

Winter Blues Blowout: Killdeer Plains WA

By Doug Whitman

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Ohio Young Birders Club invades Killdeer!

I already knew it would be a good trip when, on the way to Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, four cars (including mine) pulled over to look at a flock of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings. I jumped out, slipped and promptly fell on my butt. I had slipped because the road was a solid sheet of ice. Not the best driving conditions, but still great birds.

The Black Swamp Bird Observatory sponsors the Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area event that happens every year, calling it their "Winter Blues Blowout."

This year, 17 birders from the Central Ohio Chapter of OYBC were there. Our target birds were uncommon winter visitors like the Northern Shrike, Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Rough-legged Hawk.

Once everyone got to Killdeer, the first thing that we saw was a Northern Harrier gliding over the plains, looking for something to eat. Then Jacob, his mother, my mother and I all stopped to stare at a Red-tailed Hawk. When we turned our attention back to driving again, we had lost the others in our caravan and had to swallow our pride and call Gerry, our OYBC Advisor, to get directions.

After everyone showed up at the Sportsmen's Center, (which we turned into our base/cafeteria), it was decided that it would probably be best to take as few cars as possible and bird the surrounding roads. With that settled, many of the kids (including me) rode in the Black Swamp Bird Observatory bus that had come down that morning with a load of OYBC students from up north. We found some interesting birds with the help of so many eyes. There were American Tree Sparrows feeding, some Rough-legged Hawks (a lifer for me and probably a few other members, too), a Bald Eagle (also probably a lifer for a few people) on its nest, a flock of Eastern Meadowlarks, some great views of Northern Harriers, a Northern Mockingbird, and three Red-tailed

Hawks in one tree. After that, we went to a pine grove to look for wintering Long-eared and Northern Saw-whet Owls. All of us looked in every pine tree we could find for an hour and a half, but no luck. I bet there were probably one or two of them laughing at us the whole time, as we tried and failed to see them.



Robert takes the high road

After walking around looking for owls for an hour and a half, we were all hungry and headed back to the building to enjoy some sloppy joes. For about an hour, we all just hung out and talked, while another plan was decided on. Some of our group had



The search for owls at Killdeer

departed right after lunch. Those remaining from the Central Ohio chapter needed to start meandering our way back home and could not stay for afternoon birding at Killdeer and at the nearby Big Island Wildlife Area. Eventually it was decided that Darlene and Emily would lead our 4-car convoy, including Jacob and his mother; followed by Gerry, Clare, Nick, and Aaron; then me and my mother. It was very funny with everyone leaning out windows to stare at the numerous Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, as well as a few American Kestrels. The best sighting of all, though, was when a 3rd year, sub-adult Bald Eagle flew within 30 feet of all of us! Everyone got great views.

The convoy drove out of the Wildlife Area after that

and everyone peeled off on their separate ways, still occasionally pausing to look at flocks of Horned

Larks. Overall, we saw between 30-35 species of birds--not bad. But it was the number of raptors that was amazing! I estimated that we saw 20 Red-tailed Hawks, 10 Rough-legged Hawks, 5 Northern Harriers, 5 American Kestrels, and 2 or 3 Bald Eagles.

I can't wait to come back to Killdeer Plains next year.

Here's our species list for the day, courtesy of Clare Jusdanis with input from Jacob Stinnett:

1. Canada Goose
2. Mallard
3. Bald Eagle
4. Northern Harrier
5. Cooper's Hawk
6. Red-tailed Hawk
7. Rough-legged Hawk
8. American Kestrel
9. Rock Pigeon
10. Mourning Dove
11. Red-headed Woodpecker
12. Red-bellied Woodpecker
13. Downy Woodpecker
14. Northern Flicker
15. Blue Jay
16. American Crow
17. Horned Lark
18. Carolina Chickadee
19. Tufted Titmouse
20. White-breasted Nuthatch
21. American Robin
22. Northern Mockingbird
23. European Starling
24. Northern Cardinal
25. American Tree Sparrow
26. Dark-Eyed Junco
27. Snow Bunting
28. Eastern Meadowlark
29. House Finch
30. House Sparrow
31. Song Sparrow
32. American Goldfinch
33. Great Blue Heron