we see Black-throated Blue Warbler and our first Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Walking down from the highest point, going across an open area with fewer trees we spot a beautiful Indigo Bunting on the ground with a Chipping Sparrow.

At Belvedere Castle, there's a visitor centre for the park where we can scan below to Turtle Pond - and hey, there are turtles! A large Snapping Turtle is working its way across the water and there are lots of Painted Turtles basking on rocks. Wayne finds an Eastern Kingbird perched below, another new bird for the list. From the castle we walk along to the north entrance to The Ramble with American Redstart, Magnolia and Black-throated Blue Warblers along the way.

At 'Maintainance Meadow' – it's close to some maintainance buildings - Rob finds Brown Thrasher, Dark-eyed Junco and a Field Sparrow. There are lots of thrushes as we enter woods nearby, with close looks at Veery, Wood and Hermit Thrush. There are House Finches, Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds at the feeders and at nearby Azalea Pond we see Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat and lots of White-throated Sparrows, there has obviously been a fall of these handsomely marked sparrows.

After another lunch at the Boathouse, some of us go back to The Ramble for more birding, others choose to see more of New York and wander to the museums nearby.

Walking to The Point we note that it's getting a bit cooler. There are birds still showing with great looks at Blue-headed Vireo, American Redstart, Warbling Vireo and Red-bellied Woodpecker. At Azalea Pond we add Swainson's Thrush, Chestnut-sided Warbler (with Black-throated Blue) and get great looks at an American Goldfinch. We end our birding session at The Lobe with a confiding Magnolia, Ovenbird, Yellowthroat and a stunning Worm-eating Warbler (its actually eating worms!). There's a Racoon out for a late-afternoon wander too.

**Day 5:** We start the birding day at Central Park, at the entrance close to the American Museum of Natural History (particularly enjoying the tiled mosaics at the subway station). Birds are calling at the base of The Summit and we check a small watering pool. A couple of photographers are there and we see White-throated Sparrows and Black-throated Blue coming lower to investigate the water. Above in the canopy we see Blue-headed Vireo and a Blackburnian Warbler.

We move round to see if we can view the canopy from a different angle to get better views. We fail to find the Blackburnian but get wonderful looks at a confident male American Redstart shaking his tail feathers. We get looks at a Great-crested Flycatcher and a Chestnut-sided Warbler before walking on. Next we come across a tree that is busy with warblers and we spend time enchanted by a number of species at close quarters. We see Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Black-and-white, Common Yellowthroat and several Black-throated Green Warblers only feet away. Wonderful.

It's a short walk to the edge of the large reservoir, where we can get a few water loving species with Herring and Ring-billed Gull, Double-crested Cormorants and three Bufflehead that are new for the list. Continuing on our walk we find another oak tree with fresh leaves and small flowers attracting warblers and we are in luck as there are two new species; Cape May Warbler and Blackpoll Warbler. We move to get the best position to view and eventually get great looks at striking birds. Simon even manages to get the Cape May Warbler in the scope which is no mean feat.

Walking towards Turtle Pond we get more new birds with American Kestrel and Eastern Wood Pewee. Lunch is at the pond where we seek the shade as it's starting to get warm. While we are eating Simon finds still more new species, a Nashville Warbler followed by a Blue-winged Warbler.

Some folk take off after lunch, to explore the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art, others decide to head for the Top of the Rock. A small group stay birding, so we decide to enter the wooded Ramble seeking out shadier spots close to water. At The Point we are in luck with more new things, a fantastic Canada Warbler come down low to bath in a stream, followed by two low Wilson's Warblers. We also discover a darling Raccoon asleep in a tree!

Back at Azelea Pond we see Rufous-sided Towhee, White-breasted Nuthatch and both Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes – check out that broad white supercilium! As we walk back out of The Ramble we are distracted by a couple of photographers at the very same spot as yesterday, where the Worm-eating Warbler is again putting on a show. A nice bird to end the birding day on.

After an early dinner we get smartened up, as we are off to Carnegie Hall for an evening of classical music. It's just a short walk and we are soon inside the elegant lofted dome of one of the greatest concert halls, a world away from the bustle of New York streets outside. The programme is in two parts, starting with Lang Lang playing Rachmaninoff's piano concerto No.1, followed by The Philadelphia Orchestra performing Mahler's tenth symphony. What follows is truly wonderful: first the virtuosity of one man at one with the piano, then the full sweeping and

cinematic grandeur of a multitude of musicians in unison. Memorable is the best that Darren can offer (guess he won't be commentating for Radio Three.)

**Day 6:** After breakfast and a visit to the deli we are off to Brooklyn to explore Prospect Park., another green oasis in the greater New York conurbation. We catch the nearby Q train from the subway and ride the half hour or so to the park and the journey takes us across the Manhattan Bridge, with great views to the iconic Brooklyn Bridge and Lower Manhattan. At the subway station it's a short walk to the park entrance, where we are transported to another world, a forest within the city. We walk through tall trees and within minutes Simon has found a smart Prairie Warbler. Next is a flurry of activity above our heads with Blackburnian, Black-and-white, Parula and Red-eyed Vireo. Then a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher appears overhead.

The walk follows the course of a tumbling brook and we can see Orchard Orioles coming to bathe. Further along, we watch a Green Heron catching crayfish followed by Ovenbirds, White-throated Sparrow and lots of Eastern Chipmunks in leaf litter. Walking along the perimeter of the lake, we see Northern Waterthrush, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped and Blackpoll Warbler. At the large bridge, where the path joins the water going under, there is the loud moaning from a Bull Frog and we can find the culprit in the water at the far edge. What a star animal!

Further around, the lake opens out and we continue the walk along the edge adding a lovely male Yellow Warbler and a stunning group of Cedar Waxwings. After a picnic lunch in the sun, we walk back to the visitor centre and plan the rest of our day. Some continue walking around the park in search of birds, while others journey back via the subway to Lower Manhattan and a date with a whirlwind ferry tour of Ellis Island, The Statue of Liberty and The Brooklyn Bridge, all within sight of the huge Freedom Tower that dominates the skyline.

**Day 7:** We decide to squeeze in some early morning birding on this, our last day in New York. After a quick coffee across the street, we walk to the subway and take the short ride to Strawberry Fields. The overnight rain and cloudy conditions have caused more birds to drop into Central Park and there is a noticeable increase in bird vocalisation. We quickly start tracking down singing warblers: Parula, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Black-throated Blue. More species are added but the 'tree of many warblers' that lit up the first day is not as busy. We walk off the ridge and down to where the cycle track crosses a small creek, where a Northern Waterthrush is singing. We peer down to see not only the bird singing but two more waterthrushes and a male Indigo Bunting.

Across the road we enter The Ramble for a last stroll around. The species that we've seen now seem commonplace, with Ovenbird, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Blue and Black-and-white Warblers popping up. We glimpse a Bay-breasted Warbler but can't relocate it for all to enjoy. We do however manage

a second look at a Canada Warbler, before adding a Scarlet Tanager female and a group of Cedar Waxwings.

Walking down to Azalea Pond, we pause to admire a Black-throated Green Warbler low in the bushes before Wayne finds a nearby Blackburnian Warbler, our closest looks at this stunning bird to date. It's in the same tree as a Black-throated Green Warbler and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Nearby a Wilson's Warbler calls from a thicket and we have fun tracking it down, eventually all getting great looks. Next, a lovely Prairie Warbler entertains us, our best looks at a pretty bird. Slowly working our way out of The Ramble we see two male Scarlet Tanagers and a smart Blue-winged Warbler – nice birds to end on.

The route back takes along past Strawberry Fields, where we have final looks at an Ovenbird, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Parula Warbler, before squeezing past the crowds of people now gathered at the John Lennon memorial, and crossing the road to enter the subway for a final time. Back at the hotel there's time to freshen up and pack our bags before a well-deserved brunch.

Our mini-bus transfer collects us shortly before 2pm, for the slow journey through the busy Manhattan traffic. It takes nearly an hour just to reach the Manhattan Tunnel! Thankfully there's plenty of time to reach JFK Airport and when we do get there it's raining steadily. We say our goodbyes to June, who is leaving at a different terminal, before checking in for our flight to Heathrow. There's still time for the final checklist and those all important votes for our bird of the week (or could that be frog of the week) and relive those magic moments.

### **Top Species and Moments to Treasure**

Winner: Chuck-will's-widow

Second: Magnolia Warbler, or as Dave says: 'It's everything you ever want from a warbler.'

Third: Cape May Warbler

Best-of-the-rest (fourth equal): Bull Frog, Blackburnian and Worm-eating Warbler

Place of the Trip: Central Park

Magic Moment: The 'Tree of Many Birds' on the first morning in Central Park

If our Magic Moment relates to our birding experiences in Central Park, then we needed a special category to capture our memorable Americana Moment. With added free time built into our schedule for the week it's no surprise that these snippets were as varied and diverse as the city itself:

If the birding in Central Park was wonderful then the friendliness of the American birders was a highlight, particularly noted by Norman, Wayne and Val. For Margaret it was the sight of New York's yellow cabs on the busy streets; John especially

enjoyed riding the subway and Simon was amazed by the lights of Times Square. Lyn chose her own personal bit of heaven – an American chocolate sundae!

We all were amazed at seeing first-hand the famous Manhattan skyline. For Liz, it was the journey from the airport and the first view approaching the Queensborough Bridge with the Empire State and Chrysler buildings vying for attention amongst the cluster of new spires and towers. For Dave and Darren, it was the nighttime view across the lights of the metropolis from the top of the Empire State Building. Angela chose the view from the boat in the harbour with Lower Manhattan rising from the water, the skyline dominated by the Freedom Tower.

Perhaps two comments summed up the ever-changing aspects of one the greatest cities of the world. Chris (and Norman) visited Ground Zero and she singled out the moving memorial at the site of the twin towers commemorating New York's darkest hour. For Keith it was a view from the boat trip across the harbour, as we approached Liberty Island. Perhaps not only the view but what it represents and what it must have meant to the many hopeful immigrants to a New World – there was The Statue of Liberty herself, clutching her torch of freedom and shining in the afternoon sun.

New York City and America – The Land of the Free and an awful lot of bright warblers.

## Bird Species

Double-crested Cormorant  
Little Blue Heron  
Great Egret  
Snowy Egret  
Green Heron  
Glossy Ibis  
Mute Swan  
Brant  
Canada Goose  
American Black Duck  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Turkey Vulture  
Osprey  
Red-tailed Hawk  
American Kestrel  
Merlin  
Black-bellied Plover  
Lesser Yellowlegs  
Willet  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Least Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Short-billed Dowitcher  
Laughing Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Forster's Tern  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Least Tern  
Mourning Dove  
Feral Pigeon  
Chimney Swift  
Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
Downy Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker  
Red-bellied Woodpecker  
Eastern Wood-pewee  
Olive-sided Flycatcher  
Great Crested Flycatcher

Eastern Kingbird  
Tree Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Blue Jay  
American Crow  
Fish Crow  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Tufted Titmouse  
House Wren  
Carolina Wren  
Veery  
Swainson's Thrush  
Wood Thrush  
Hermit Thrush  
American Robin  
Northern Mockingbird  
Gray Catbird  
Brown Thrasher  
Cedar Waxwing  
European Starling  
Blue-headed Vireo  
Yellow-throated Vireo  
Warbling Vireo  
Red-eyed Vireo  
Northern Parula  
Blue-winged Warbler  
Yellow Warbler  
Chestnut-sided Warbler  
Magnolia Warbler  
Black-throated Blue Warbler  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Cape May Warbler  
Cerulean Warbler  
Bay-breasted Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler  
Blackpoll Warbler  
Black-and-white Warbler  
American Redstart  
Ovenbird  
Worm-eating Warbler  
Northern Waterthrush  
Louisiana Waterthrush

Common Yellowthroat  
Wilson's Warbler  
Canada Warbler  
Scarlet Tanager  
Northern Cardinal  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak  
Rufous-sided Towhee  
Chipping Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
White-throated Sparrow  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Common Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Baltimore Oriole  
Orchard Oriole  
American Goldfinch  
Indigo Bunting  
House Finch  
House Sparrow

#### **Mammal Species**

Gray Squirrel  
Eastern Chipmunk  
Raccoon  
Brown Rat

#### **Reptiles and Amphibians**

Bullfrog  
Painted Turtle  
Snapping Turtle

#### **Flower Species (compiled by John Duerden)**

Wild Leek  
Mayapple  
Star of Bethlehem  
Garlic Mustard  
Large White Trillium  
Dutchman's Breeches  
Ribwort Plantain  
Common Strawberry  
Goosegrass  
Lily-of-the-valley  
False Solomon's Seal  
Smooth Solomon's Seal  
Foamflower  
Tall White Violet  
Common Vetch  
Wild Columbine  
Golden Alexanders  
Common Dandelion  
Sessile Belwort  
Hop Trefoil  
Yellow Wood Sorrel  
Marsh Marigold  
Lesser Periwinkle  
Virginia Bluebells  
Wild Geranium  
Bugle  
Thyme-leaved Speedwell  
Deadly Nightshade  
American Speedwell