

# New Hampshire Warblers & Bicknell's Thrush

## Trip Report | Written by Steve Shunk

**June 5-10, 2021 | With Guides Steve Shunk, Gina Nichol, and Michael Good, and participants Judith, Janell, Diane, Amy, Robert, Bonnie L., Bonnie M., William, Nancy, and Barbara.**



What a beautiful part of North America and a gem of the northeastern U.S. Our tour took us from the Maine coast to the summit of the iconic Mt. Washington. It was the onset of breeding season, and warblers were out in force. We sought the enigmatic Bicknell's Thrush, and we were not disappointed. The panoramic views, the lush forests, carpets of wildflowers, and the scattered wetlands all combined for an outstanding nature experience. For a short tour, we had many highlights. Here are just a few.

### **Sat., June 5 Arrivals on the Portland Waterfront**

Despite this being a New Hampshire tour, we started in Portland, Maine, which provided the best access to our tour route. Joined by Gina Nichol, we gathered at the Hampton Inn near the Portland airport and ventured out to the Portland waterfront for our amazing dinner at Scales Restaurant. The waterfront was more active with humans than birds, but we still enjoyed the excellent looks of 'common' species, such as Common Eider, Common Tern, and Great Black-backed Gull—the largest gull in the world. Did I mention the mouthwatering seafood at Scales Restaurant? Onward.



## **Sun., June 6      Portland to Mt. Washington**

Our first morning was dedicated to the southern Maine coast; it's hard to start the tour in the state without spending at least a little time exploring this scenic region. Our first stop took us to the expansive Scarborough Marsh. This Maine Audubon sanctuary is perhaps best known for its nesting Saltmarsh Sparrows, though the wetlands attract a wide array of water birds. Besides the more common Great and Snowy Egrets, we found a rare Tricolored Heron along one of the sloughs. The marsh also gave us our only Spotted Sandpiper and Willets of the tour. We were able to enjoy several of the Saltmarsh Sparrows, some at very close range.

One more coastal stop took us to the outer coast and Crescent Beach, just west of Cape Elizabeth. We crossed the dunes and looked up and down the beach for the small, fenced areas; these would be the protected Piping Plover nest sites. It doesn't get much easier than that, and we easily found a pair of plovers at their nest. One adult was wandering outside the fence and the other was incubating a single egg. We approached within a safe distance and enjoyed watching the two going about their business. Just off the beach, we watched Least Terns feeding along the surf zone and Common Loon past the waves. After a great lunch at Sabago Brewing Company, we headed inland toward our main destination: the White Mountains and Mt. Washington. Before reaching the mountain, we broke up the drive with a little bit of birding. First was a combined birding and bathroom stop at Sebago Lake State Park. Since the line of cars entering the park was almost an hour long, the cost of a warm, sunny, weekend day in Maine, the parking attendant had an alternative idea. He sent us to Songo Lock.

One wouldn't normally expect a lock in this neck of the woods, but this was no ordinary lock. Songo Lock was built in 1830 just above the confluence of the Songo and Crooked Rivers. This historic structure is the only one remaining of the original 28 locks on the Cumberland and Oxford Canal. The coolness of the lock itself is enhanced by a manually operated swinging bridge over the river. We got excellent looks at Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, and Red-eyed Vireo, and we found an active Black-capped Chickadee nest. We continued along our route to the Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary, just inside the New Hampshire state line. This 56-acre property, owned by New Hampshire Audubon, supports one of the best examples of maple/ash floodplain in the state. At first, the sanctuary was eerily quiet on this hot afternoon. But after we got into the woodland, we found one of the best birds of the trip, a handsome Black-billed Cuckoo. After excellent looks at the bird, we headed for Mt. Washington. Capping off the scenic drive into the White Mountains, we settled at the Glen House hotel for our first of four nights and an equal number of delectable lodge dinners.





## **Sun., June 7      Mt. Washington and Pudding Pond**

For the remainder of the trip, the gang was joined by Michael Good. Gina spent the morning with us before heading back to her home in Connecticut. All of us spent the first half of the day exploring the birch/conifer forests and alpine slopes of Mt. Washington.

Much can be said of the experience driving up the Mt. Washington Auto Tour Road. As we went up the mountain, we were sure to follow the safety requirements of the National Forest and concessionaire. Steep and sinuous describe most sections of this adventurous route, but it's paved all the way to the top and offers plenty of turnouts for birders seeking the holy grail of the mountain: the Bicknell's Thrush. Our first stops netted us singing Blackpoll Warblers and White-throated Sparrows. Participants of one vehicle watched a Northern Goshawk fly across the road. We easily found Canada Jay and heard plenty of Black-capped Chickadees. Trying not to get too distracted by singing Winter Wren and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, we plowed ahead to the stunted spruce forest that the Bicknell's calls home.

Within minutes of exiting the vehicles, we heard the ethereal song of the Bicknell's Thrush. And then we heard another. And another. We practically had Bicknell's Thrushes singing all around us. But seeing them would prove to be a trick. Without the use of playback, we just could not get decent looks on these skulking little birds. A little higher up the mountain, we decided to use some brief playback to entice them out of the dense spruce stands. We were all rewarded with glorious looks at this plain-colored but nonetheless amazing thrush. Reeling from our success, we drove to the top of the mountain to explore the historic structures at the summit of Mt. Washington. With excellent interpretive displays and a first-class museum of the road's history, the scene at the top of the mountain is truly memorable. We even hit it on a day with warm sun and calm winds, an anomaly on this mountain known for its thick fog and the world's highest wind speeds.

After enjoying the human elements of the mountain, we headed downslope for some more birding. The alpine habitat offered us great looks at territorial American Pipits, which flitted over the carpets of wildflowers. Lower on the mountain, we saw Purple Finch and 'Slate-colored' Dark-eyed Junco. After lunch, we headed for an afternoon of birding at the Pudding Pond Conservation Area outside the town of Conway. This lovely, shaded hike got us out of the hot sun and into the canopy of a nice second-growth mixed woodland; we knew we were



in for some warblers. And warblers we did find. Most of them were impossible to see, singing from high in the canopy; elusive birds included Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, and American Redstart. But the frustration of warbler watching disappeared quickly, first with a very curious Pine Warbler, and then with drop-dead looks at both Blackburnian and Black-throated Blue Warblers. It was a satisfying end to a major birding day.

## Mon., June 8      Birding among the White Mountains

The morning started with a sunrise walk on the trail network behind the Glen House. This system of well-managed paths would prove to give us some of the best birding of the tour. Before breakfast, we enjoyed excellent looks at singing Chestnut-sided Warbler, as well as Alder Flycatcher and American Redstart. After breakfast, we continued our morning with birding at Pinkham Notch and the Lost Pond Trail. The first hundred yards of the trail produced some excellent birding through a scenic pond and bog. We started the walk with a brood of young Mallards, followed by Belted Kingfisher and Swamp Sparrow. We also heard our first Boreal Chickadees. Our next stop took us to Wildcat Ski Area, where we shared a great experience watching a Philadelphia Vireo. We enjoyed lunch at the J-Town Deli and Country Store in the tiny hamlet of Jackson, an unexpected but happy find. Casual seating allowed indoor social distancing and we fueled up on delicious deli fare for the afternoon. The afternoon would take us north of Mt. Washington to Dolly Copp and Pinkham B Roads. Lined with mature deciduous woodlands, these two roads offer some excellent birding, for warblers and more. Shortly after crossing the Peabody River, we found a pair of nesting Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. While we watched their courtship antics, a Wood Thrush sang from deep in the forest and a Black-and-white Warbler shuffled along the bark of the nearby trees. A little way down the road we found Golden-crowned Kinglet and Black-throated Green Warbler. Magnolia Warbler continued to tease us with its loud song but no joy on a visual. And to cap off the day, we found Black-throated Blue and Blackburnian Warblers and a very loud Ovenbird.





## **Tue., June 9      Glen House and Mt. Washington**

On our final full day, the Glen House trails gave us another full morning of excellent birding. The Indigo Buntings we had watched for the last few days continued singing from the tops of the trees around the hotel. A few feet away, we spent more time with the local Chestnut-sided Warbler. We enjoyed excellent looks at American Redstart and Blackburnian Warbler, and we found our one and only Northern Flicker of the trip. Overhead, we enjoyed the resident Broad-winged Hawk, and the meadow featured the continuing Alder Flycatcher and nesting Eastern Bluebirds. Only our quest for food could pull us away from these productive trails.

The little village of Intervale provided us with a great lunch at the Moat Mountain Smokehouse and Brewing Company, along the Saco River. Just another in a series of great meals for the tour. The afternoon took us back onto the Mt. Washington Auto Road. We had already been to the top of the mountain, so our goal on the auto route was to find a handful of species that we had missed elsewhere on the trip. A few stops would be all we needed to round out the week. Just for fun, we first drove to the stunted spruce forest with the Bicknell's Thrushes. The thrushes continued to call repeatedly from the dense thickets of spruce. Turning around and descending to the next big turnout, we finally got cursory looks at our first Boreal Chickadees. Just around the corner we found our first Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. And the icing on the cake? One of our vehicles lagged a bit and stumbled upon a bright male Scarlet Tanager. A farewell dinner at the lodge and a final review of our wildlife sightings were the perfect end of the day.

## **Wed., June 10      Glen House to Portland**

It was the last day of the tour, but we weren't quite finished. One more morning of Glen House birding gave a great fix before heading back to Portland. The trails came through once again, with more excellent looks at the local America Redstart. We found our first Pine Siskin of the tour and finally got a visual on a Red-breasted Nuthatch. In addition to one more look at the Broad-winged Hawk, we also saw our first Red-shouldered Hawk. The group headed back to the airport quite fulfilled, with a great sense of success for this first annual tour.

## **WILDLIFE SUMMARY**

- 104 bird species, including 15 warbler species and great looks at Bicknell's Thrush.
- Daily or nearly daily species included Black-capped Chickadee, Cedar Waxwing, Chipping Sparrow, and American Redstart.
- We saw many dragonflies and butterflies, as well as the gorgeous Ebony Jewelwing damselfly.

PHOTO CREDITS: Top of Mt Washington (Bonnie Long – BL), Blackburnian Warbler (Michael Good – MG), Saltmarsh Sparrow (Steve Shunk – SS), Double-crested Cormorant & Common Eiders (BL), Crescent (SS), Piping Plover (SS), MT Washington (BL), Yellow Warbler (SS), Bicknell's Thrush (SS), Purple Finch (SS), White-throated Sparrow (SS), Black-throated Blue Warbler (SS), Dark-eyed Junco (SS), Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (SS), Ovenbird (SS), Pincushion and Alpenrose (SS), Indigo Bunting (MG), Red Squirrel (SS), Sweet Williams (SS), Ebony Jewelwing (SS)