May 8-16, 2023
Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
A Swainson’s Warbler in the Red River Gorge

Great Lakes
A Spectacle of Bird Migration

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May 8 – Haley Downs Drive, Natural Bridge State Resort Park

After several pickups at the Cincinnati airport and lunch, our group headed south to some grasslands before continuing to Natural Bridge SRP where we would be staying for the next two nights. There were some thunderstorms headed our way, so our visit to Haley Down Drive was cut short. However, we had time to see quite a few species! We had good looks at several grassland species such as Grasshopper, Field, and Savannah Sparrows, Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Dickcissel. Northern Bobwhites were vocal, but we were unable to spot any. As the rain started, we continued on our way to Natural Bridge. In the afternoon and early evening, we spent some time birding from their deck and along the Middle Fork Red River. We enjoyed our first southern warblers with good looks at Cerulean and Yellow-throated Warblers. We also saw our first White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, and Indigo Bunting. After dinner, some of the group heard an Eastern Whip-poor-will singing from behind the rooms!

May 9 – Red River Gorge and Minor E Clark Fish Hatchery

With thunderstorms on the horizon, we left our rooms and headed to the Red River Gorge. Our first stop was for Swainson's Warbler, the main reason that we start this tour in Kentucky. This is when the storms started; we would have to be flexible and hope to see one later on in the day. We sheltered in the van while it was raining and stayed close to the van when it would let up at all. And, despite the weather, we enjoyed a great morning with many of the southern breeding species we were looking for. Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Kentucky, Hooded, Cerulean, and Yellow-throated Warblers, and Louisiana Waterthrush were all seen well. The biggest surprise was a female Common Merganser that flew up the river and eventually landed. It was time to try again for the
Swainson’s Warbler and this time the weather cooperated, and the warbler showed off! Next up was lunch, but as usual, we had a couple of distractions on the way. The highlight was a Blue Grosbeak, our only one of the tour. We spent the afternoon birding at Minor E Clark Fish Hatchery. A couple of the ponds had good shorebird habitat and we recorded 8 species including a small flock of White-rumped Sandpipers! Some of the other highlights included a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Broad-winged Hawk, several species of swallows, and Orchard Orioles. After we were done birding, we drove back to our lodge, enjoyed a great dinner, and had some time to get ready to leave the next day.

May 10 – Red River Gorge, Haley Downs Drive

There were still several species we were hoping to get better looks at, so we returned to the Red River Gorge to target a few of them. There was lots of singing as we began birding along the forest edge and after some effort we had good looks at a pair of Kentucky and Cerulean Warblers and Yellow-breasted Chats. A little ways down the road, we also had good looks at a pair of Louisiana Waterthrushes. We headed back to the lodge for some breakfast and to pack up the van to start our drive to northwest Ohio. On our way, we stopped at Haley Downs Drive again to try our luck in seeing a Northern Bobwhite. We spent quite a bit of time and some of our group got looks, but the bird took off before we could all get a look. As we were driving out, a male Northern Bobwhite popped out of the grass along the side of the road! We were all very pleased to have close views of this striking species. The rest of the day was spent driving north. We were all excited for our first visit of the trip to the famed Magee Marsh!
May 11 – Magee Marsh, Howard Marsh, Maumee Bay State Park

We had been informed by another birder that Magee didn’t have any birds the day before, or any trees! While I knew that many trees had fallen during a storm a year and a half before (I had seen the damage the previous spring), I highly doubted there were no trees left. It became a running joke with our group, someone would say there are no birds, and then we would see a lot of birds! Anyway, our first walk around Magee brought many new species for our tour. Some of the many highlights included American Woodcock, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, 21 species of warblers including such stunners as Blackburnian and Bay-breasted, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. It was a great morning of birding, but it was time for lunch, and to avoid the crowds that Magee draws each spring.

After lunch at Barnside Creamery, we spent most of the afternoon birding at Howard Marsh. A good diversity of shorebirds and ducks made for a great visit. Lingering waterfowl included Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Horned Grebe, while shorebird highlights consisted of Black-necked Stilt, Black-bellied Plover, large flocks of Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitchers. Our first American Pipits joined the shorebirds on the flats as well. In the late afternoon, we made a stop at Maumee Bay State Park, where the Biggest Week in American Birding festival is headquartered. While we were walking around the vendor area, we got word of a few Ruddy Turnstones on the beach, so as we were leaving, we made a stop to see these beautiful shorebirds. Also, on our way out, were two male Wild Turkeys showing off for a female. It was great fun watching their antics! A great dinner at the Oregon Inn was a perfect way to end the day.
May 12 – Magee Marsh, Ottawa NWR, Metzger Marsh, Howard Marsh

We started the day back at Magee Marsh. It had looked like many birds were migrating overnight, so we were hopeful for some new species and more individuals than the day before. The birding was great, and we added several new species. More Magnolia, Cape May, and Chestnut-sided Warblers had arrived. And we saw a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl. Our only Lincoln’s Sparrow of the trip made a brief appearance too. As we were heading back to the parking lot, we came upon a big group of birders...someone had spotted a roosting Eastern Whip-poor-will. We spent the late morning birding one of the woodlots at Ottawa NWR. The birds were active and there were few other birders around. We enjoyed 20 species of warblers during our visit including our only visual of an Ovenbird and good numbers of Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and Magnolia Warblers. We also saw our first Common Nighthawk of the trip roosting high in a tree. Towards the end of our walk, we came across several thrushes including a Veery that allowed great views. As we were headed back to the parking lot, a male Scarlet Tanager dazzled as it perched low over the trail! After lunch we visited Metzger Marsh and while the woodlot was slow, we did have great looks at Trumpeter Swans and our first American Wigeon and Black Tern of the trip. Since we had missed Yellow-headed Blackbird on our first visit to Howard Marsh, we went back for a second try. We spent some time walking the boardwalk and recorded a good number of shorebirds, many at close range. We had been keeping an eye out for Least Bittern, so when a couple other birders mentioned seeing one just ahead, we quickened our pace. It didn’t take long to spot one and
eventually two as they chased each other around a small patch of cattails! It seemed we were out of luck for the Yellow-headed Blackbirds, but as we got back to the car, there was a female in the lawn! Birding had been great throughout the day, but it was time to head back to town for the night.

May 13 – Ottawa NWR, Maumee Bay SP

We started our morning at Ottawa NWR. 18 species of warblers were detected including our first Mourning Warbler, but we only heard it chip a few times and sing once. We would have to continue trying to catch up with this species. There were many highlights however including a late Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Scarlet Tanager, and some Indigo Buntings. After stopping at the visitor center, we drove the auto loop where we had good looks at Mute and Trumpeter Swans, American White Pelicans, Marsh Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, and Common Yellowthroats. After lunch, we took a break back at the hotel because it was going to be a late night. We had American Woodcocks to watch! We spent some time in the late afternoon and evening birding around Maumee Bay State Park where we saw our only two Lesser Black-backed Gulls of the trip. A flyover Yellow-headed Blackbird was exciting, but it decided not to stop to give us a good view. After dinner, we headed to the spot to watch the woodcocks. We had some time to wait until it was dark enough, but soon enough an American Woodcock appeared. Watching them “peent” and circle high above our heads in a flight display was one of the highlights of the trip!
May 14 – Westwinds Metropark, Oak Openings, Nayanquing Point

This was our last morning we would be spending in northwest Ohio, and we were still missing several species of we were hoping to see in this area. So, our first stop was at Westwinds Metropark where we saw our first target, a Henslow’s Sparrow. It was super cooperative and perched up singing for good photos and scope views. Next up was Oak Openings! At our first stop, we quickly found several Lark Sparrows and also had great looks at Red-headed Woodpeckers, Field Sparrows, and Eastern Towhees. We moved on to a more wooded area to look for warblers and it paid off. A Pine Warbler sang and was seen high in the pines, a Canada Warbler eventually perched out in the open for great views, and a Mourning Warbler made us work for good views, but eventually showed well. Lunch at a nearby Mexican restaurant, Cinco de Mayo, was delicious, and the live music made for a lively lunch. We had a long drive up to Tawas City, so we started driving north. We made a brief stop at Nayanquing Point on the way where we saw our first Gadwall, Northern Pintail, and Green-winged Teals, as well as close views of a pair of Sandhill Cranes. We arrived at our hotel in the early evening and were ready to go see the Kirtland’s Warbler the next morning!
Our first stop of the day was for Kirtland’s Warbler. As we were getting out of the van, we could hear them singing from both sides of the road. We saw one briefly right away, but it took some time until we had good looks at males perched up as they were singing. We spent time enjoying this rare species before moving on to our next destination, Tuttle Marsh. Upon arrival at Tuttle, we heard a bee-bzzz-bzzz-bzzz song, but when we got it in our bins, it looked like a Blue-winged Warbler. This area is full of Blue-winged X Golden-winged Warbler hybrids, and we would see a couple during our time here. After spending some time at Tuttle, we headed for lunch in Oscoda before driving to the shores of Lake Huron. We were looking for a pair of Piping Plovers here, but they were well hidden. It wasn’t until our walk back that we found one individual that was on a nest! As we were watching, some locals had brought out fencing to keep people away from the nest. Hopefully it’s a success! Afterwards, we made a brief stop at the Oscoda airport to look for Upland Sandpipers. None were to be seen, but we did see our only American Kestrel of the trip. As we headed back south towards Tawas City, we stopped at the point to see if any migrants were in. There were a number of migrant passerines around, but the highlights were waterbirds. Long-tailed Ducks, Bonaparte’s Gulls, and a Black Tern all made appearances.
May 16 – Tawas Point State Park, Big Creek Road

Our day started at Tawas Point State Park. There were some birds around as we walked down to the point, but the action really got going when we were at the tip. Hundreds of birds were making their way down the point, with many of them taking off and continuing southwest off the point. Blue Jays, Indigo Buntings, Baltimore Orioles, and American Goldfinches were particularly numerous, but we also had smaller numbers of Eastern Kingbirds, White-crowned Sparrows, Bobolink, Northern Parula, and Yellow Warblers were seen as well. Out over the lake, a Red-throated Loon flew by, and Common and Red-breasted Mergansers were hanging around the point. The birding was great! As we made our way back up the point, we noticed a big increase in songbirds in the woods as well. 20 species of warblers were recorded, and we had our only Clay-colored and Vesper Sparrows. A sleeping porcupine close to the parking lot was also a big highlight! It was hard to leave, but we had to make a drive south to Detroit where we would be staying for the night. On our way, we made one more stop for Golden-winged Warbler. It was the middle of the day, so activity was a little low. Two Brown Creepers were seen soon after we got out of the van, our only ones of the tour. We heard another Golden-winged type song, it turned out to be a Brewster’s Warbler. A little ways down the road, we heard another Golden-winged type song, but this one sounded perfect. It was our Golden-winged! And a great way to end our tour!
Canada Warbler

Red-headed Woodpecker

Veery