

# Coastal Maine & New Hampshire's White Mountains June 7 – 13, 2023 | Trip Report | by Jon Atwood



With Guide Jon Atwood and participants Anthony, Susan, Terry and Susan



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 New Hampshire's iconic Mt. Washington. Beginning on the Maine coast, then moving inland to New Hampshire's White Mountains, our small group enjoyed a diverse selection of breeding shorebirds, sparrows, thrushes and warblers. Although we dodged rainstorms and mosquitoes throughout our trip, we successfully found both of our primary target species: Saltmarsh Sparrow and Bicknell's Thrush, as well as 16 species of wood-warblers. The panoramic views, lush forests, sandy beaches and coastal wetlands all combined for an outstanding nature experience. For a short tour, we had many highlights, following are just a few.

## Sat., June 7

### Arrivals in Portland

We started in Portland, Maine, which offered good access to our tour route. We gathered at the Hampton Inn, near the Portland airport, and had time for a short visit to nearby Higgins Beach. This sandy barrier beach hosted nesting Piping Plovers (with multiple tiny chicks a.k.a. cotton balls on toothpicks), Least Terns and Willets. Offshore, we were able to pick out a late flock of Black Scoters and a single Long-tailed Duck. A Cooper's Hawk



enjoyed a House Sparrow lunch, and after a quick stop at our hotel, we headed for our own dinner at Scales Restaurant on the Portland waterfront. Great seafood and an excellent beginning to our trip!

## **Sun., June 8                      Southern Maine Coast**

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. We started at the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve at Laudholm Farm. This beautiful property protects 2,250 acres of historic farmland, coastal marsh and sandy beach. As we walked to the beach, we enjoyed seeing displaying Bobolinks and a variety of warblers, thrashers and thrushes. Least Terns and Piping Plovers were nesting on the beach.

After a lunch stop at the Clambake Restaurant in Scarborough, we were fortunate to get great looks at several Saltmarsh Sparrows directly behind the restaurant. The birds strongly responded to our vocalization playbacks, and we were able to get good looks and photographs. This species may be the most threatened in New England due to sea level rise caused by climate change. Nesting only in a narrow strip of saltmarsh vegetation, even a slight increase in sea level is likely to inundate breeding areas.

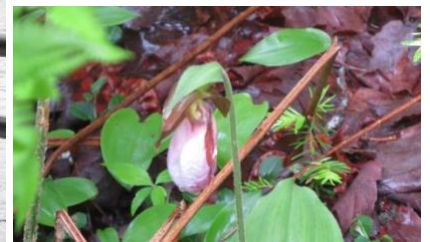
Next, we birded the trails at Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm Sanctuary, a beautiful property with grasslands, forest and ponds. Rain drove us into the sanctuary's excellent bookstore, then we headed off to dinner at the Sebago Brewing Company in nearby Gorham.

## **Mon., June 9                      Portland to Mt. Washington**

This was mostly a travel day, as we drove from the Portland area toward New Hampshire's Mt. Washington. First, we explored nearby Hinckley Park, a 40-acre property in South Portland with various loop hikes and a couple of ponds. Although we couldn't find the vagrant Prothonotary Warbler that had been seen several days earlier, other species including American Redstart, Yellow Warbler, Great Crested Flycatcher and Alder Flycatcher added to our growing species list.

Next we headed inland, stopping at an interesting historic site, the Songo Lock, built in 1830 just above the confluence of the Songo and Crooked Rivers. Of the original 28 locks on the Cumberland and Oxford Canal, this is the only remaining one. The site itself was quite beautiful, enhanced by the fact that the sun made a





brief appearance. Soon the clouds and rain returned, however, and we headed to lunch at the Top of the Hill Grille. Then off to our hotel at the base of Mt. Washington, the beautiful Glen House, where we would stay for four nights and many delectable lodge meals.

## **Tue., June 10**                      **Mt. Washington vicinity**

Poor weather conditions sent us west as the Mt. Washington Auto Road was closed the previous day due to snow, so we detoured to Moose Brook State Park. Although a bit buggy, we had good opportunities to study a singing Mourning Warbler, one of a group of species that can be quite secretive. Next we walked the trail to Mud Pond, a unit of Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge. Swamp Sparrows gave us good looks, and we saw Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, Northern Parulas, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Scarlet Tanagers. All of us practiced using our phones' *Merlin* app to help us learn unfamiliar vocalizations. If sometimes the birds were hard to see, we had great looks at pink lady slipper orchids along the Mud Pond trail.

Returning to the base of Mt. Washington, we took a gamble trying to explore the Auto Road to the top. Although we knew that the time of day and weather conditions would not be good for warblers and thrushes, we still wanted to see what might await us the next morning. Much of the way to the top was so foggy that we could barely see the edge of the narrow road! Mt. Washington, 6,288 feet in elevation, is often described as home of the world's worst weather; while our visit on June 10 was not exactly horrible, it needed to improve if we were to have much hope of seeing any of the mountain's specialty bird species.

## **Wed., June 11**                      **Mt. Washington vicinity**

Although the adage, "If you don't like the weather in New England, wait five minutes and it will be different" sounds good, I'll admit that it was with a big sigh of relief that the morning of June 11 dawned clear and



beautiful. We first explored the trails near the Glen House Hotel, finding Swainson's Thrush, Blackburnian Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, American Redstart and Red-eyed Vireo (LOTS of Red-eyed Vireos).

It looked good for finding our trip's primary target species: Bicknell's Thrush (BITH). Still, sometimes birding doesn't go as planned. We stopped at the first turnout along the Mt. Washington Auto Road where BITHs had been seen in previous years. Perfect habitat, but no thrushes. We stopped at the next turnout, but still no thrushes. What we were hearing was the thundering roar of hundreds of Harley-Davidson motorcycle riders heading to the mountaintop. Apparently, we had managed to be on the mountain on a sunny day on the weekend of New Hampshire Biker Week (an annual event that draws participants from all over New England). We drove to the top and explored some of the tourist shops and interpretive displays, then headed back down to the narrow band of vegetation where BITHs occur. Stopping at the alpine garden area (which in a few weeks would be carpeted in flowers) we had a quick look at an American Pipit, a rare breeder above timberline in the White Mountains. But still no BITHs! I was starting to panic.

We returned to an earlier stop to eat our picnic lunches and hope for a singing Bicknell's Thrush, although the species is often quiet in the middle of the day. But FINALLY, a thrush sang, and then responded enough to our playback that everyone saw the bird! We even succeeded in getting a photograph. Whew! Considering that I have coauthored scientific papers about Bicknell's Thrush distribution in New England, it was going to be embarrassing if I couldn't produce this species on this trip. But our patience and perseverance paid off!



## **Thurs., June 12**

## **Mt. Washington vicinity (Pondicherry NWR)**

Today we headed back to Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge, visiting a different area than we had on June 10. Along a delightful trail to Cherry Pond, we saw Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireos, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and Black-and-white, Nashville, Magnolia and Black-throated Blue Warblers. At the trail's ultimate destination, Cherry Pond, we had a distant view of a Common Loon, complete with a half-grown juvenile riding on its parent's back. A very cool final sighting of our trip.

## **Tues., June 13**

## **Back to Portland**

We apparently had used up our allotted amount of good weather luck, and we said goodbye to the Glen House in a fairly heavy rain that persisted until we reached Portland. Still, the weather did not dampen our spirits! We had had a great trip, with wonderful birds and good friends that we hoped we would see again.

Photo Credits: Pearl Crescent (Terry Peterson - TP), Swamp Sparrow (Jon Atwood - JA), Bobolink (Anthony Matthews - AM), View from the Glen House (JA), Black Skimmer (NJ Stock), Spotting Bicknell's Thrush (JA), Well's Reserve (JA), Scallop Dinner (JA), Saltmarsh Sparrow (TP), Piping Plover (Anthony Matthews - AM), Song Lock (JA), Mourning Warbler (AM), Pink Lady Slipper (JA), Trail to Mud Pond (JA), Chestnut-sided Warbler (JA), Group in the Fog (JA), Bicknell's Thrush Habitat (JA), Common Ringlet (TP), Bicknell's Thrush (AM), Group looking for Bicknell's Thrush (AM)