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**BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY IN NORTH CAROLINA
NATURALIST JOURNEYS TOUR, 21-27 APRIL 2014
Guide Doug Pratt with six participants:**

Susan, Terry, Georgia, Ginny, Madeline, and Daniel

TOUR SUMMARY BY DOUG PRATT

Mon., April 21 Arrivals / On to the Blue Ridge Parkway!



Our party of 7 gathered at the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport at 1 PM, and headed west on I-85. Because several of us had not eaten lunch, we stopped at a Cracker Barrel in Gastonia, after which we headed west again, dipping briefly into South Carolina. We took a short cut on SC 11 to I-26 heading for Asheville NC.

Along the way we saw the common rural birds of the Carolina piedmont. At a rest stop about half way to Asheville, we saw and heard some of the common low-elevation forest birds, including an Eastern Wood

Pewee that turned out to be the only one of the tour. In the outskirts of Asheville, we reached the Blue Ridge Parkway, on which we headed south stopping at promising overlooks along the way.

We were surprised at how little spring had advanced at the higher elevations, where it still looked like winter. 2014 was one horrific long winter, and all of nature seemed to be on delay.

Pisgah Inn, our base for 3 nights, welcomed us with spectacular views from our rooms. After a fine dinner at the inn's restaurant, we went back out to search for courting American Woodcock. We found one male calling right by the parkway, but did not have the proper lighting to get a good look, so settled for a silhouette against a twilight sky.

Tues., April 22 Cradle of Forestry /

This day turned out to be a serious adventure! We birded the parkway south of Pisgah early, but found it disappointing. Only a few birds were about despite the beautiful weather, so Doug decided to deviate

from our published itinerary and try to find some migrants at lower elevations. We headed back north and took US276 south toward the Cradle of Forestry in America in Pisgah National Forest. It proved to be a good move because we began to pick up birds about a thousand feet below the parkway. We had stunning looks at Ovenbird, Blue-headed Vireo, and a spectacular pair of Blackburnian Warblers.



By the time we stopped at a site known as Pink Beds Picnic Area, the sky had clouded up and some light rain began to fall. It would continue, off and on, the rest of the day. We hiked down the Pink Beds Loop Trail which Doug had hiked before, but because the combination of his poor memory and a lack of information posted at the trailhead, we found ourselves on a much longer hike than was anticipated.

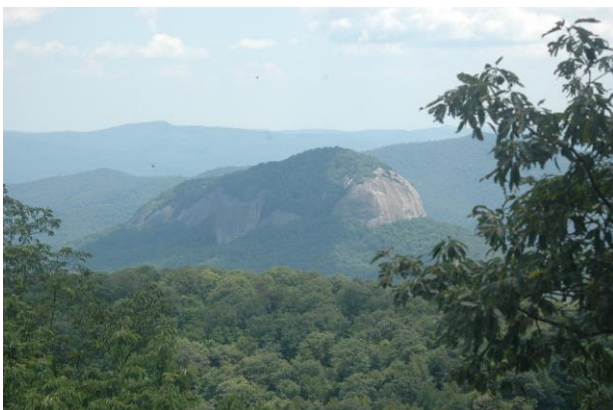
We quickly added Black-throated Green, Black-throated Blue, Hooded, and Northern Parula warblers to our list, and found the trail very interesting and scenic, with newly repaired bridges over a winding stream. Unfortunately, the cut-off back to the parking area was not marked, and we continued on what turned out to be a 5-mile hike. The fact that no distances were posted along the trail was rather disconcerting. Eventually, undoubtedly due to fatigue, Madeline slipped and fell, injuring her arm. Georgia and Doug were great to help by hiking out as quickly as possible to seek help, leaving the rest

of the group on the trail.

Back at the parking lot, Doug summoned the rescue squad, who were a marvel of efficiency with a small ATV, and they had Madeline out in less than 40 minutes from when Doug first called 911! An ambulance took her to the nearest hospital in Brevard, some 17 miles away. Doug took the rest of the group back to Pisgah Inn, and went to the hospital to await the results of Madeline's examination. Unfortunately, her arm was broken, and she would have to leave the tour to seek further medical treatment at home. We missed her as part of the group, but were encouraged that her brother came to help and she made steady improvement.

Wed., April 23	Looking Glass Rock / Devil's Courthouse / Richland Balsam /
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As Scarlett O'Hara said, "tomorrow is another day". Madeline remained at Pisgah to make her arrangements to return home, while the rest of us took the parkway south. Weather was clear, and the scenery, including such iconic landmarks as Looking Glass Rock and Devil's Courthouse, was in wonderful view.



We birded around Richland Balsam, the highest point on the parkway, and heard several singing Winter Wrens, but could not lure them into view.

We found the small visitor center at Waterrock Knob still closed for the winter, but saw an unexpected Osprey fly over! Ruffed Grouse put in a good performance on the shoulders of the parkway. By lunchtime we had reached US19, so we again altered the original itinerary in search of warmth and birds, and left the parkway to head into the town of Cherokee on the Qualla Reservation owned by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee.

We experienced a bit of serendipity when we stopped at a Burger King on the Oconaluftee River. They had a lovely picnic table along the river, where we saw a Blue-winged Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow



Warbler, and Yellow-rumped Warblers, plus Rough-winged, Tree, and Cliff swallows.



From there, we entered Great Smoky Mountains National Park and stopped at the visitor center, then took a short walk at Mingus Mill where we found our only Scarlet Tanager of the trip, a female, and also saw American Redstart and Red-eyed Vireo, not to mention a rare showy orchids in bloom.

Returning to the parkway at its southern terminus, we headed back up to the cooler elevations. The portion of Heintooga Road in the national park was still closed, so we could only go a short distance on it, but it did produce a nice look at a Wild Turkey. Our drive back to the Inn was scenic but relatively unproductive for birds.

We were joined for dinner by Doug's friends Marcus Simpson and Marilyn Westphal, local experts on the birds of the Blue Ridge. Mark regaled us with stories until it was time to try again for the Woodcock. Mark had an impressive spotlight, so when we found our bird again, we were able to see it as if in a wildlife video.

Once the sky had darkened sufficiently, we began to hear the *ow-ow-ow...* calls of a Northern Saw-whet Owl in the distance. By walking the parkway, we were eventually able to get quite close to the bird, but had to settle for the audio experience because Mark did not want to take a chance on playback, which might cause this bird to move off its territory. We would have had a very small chance of seeing the bird anyway because, in his 4 decades of research on the species, Mark has seen it only 3 times!

Thurs., April 24 French Broad River / Folk Art Center / Black Mountains / Mt. Mitchell / Linville Falls

Madeline's brother was scheduled to arrive today to rescue her, so we departed for the northbound portion of our trip. An early stop was the low-elevation French Broad River overlook, where we found White-eyed Vireo and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

We proceeded to the Folk Art Center just past Asheville where some enjoyed the demonstrations by craftsmen while other birded the grounds, finding mostly common suburban species. The parkway was closed beyond this point for repairs, so we detoured through Black Mountain, where we picked up lunch as well as hummingbirds and swifts.

We then drove to Curtis Creek Road, a well-maintained gravel forest service road that runs from ca. 2000 ft elevation all the way up to the parkway beyond the closed section. It is a well-known birding locality, and lived up to its reputation. First, we encountered a Swainson's Warbler on territory but could not get a look at it. Further up, we found four more by hearing their loud songs. Two of them came in to playback, but quickly retreated so no one got much of a look (living up to their reputation, too!). We ate our lunch in a delightful picnic ground beside Curtis Creek, then headed upward. After leaving the creek and climbing a while, we encountered a mixed flock of migrating warblers and vireos that included our only Canada Warbler.



Once on the parkway, we headed south a few miles to Mt. Mitchell State Park, which boasts the highest peak east of the Mississippi. Facilities were not yet open for the season, but the trail to the summit lookout was and we enjoyed the spectacular panorama. The red spruce forest, with a few surviving Fraser firs (victims of the balsam wooly adelgid), harbored Golden-crowned Kinglets and "Carolina" juncos, a field-identifiable Appalachian subspecies with a distinctive white bill.

From Mt. Mitchell, we drove north, stopping at the Museum of North Carolina minerals which featured an interesting local-speaker narrative about mining in western North Carolina. Next came Linville Falls, and a hike of just over a mile that seemed like nothing after Pink Beds! Not only did we have incredible views of the falls, but we found the surrounding forest to be very birdy. Apparently nesting in the cliffs above the falls were Rock Pigeons, looking as wild as they ever do in North America. Playback brought a singing Winter Wren right to the feet of several of us. We also had our best looks at Black-throated Blue Warblers. A surprise was a Red-breasted Nuthatch in the tall hemlocks.

We hurried to our new quarters at the Mountaineer Inn in Blowing Rock, and then went out for what turned out to be one of the best dinners of the tour at nearby Bistro Roca.

Fri., April 25 Blowing Rock / Trout Lake / Elk Mountain State Park / Bass Lake

Places that open for breakfast on birders' schedules turned out to be scarce as hen's teeth in Blowing Rock, so we ended up driving into Boone where we found a Cracker Barrel and some fantastic pecan pancakes. As a result, we rearranged the order of activities for the day and went first to Valle Crucis Community Park. This little park benefits from the convergence of several different habitats, and produced some good birds. Least Flycatchers, the only small



flycatcher that seemed to be back on the breeding grounds, were everywhere along with a few Eastern Kingbirds. We had an interesting study in habitat partitioning with Tree Swallows in nest boxes, Barn Swallows nesting in picnic shelters, and Rough-winged Swallows burrowing into the banks of a stream. Yellow Warblers were singing in the willows, and some winter holdover White-throated Sparrows were under the shrubbery. We also had our only Palm Warblers of the trip.



The weather had been cloudy early, but cleared off while we walked around the park. So we were surprised when a dense fog engulfed us as we headed back to Trout Lake in Blowing Rock. Visibility was measurable in feet, which precluded any birding, so we found a nice café for lunch and waited for better weather. The fog lifted somewhat, but was followed by a steady drizzle that stayed with us nearly the rest of the day. The cold and rain made birds reluctant to sing, and we dipped on our target Golden-winged Warbler at Elk Mountain State Park and along the Rich Mountain Rd. So we

headed back to Blowing Rock, and saw the skies begin to clear as we stopped by Trout Lake again, which surprised us with a flock of Buffleheads, but had hardly any birds in the surrounding trees.

We also stopped at Bass Lake before heading for an early dinner at Foggy Rock Eatery. There we learned that the restaurant next door, Papa Joe's, had just started opening at 7 for breakfast. Just what we needed!

Sat., April 26 Jeffress Park / Doughton Park / Back on the Blue Ridge Parkway

The breakfast menu at Papa Joe's included, in addition to grits, a North Carolina specialty known as livermush, which Doug ordered (and ate) but couldn't persuade anyone else to try. Our first goal after breakfast was to find Bobolinks at their southernmost breeding site at the Mt. Vernon Baptist Church just off the parkway. Amazingly, the birds were right where they were predicted to be, but only males so far. Females will arrive later. The area also produced our only Savannah Sparrows. Back on the parkway, we found a streamside site where White-eyed Vireos were chasing about affording great looks.



We moved on to Jeffress Park, where we took the 1.2 mile Cascades Trail. Only a few yards into the trail, we heard, or more accurately *felt* the nearby drumming of a Ruffed Grouse. Sneaking slowly ahead, we spotted the bird atop a huge log it was using as a resonator. It eventually walked across the trail just ahead of us in the sunlight. It was the ultimate grouse experience. The Cascades themselves were beautiful, and the wildflower show nearby featured two species of *Trillium*. On the

final leg of the hike, we heard an unfamiliar song that turned out to be that of a Louisiana Waterthrush, which was surprisingly high in the trees.

Back on the parkway, we drove a short distance to Mile Post 370, which is a well-known site for Cerulean Warblers. We spent quite a while there, adding American Redstart to our list and watching a pair of Blue-headed Vireos build a nest. But the Ceruleans failed to appear, so we headed north with the intention of giving this spot another try later.



We stopped at the Northwest Trading Post, and were directed to a nearby restaurant in Laurel Springs that turned out to be one of the most interesting cultural experiences of the tour. Doug was able to translate for the rest of the group.

After a run to Doughton Park, which provided great scenery but few birds, we returned to try again for the Cerulean, but could not turn one up. By popular request we went back to the Bobolink site and found the birds again, along with an accipiter, probably a

Sharp-shinned Hawk, on a recent kill. We also got fine views of Eastern Meadowlarks.

For dinner, we went to a posh restaurant called Twigs, but found the service slow and the food not quite as good as the décor promised. Adding insult to injury, they forgot to return our credit cards with the bills. Not the best end to the day!

Sun., April 27	Departures / McDowell Nature Preserve
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For most of us, this last day was just a travel day to return to the Charlotte airport. But Georgia and Pete had several hours to kill after we dropped off the early departing folks, and Doug had some time, so we went birding in some of Doug's early birding haunts in the place where he grew up. McDowell Nature Preserve produced the only migratory thrush of the trip, a Veery, as well as singing Summer Tanagers and Prothonotary Warblers. The big surprise was a Black-billed Cuckoo in a small patch of woods near the barn that was the model for Doug's Barn Swallow painting in the National Geographic field guide. He was gratified to see the barn was still there, although a little decrepit, amidst the rampant development of this formerly rural area. A last stop at historic Steele Creek Presbyterian Church produced Indigo Bunting, House Finch, and a surprising late flock of Cedar Waxwings.

Photo Credits: Black-billed Cuckoo by Tom Dove. All other photos by H. Douglas Pratt.