

Maine Northwoods Retreat | July 12-18, 2023

Trip Report | by Michael J. Good



With Guide Michael Good and participants: Bonnie, Claudia, Ed, Gopa, Pat, Patty, Samar and Steve



Wed., Jul. 12

Bangor Airport | Bangor Forest & Orono Bog | Bar Harbor

Day one of any birding trip seems a distant memory, after an amazing week of birding and naturalizing during the Maine North Woods Retreat July 12 to 18 2023. After long flights and drives from around the country, California, Delaware and North Carolina, the group assembled, loaded all our gear into the van and began birding on our way to the Bangor City Forest and Orono Bog. Our first group bird of the trip, besides House Sparrows, European Starlings and Common Grackle at the airport, was a Northern Mockingbird on a wire at the Bangor Mall. We had to get the good ones first! The Rolland F. Perry City Forest is 680+ acres offering 9 miles of trails, one leading to the 616-acre Orono Bog. This is one of the best kept secrets of the region, offering an



opportunity to hike on a “floating trails system”, the Bog boardwalk is 4800 feet long and consists of 509, 8-foot sections, allowing amazing access to habitat found throughout northern Maine, but difficult to access without hip boots! We found 18 species including a couple fly-bys of Life bird, American Bittern, a close encounter with a Palm Warbler, the ethereal, fairy-like song of the Veery, excellent comparisons of Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireo, Black-throated Green Warbler, Ovenbird, Nashville, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula and a close-up Palm Warbler for our first Parulidae species.

It was a warm, sunny and magical day in the Orono Bog. Our first mammal of the trip was a Red Squirrel, a new species for some. A variety of Bog plant species included Pitcher Plant and Sundew, Canadian Bunchberry, Sheep Laurel, White-fringed Orchid, Tuberous Grasspink and Horned Bladderwort were identified. In the Bangor Forest we found Crown and Purple Vetch and Cow Parsnip as we walked back to the van to make our way to Bar Harbor and the first glimpses of my Island community and Bar Harbor. We all enjoyed our inaugural dinner at The Bistro with a sunset, good food and learning about each other’s birding interests.

Thurs., Jul. 13 Whale Watching & Pelagic birds | Cadillac Mountain

After a light breakfast, our group drove to Bar Harbor and prepared for our 5-hour Whale Watch and Pelagic Bird trip. Our first trip list bird found in town was a House Finch singing at the Down East Nature Tours office where we parked. Because of our position in the queue, we captured the best seats in the house on the bow of the AtlantiCat, the largest of the whale watch boats. The crew told everyone about the fog bank sitting offshore and prepared us for a gray and wet morning. What actually happened when we got about 15 miles for shore, is that the sun came out, the seas were calm, and the visibility was 20 plus miles. Wilson’s Storm-petrels were seen skimming and dancing on the water from the start of the trip. Perfect conditions for some of the amazing birds we saw. But the show was stolen by the Humpback Whale pair who saw us coming and began to “flipper flap”. Waving at us that they wanted to put on a show. And what a show, with several spectacular breaches and close encounters as Wilson’s Storm-petrel, Northern Fulmar, Great and Sooty Shearwater’s. One flock of about 175 Wilson’s Storm-petrel were all “dancing” or “foot-tapping, which is thought to attract prey to the surface. Wilson’s have black legs and feet but interesting high-contrast yellow webbing between their toes, which may play a role in the water walking feeding behavior to attract prey. Wilson’s Storm-petrel is one of the most numerous, about 30 million, around the world’s waters, except for the Arctic. It was a total thrill to see so many



today. Named for Alexander Wilson, the father of Ornithology, this swallow-sized bird scours our oceans for fish, krill, small squid and detritus which can be brought to the surface by the great whales. There is a strong correlation and symbiotic relationship between whales and pelagic birds.

The best pelagic bird of our trip was a single South Polar Skua flying directly at the boat out of the east. Thanks to my friend Steve Antel, who saw it first and brought it to our attention, everyone in the group got to see it at least fly by. This large gull sized ocean predator is known for chasing birds down and stealing their food, a behavior called "Kleptoparasitism". Skua's are one of many species of kleptoparasites, including Parasitic and Pomarine Jaeger, all the Skua and even Bald Eagle, our national bird. Other birds seen on our trip were Northern Gannet, Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Northern Fulmar, Parasitic Jaeger and Great Black-backed Gull.

Cadillac Mountain is the highest summit on the Eastern coastline, and our next destination after our exhilarating boat trip to Canadian waters, pelagic birds and whales. East from the summit, on a 100-mile clear sky day, you can see Machias Seal Island 60 miles away easily with a scope, and that is about right where we saw whales waving. Northwest lies Mount Katahdin, Penobscot Indians sacred Great Mountain and our next destination tomorrow. Today, we were looking for Eastern Towhee, who joined us as we looked out over the vast expanses of the Gulf of Maine. Purple Finch, a Cedar Waxwing immature fed by the parent and 6 other species were found. After a wonderful dinner at McKay's in Bar Harbor, Nat Journey's birds reclined on their decks and enjoyed their first Maine sunset.

Fri., Jul. 14 Bar Harbor Town Pier | Petit Manan Island | Three Pines Bird Sanctuary | New England Outdoor Center

A fog bank, real Maine pea soup FOG, thick and not-so-beautiful inversion fog lingered just off the southern side of Bald Porcupine Island as we went aboard the Schoodic Explorer, a 100-foot jet powered catamaran. It was sunny and warm on the land but out at sea, wet, damp and not very good visibility. We passed by the Porcupine Islands, Sheep, Burnt, Long and Bald Islands who were all firmly in the clutches of senior Inversion Fog. We all knew the conditions when getting on board, but the need to see an Atlantic Puffin and Razorbills, made the



foggy ride over enjoyable for its uniqueness. Despite the thick fog at Petit Manan Wildlife Refuge, we logged 11 species and had amazing long looks at close-by Atlantic Puffin, a few Razorbills and one Common Murre, just on the edge of visible in the fog. The fog was so thick we could not see the Lighthouse and we could barely see the other tour boat off our starboard bow. Common Tern was seen often, and we had only one Arctic Tern go by the boat. Arctic Tern adults have an all-red bill, lightly gray above and is an overall whiter, longer tailed and slightly smaller than Common Tern. One obvious difference is the thicker band of black on the dorsal and ventral side of the wings for Common Tern versus a thin black line on the outer primaries of Arctic Tern. Their calls are like Common Tern but higher pitched, squeakier and drier than Common. Overall, it was an amazing morning.

The fog is often used by pelagic species of birds as cover from predators, so it was very interesting to see Wilson's Storm Petrel and Great Shearwater banking over the waves within sight of Petit Manan Island. On a typical blue-sky day, you probably would not see them that close, partly due to predators like Peregrine Falcon, who are sometimes on these outer islands. This is another good example of how some pelagic species wander about in the fog, coming close to places they are typically not seen.

After the boat trip, everyone was interested in walking. We stopped by Three Pines Bird Sanctuary in Town Hill, Maine and learned about some of the 130 species of birds recorded for this location. We did find Purple Finch, Pine Warbler and a Black-throated Green Warbler. We took our time driving north to the New England Outdoor Center. After our first meal and tallied up our species list at the River Drivers Restaurant and enjoyed our new cabins.

Sat., Jul. 15 Baxter State Park | Stump Pond | Foster Fields, Marston Trailhead | Daicey Pond

I think the general consensus is that Baxter State Park is an amazing place, with so much diversity that it is almost overwhelming. We started our day at NEOC with foggy skies, but the skies cleared, and we enjoyed a beautiful day birding Maine's largest state park. We started birding at New England Outdoor Center (NEOC) right after breakfast, recording 11 species including Osprey, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Blue Warbler and the crowned prince, Scarlet Tanager. Ohlala.

Just before 8 am, we took off for Baxter State Park and began our search for boreal birds, Moose and whatever the day handed us. After stopping at the Togue Pond Gatehouse, where we saw and heard a Northern Flicker,



we started making random stops and short walks at the variety of ponds along the park tote road heading west. Stump Pond was our first birding stop. Here we found a small flock of 5 Ring-necked Duck. We found Nashville, Black and White Warblers, Northern Waterthrush and Common Yellowthroat to add to our Baxter list. We had a great surprise at the Foster Fields group area with a Ruffed Grouse female standing right in the middle of the road. It turned out she had a few chicks which flew or scurried over the road.

The Baxter State Park Tote Road is a rather good dirt road the wanders through the outer edges of this 209,644-acre park founded by Governor Percival Baxter in 1931. Our ultimate goal was Nesowadnehunk Lake Wilderness Campground located on the southern end of Nesowadnehunk Lake. There is easy walking access to this from the Baxter Tote Road and I had some advice on where to find a Black-backed Woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee. The problem was that no one told Mother nature and the rain began to fall. We took cover temporarily in the Nesowadnehunk Laundry and Library, saw some great books, then ventured back out into the rain, with only limited success on the birds we wanted to see. Despite the rain, we found 20 species of birds including White-winged Crossbill, Swainson's and Hermit Thrush and both Red-eyed and Blue-headed Vireo.

The Baxter Tote Road follows the Nesowadnehunk Stream, which is beautifully seen at Ledges Falls. The only bird we saw here was a Belted Kingfisher but the views of Doubletop Mountain in the clouds was spectacular. Nesowadnehunk Field Campground is a fantastic location for birds, as evidenced by the 17 species we recorded. A Merlin stooped and flew quickly by our lunch stop with the hornets' nest. We saw Life Bird White-winged Crossbill and found Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula and some great looks at Magnolia Warbler. We dipped on boreal species but greatly enjoyed hearing the ethereal calls of Hermit and Swainson's Thrush.

Our last two stop before driving back to NEOC was Daicey Pond, where we took in the amazing views of Baxter Peak partially hidden by the clouds. We stopped by Elbow and Grassy Ponds for our last walk in the woods. No boreal Chickadee were found! After a long day of birding, we all decided it was time to venture back to NEOC, then off to the Loose Moose restaurant for a well-deserved meal.



Sun., Jul. 16

**NEOC to Katahdin Woods | Water National Monument
Grindstone Flats | Stacyville | Whetstone Falls |
Sandbank Stream**

NEOC to Katahdin Woods and Water National Monument, Golden Road to Millinocket, Grindstone Flats, Farmland, Swift Brook Road, Stacyville, Whetstone Falls, Sandbank Stream, Katahdin Overlook, return to NEOC The Penobscot River is sacred to the Wabanaki and Penobscot people, who were stewards and have lived along this river for 10,000 years. Butch Phillips, a Penobscot tribal elder wrote in his essay entitled "[A River Runs Through Us](#)", "A Long time ago, the People lived along this river, as we still do now. We take our name 'Burnurwurbskek' from a place on the river, and later the entire river took its name from us."

A sacred lifeline to the sea, the Penobscot River, begins high above the river, on Ktaaden, the "great mountain", and flows freely through Baxter and Ktaaden Woods and Water National Monument. Nutrient laden fresh water flows daily to the great ocean we visited only days ago off the coast of Mount Desert Island and Bar Harbor. These oceans have thrived prosperously for thousands of years, where giant Humpback Whales fly through the air, seabirds feed on Searun fish and migratory birds move masterfully over it to reach their breeding and wintering grounds. The Penobscot and all Maine rivers deliver nutrients, insect larvae, millions of out migrating and in migrating fish and billions of gallons of freshwater annually. All rivers of Maine are the arteries feeding the heart, the Gulf of Maine.

The East and West Branch of the Penobscot River are also the freshwater nursery for the Gulf of Maine keystone species, Alewives, and American Eel, American Shad, Atlantic Salmon, Atlantic Sturgeon, Atlantic Tomcod, Blue-backed herring, Rainbow Smelt, Sea Lamprey, Sea-run Brook Trout, Shortnose Sturgeon and Stripped Bass. There is no more of an important place anywhere in the world, then the Penobscot River feeding the Gulf of Maine. Yet, modern Europeans almost destroyed it by placing dams all along its pathway. Fortunately, two lower dams, The Veazie and Great Works dam have been totally removed and the Milford dam has a new fishway around it. The Penobscot River Restoration Project open up 1000 miles of riverine habitat for all of 12 of these Searun fish species. This in turn, feeds the ocean where we are indeed seeing bigger and more numerous bait balls. Fish are bird food, so this river restoration project has also benefited birds, mammals, and humans all the way to KWWMN.



The morning started off with a Chestnut-sided Warble on the Golden Road. This was a target species for many, so when I heard “Please, Please, please to meet chya” we stopped the van and took a little time to know this Parulidae family member of the Setophaga genus of warblers. The eastern end of the Golden Road enters Millinocket from the southwest through the industrial park of the forest product industry, so prevalent in the northern forest.

The drive through Millinocket lead to Rt 11, known locally as the Grindstone Road. We made a quick stop at the Grindstone Falls finding a Purple Finch eating fruit from a Serviceberry Tree on the East Branch of the Penobscot River. The farmlands at Stacyville produced some excellent birds on the way in and out of the park. One the way in, we saw our first and only American Kestrel, many Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrow during the extended stop we made on the way back to Millinocket.

The rain began to fall, so after a brief stop at the Ktaaden overlook in the clouds and mist, we departed for Waxwing, Otter and Partridge lodges at the New England outdoor Center. Our scheduled Moose boat trip with guide Matt Cyr, turned into the Golden Road Van Moose trip due to rain. We scoured the Golden Road and crossed the West Branch of the Penobscot River taking us to the Abol Bridge, part of the Appalachian Trail, and west to the Telos Road. We got great looks at the Bald Eagle nest at the Abol Bridge. These birds have been here for a few years and have picked an incredible location along the West Branch of the Penobscot River. Leaving the Telos Road with one Riong-billed Gull, we returned to the Golden Road and bounced our way back to NEOC and the River Driver Restaurant. Over a great meal, we discussed our Moose-less adventure and all the amazing habitat and places we visited during the moose hunt. Overall, the wet day ended up being enjoyable and memorable.

Mon., Jul. 17

The Golden Road | Pockwockamus Stream or Compass Pond | Ambejeus Falls | NOEC Golden Road Trail

For our final full day in the North Woods of Maine we took a leisurely breakfast at our lodges, Waxwing, Partridge and Otter and started at 8 am with a drive out on the Golden Road. The weather cooperated with some sun and a few clouds but no rain! A great Blue Heron and Wood Duck would have gladly been traded for a Moose, but even the moose guides were having trouble finding one. A



local told us about the Grant Brook Road, so we took off to see the Ambejeus Falls. This location produced Brown Creeper but otherwise it was a quiet stop. We stretched our legs a little then continued to another road I have never taken, the Hubner Road where we located a Northern Flicker and Blue-headed Vireo. Birding has been quiet most of the morning and then we went to the River Pond Trail, and everyone learned about mosquitoes! Maine mosquitoes come by the busload, and we found them all today, intermixed with a couple Hermit Thrush and an Ovenbird. After the morning walk and mosquitoes, everyone decided to go back to NOEC for a leisurely afternoon. Steve, Gopa, patty and I walked the Golden Road Trail, one of the many trails on the NOEC campus. No day is complete without one last try for a Moose, so we ventured out after dinner to Compass Pond where we were lucky enough to find several Common Nighthawk, a new species for a few in the group. The sun was setting and a fitting way to end our time in the North Woods of Maine.

Tues., Jul. 18 Departures from NEOC to Bangor Airport

After breakfast at NEOC, we packed and loaded for the final time and set off for the Bangor airport. And so ended Naturalist Journeys' first North Woods Retreat tour of 2023.

Photos by Michael J. Good