

# MANITOBA, MAY 2004

by Rob Adderley

**In May 2004** my wife Sonia and I combined a birding holiday with visiting relatives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The largest urban area in Manitoba, the City of Winnipeg, is built around 2 rivers the Red River and the Assiniboine.

Our plan was to stay with my Aunt and Uncle who live in the leafy suburban Fort Richmond area to the south of the city for the first few days, and then transfer to my Cousin's house on the south side of the city itself close to the huge Assiniboine Park. We also went off on our own for a few days staying in the neighbouring town of Portage La Prairie, ideally placed to explore the Delta Marsh area on the Southern shore of Lake Manitoba.

Meeting my Cousin off the plane on the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> we were a little surprised when she informed us that there was heavy snow forecast for the next day, (Winnipeg has almost permanent snow cover from late Autumn through to early Spring – but not usually in May!).

**The next morning (11<sup>th</sup>)** I was up at first light (Sonia elected to sleep off the jetlag), my Aunt's gardens consisted of a lawned area with a few trees and shrubs. Beyond the back garden was a large short grass field complete with a small lake.

Most importantly there was no snow (the forecasters must have got it wrong I thought, just like Britain). In fact I was just enjoying my first birds, an Orange-crowned and a couple of Yellow-rumped Warblers in the back garden when it started - 25cm of snow fell during the next few hours creating a complete white-out. With drifting as well, the snow was very deep in places (as in above knee level!). As the local TV station reported the heaviest May snowfall in Winnipeg "ever", accompanied by footage of bewildered locals struggling to work in blizzards, our planned itinerary of picking up the hire car and hitting the birding hot spots "out of town" often on rough roads quickly became an unrealistic prospect. Or to put it another way having never driven abroad before on the "wrong" side of the road I bottled it!

However, Winnipeg's reputation as a great migrant area quickly became apparent as we kept the feeders topped up and enjoyed a couple of days of superb garden birding (all from the comfort of the house with a regular supply of coffee and home cooked food!).



Above: White-throated Sparrow



Above: Swainson's Thrush in a complete white-out!

**Two days of garden birding (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>) produced the following garden list.**

American Robin – 2 . Orange-crowned Warbler -1. Yellow-rumped Warbler – 5+. Merlin – 1.

Black and White Warbler – 1. Least Flycatcher – 1. Blue-headed Vireo – 1. Ruby-crowned Kinglet – 2.

Black-capped Chickadee. Baltimore Oriole – 1. Common Grackle – several. American Crow.

Grey-cheeked Thrush – 1. Swainson's Thrush – 5. White-throated Sparrow – 10+. Chipping Sparrow – 4.

White-crowned Sparrow – 3. Lincoln's Sparrow – 1. Clay-coloured Sparrow – 1.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak – 1. Brown-headed Cowbird – several. Harris's Sparrow – 2.

Occasionally we would wrap up and wander down to the bottom of the garden to scan the lake which remained ice free. In addition to the Canada Geese and Mallards we also saw Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal and a couple of Hooded Mergansers on the lake, whilst feeding around the shoreline were Killdeer, Lesser Yellowlegs and Buff-bellied Pipits. The lake even had a Gull roost with 157 Ring-billed Gulls and an American Herring Gull. Small flocks of Franklin's Gulls would come and go but didn't linger.

Both afternoons we ventured a short distance to nearby King's Park (to walk off the caffeine) adding new species for the holiday with Green-winged Teal, Bonaparte's Gull, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, House Wren, Hermit Thrush, a forlorn Tree Swallow, Palm and Nashville Warblers and Song and Savannah Sparrows.



Above: A Killdeer braves the snow on the 11th



Above: A Rose-breasted Grosbeak visits feeders during the snow on the 11th

A bit of a thaw from the trees at least on 12<sup>th</sup> and bright conditions enabled me to take these photos of Clay-coloured, Chipping, Harris's and White-crowned Sparrows.



Above: Clay-coloured Sparrow



Above: Chipping Sparrow



Above: Harris's Sparrow



Above: White-crowned Sparrow

**Day 3 (13<sup>th</sup>) a thaw set in,** we collected the hire car and relocated to my Cousin's house on the south side of the city, a short drive from the huge Assiniboine Park. A small area within the park by the river known as the "English Garden" is recommended in the guide books as a renowned migrant site. Our first visit didn't disappoint with Grey-cheeked, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, White-throated, Lincoln's and Chipping Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers and 3 Ovenbirds. Other species included a Cooper's Hawk, flyover Osprey, Downy Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch and Brown Creeper. Whilst the small lake opposite held 7 Wood Ducks, 2 Lesser Yellowlegs and a Spotted Sandpiper.

**The following day (14<sup>th</sup>)** we finally made it to one of Manitoba's premier birding sites Oak Hammock Marsh, a reserve consisting of 3,500 hectares of marshland and lagoons 30km north of Winnipeg.

To this day OHM is still one of the most impressive sites I've visited laying claim to a large colony of Franklin's Gulls. The lagoons held impressive numbers of Wildfowl with c500 Blue-winged Teals, c200 Black-necked (Eared) Grebes and smaller numbers of Green-winged Teal, Pintail, Lesser Scaup, Redhead, Canvasback and Bufflehead. Waders were represented with Killdeer, American Avocet, Least and White-rumped Sandpipers, Wilson's Snipe, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Hudsonian Godwit, Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semipalmated Plover, and Wilson's Phalarope. We recorded a total of 62 species during our walk around the reserve including our first Western Grebes, also American Bittern, Sora, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush, Swamp, American Tree, Harris's and Vesper Sparrows, Yellow-headed Blackbird and Western Meadowlark.



Above: Ovenbird at Assiniboine Park



Above: Wilsons Phalarope at Oak Hammock Marsh

**On the 15<sup>th</sup>** we visited a site southwest of Winnipeg known as the Fort Whyte Centre Reserve, famed for its feral herd of Bison the reserve is also productive for Wildfowl. A scan of the lagoons produced 120 Lesser Scaup, 9 Redheads, 2 Canvasbacks, 9 Buffleheads and a couple of Hooded Mergansers. The feeding station viewable from the visitors centre proved to be good for Sparrows with Harris's, White-crowned, White-throated, Lincoln's and Clay-coloured recorded. Whilst an Upland Sandpiper by the entrance was a new bird for the holiday.

**From 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>** we went off on our own staying at one of the excellent "Super 8 Motels ( highly recommended if you're travelling anywhere in the US/Canada) in Portage La Prairie. The town makes a good base from which to explore the vast 18,000 hectare Delta Marsh/Beach area on the southern shore of Lake Manitoba.

Over the next 3 days we averaged about 80 species a day , the weather was warm and sunny, and the birding was superb.

Elegant Western Grebes were relatively common here and often afforded excellent views, we also managed to connect with a much rarer Clark's Grebe ( one of two birds in the area). Frequent stops along the gravelled Route 227 Highway produced many interesting species including Eastern Bluebird and Eastern Wood Pewee, whilst a stop off at the local Landfill site provided us with one of our target species California Gull. The grassland areas held Upland Sandpipers, Bobolinks, Western Meadowlarks and we were very fortunate to find and obtain brief on the ground views of a Sprague's Pipit before it towered skyward.

The shore of Lake Manitoba held feeding parties of American White Pelicans together with Caspian, Forster's and American Black Terns, not forgetting the bushes and scrub areas where we enjoyed Yellow, Palm, Tennessee and Blackpoll Warblers, Brown Thrasher, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and another of our target birds Western Kingbird.



Above: Eastern Bluebird by the 227 Highway



Above: Western Meadowlark by the 227 Highway



Above: Clark's Grebe at Delta Marsh





Above: Western Grebe at Delta Marsh



Above: American Bittern at Delta Marsh



Above: American Avocet at Delta Marsh



Above: Yellow-headed Blackbird at Delta Marsh



Above: Western Kingbird at Delta Marsh

**On the 19<sup>th</sup>** prior to leaving Portage La Prairie to return to Winnipeg, we couldn't resist a quick visit to the curiously shaped and aptly named Crescent Lake to the south of the town. A single Slavonian (Horned) Grebe was our only "Slav" of the holiday and brought our Grebe list to 6 with Western, Clark's, Black-necked, Red-necked (at OHM) and Pied-billed (at Delta).

We returned to Winnipeg and with an hour to spare before a family evening meal we visited the English Garden again in Assiniboine Park. Our arrival coincided with a thunderstorm and torrential rain so we sat it out in the car until the storm had passed, however this left us with little more than half an hour Birding time left. On entering the English Garden there had clearly been a fall of migrants and we recorded the following in that half hour of birding, looking back I just wondered what we missed.....

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – 3. Northern Waterthrush – 1. Ovenbird – 2. Yellow Warbler – 3.

Yellow-rumped Warbler – 10+. Tennessee Warbler – c50+. Common Yellowthroat – 1.

Magnolia Warbler – 1. Wilson's Warbler – 1. American Redstart – 3. Mourning Warbler – 1.

Least Flycatcher – c20+. Alder Flycatcher – 6. Eastern Phoebe – 1. Lincoln's Sparrow – 3.

Chipping Sparrow – 4. Dark-eyed Junco – 1. House Wren – 4. Pine Siskin – 1.

Also Swainson's and Grey-cheeked Thrushes, White-throated Sparrows, White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, and a Cooper's Hawk.

**The following morning (20<sup>th</sup>)** we were up early and back in the English Garden. Although most of the previous evening's fall seemed to have moved on we also saw a few different species in the form of single Cape May and Nashville Warblers and 3 Black and White Warblers.

Being our last day we couldn't resist another visit to Oak Hammock Marsh. We initially explored a different area of the reserve but failed to find any LeConte's or Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows (elusive little blighters!), however we did obtain superb views of a Swainson's Hawk plus a couple of Sharp-tailed Grouse and several male Bobolinks in their attractive Spring plumage. Back on the main part of the reserve by the visitor's centre it was immediately apparent that wader numbers had increased from our first visit with additional species in the form of Marbled Godwit, Stilt and Semi-palmated Sandpipers. The rarest bird on the reserve in Manitoba terms was a White-faced Ibis.

**Our 2004 Manitoba holiday** was our second visit to Canada and to a British birder the country appears to hold so many more migrant birds at migration time than we're used to on this side of the pond. We often saw migrants in the most unexpected of places. Walking one day through a large modern shopping precinct in the city centre, I remember the look of bewilderment on my cousin's face, as we hurriedly retrieved our bins from our bags and the several small birds flitting round an ornamental shrub in an open part of the precinct were quickly identified as 5 Yellow-rumped and a Nashville Warbler. Similarly, a couple of days later the single tree in the car park of a café near the city centre held no less than 7 Tennessee Warblers!

We never really stopped birding!

**Finally, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker!** On a holiday in Michigan in 2003 I saw one, well I say I saw one, we were ambling along at the back of our party and my views consisted of little more than a woodpecker in flight. Prior to our arrival in Manitoba I had received regular updates from my Aunt of the YBS in the Maple tree in her garden. During our stay I must have staked out / grilled / glanced at that Maple tree several (hundred) times but it remained "Sapsuckerless". As we passed through security to board the plane on the 21<sup>st</sup> my Aunt shouted "I forgot to mention, guess what's back in the Maple tree this morning?" .....

Until next time!



Above: Willet at Oak Hammock Marsh



Above: Short-billed Dowitchers at Oak Hammock Marsh

**Rob and Sonia Adderley, June 2004**

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