

2017 “Building Better Birders” Class & Cruise

by Kelly J. McKay and Mark Roberts

During the spring season of 2017, the Clinton County Conservation Board (CCCB) Education Staff developed an idea to train better birders and possibly develop a core group of new citizen scientists, by conducting “beginning birder cruises” in the wooded backwaters of the Mississippi River at Rock Creek Park on the Blue Heron pontoon boat. The hope was that participants in this program would get involved in various “citizen science” projects (e.g. Christmas Bird Count, Statewide Spring Bird Count, etc.). The program was funded in-kind by CCCB (\$1,575) along with a grant from the Iowa Ornithologists’ Union (\$750). The cruises were co-led by Mark Roberts (CCCB) who served as a birthing guide and boat pilot, as well as Kelly McKay (BioEco Research and Monitoring Center) who was involved as the primary birthing guide and instructor.



Originally, six cruises were planned during the summer breeding season of 2017, alternating between Saturday and Wednesday mornings (June 10 & 21, July 8 & 19, 5 and August 5 & 16). Eventually, we added two additional cruises during the fall migration season (September 13 & 27). Cruises began shortly after sunrise (6:30-7:00 AM) and lasted anywhere from 2.5 to 5.0 hours, depending on availability of the boat as well as interest from the participants. Furthermore, participants had the option of birding on foot throughout the park with Kelly for an additional hour or two after the cruise.

Overall, 83 people participated on the 8 cruises (slightly over 10 per trip), with a low of 5 participants on Trip 1 (June 10) to a high of 16 participants on Trips 4 and 6 (July 19 and August 16). During these 8 cruises a cumulative total of 105 species were identified, ranging from a low of



47 species (September 27) to a high of 72 species (September 13). This produced an average of nearly 60 species per cruise. Approximately half of the species (52) were observed on 6 or more of the trips, while 28 species were encountered on all 8 cruises. During these birding cruises, 10 species of waterfowl and other waterbirds were reported, along with 6 species each of raptors and shorebirds and all 7 species of woodpeckers (red-headed, pileated, flicker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, red-bellied, hairy and downy) occurring in Iowa. Furthermore, these trips yielded 8 species of flycatchers, 5 species each of vireos, thrushes, and blackbirds, as well as a notable 17 species of warblers. Highlight species encountered in noteworthy abundances included: wood duck, yellow-billed cuckoo, spotted sandpiper, double-crested cormorant, turkey vulture, bald eagle, red-headed woodpecker, pileated woodpecker, eastern wood-pewee, great crested flycatcher, yellow-throated vireo, red-eyed vireo, tree swallow, northern rough-winged swallow, brown creeper, house wren, prothonotary warbler, American redstart and Baltimore oriole.

The whole trip series was fraught with worries. Whenever you schedule a series like this you run the risk of it not attracting a crowd the first couple of outings and now you are stuck following through with the rest of the scheduled events. Luckily we had a small but enthusiastic following from the very start. There were people really interested in birding and becoming better birders. This fueled our whole series and inspired Kelly and myself to continue into the fall and hopefully next year. Of course the biggest fear is over sleeping. It turns out it is far easier to say you will meet at 6 AM at the boat ramp than it is to actually do that when the time comes! Astoundingly, all the trips took off on schedule. Another pesky worry is poor weather hurting your turnout. I must say we had the most spectacular weather for every one of our days. Low wind, sunshine and lots of birds! Lastly, scheduling a birding event with people does not guarantee the birds are going to show up. That was never a problem as you can see from Kelly’s report.

Although we believe this first-time effort at “beginning birder cruises” was a success, illustrated by the fact that several people participated on multiple trips, the definitive proof of success for this program will be demonstrated by the involvement of participants on various “citizen science” programs in the future. We are hopeful that additional years of this program may produce a reliable source of citizen scientists throughout the local area.

We were fortunate enough to have photographer Steve Hagar along on one of our cruises and we took some great photos including the one in this article. See them all at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/132925030@N04/sets/72157685314673923/with/36259318930/>

