

Bird Wing Report

July 2023



Notices and Reminders:



Bird Wing Outing: August's Bird Wing Outing will take place **the evening of Tuesday, August 22.** The August outing, as always, is the Cache Bay outing and it never disappoints. Because of the drive to get there and the fact the evenings get darker sooner, we will **meet at 6:00 sharp in the parking lot by Urban Planet, Northgate Mall.** Last year we watched the Caspian Terns fish, looked through our scopes at Common Terns out in the bay, watched the Osprey family in the ballpark, marvelled at the Common Nighthawks in Sturgeon Falls, and counted a large flock of flying Sandhill Cranes on Levac Road.



Caspian Tern, Renee Levesque

Bird Bash: August's Bird Bash will take place the last **weekend of August, August 26-27.** Last August, we added a Great Egret to our Bird Bash list, a bird seen in Laurier Woods by Cindy Lafleur.

Louise de Kiriline Nature Festival: Be sure to attend the Louise de Kiriline Nature Festival to be held at Laurier Woods the **third Saturday of August, August 19.** I don't know what some of the highlights might be, but I do know our very own Bird Wing member, Linda Stoner, will be there with her book, *Chippy's Family Helping Others*. Linda has been very busy promoting her book – lots of events from Sudbury through to Toronto. Linda's hard work is paying off as sales are going well.

The most enigmatic of birds

In *The Economist* issue of June 10, 2023, there is a book review of Jennifer Ackerman’s book, *What an Owl Knows* entitled “You elegant fowl!” The review begins with a paragraph I wish I had written: “With a face as round as the first letter of its name and a stance as upright as the last – along with human-like features and a haunting cry – the owl has a mystical, mythical perch in the imagination.”

There are 260 species of owls found on every continent except Antarctica. Most of these owls are nocturnal, but not all. However, all have what Jennifer Ackerman calls superpowers. One of these superpowers is that by using sound alone, an owl can find and seize a vole deep under the snow.



Great Gray Owl, Renee Levesque



Barred Owl, Stephen O'Donnell

Throughout the centuries, humans have endowed owls with wisdom and with magical powers, with bringing luck or even with bringing misfortune. We have all read about these powers in mythology, in poetry and in novels. More recently, think of Hedwig the Snowy Owl, Harry Potter’s courier and companion.

Another superpower is an owl’s ability to fly almost silently. I will never forget standing on a deserted road in the early morning when a Barred Owl flew low and silently over my head. It was a thrilling experience and a wonderful sight.

The Economist article ends with a great quote from a woman who lives in Brazil. When she was asked why owls are valued, she said, “Because they enchant the environment.”

From many of us taking part in the Nocturnal Owl Survey, we understand only so well the joy of seeing an owl. Because we often didn't get to hear members tell their Nocturnal Owl Survey tales because there was no meeting in May after the April survey, I initiated the idea of writing their stories that I then compiled into a package for all to read. And to further encourage the writing, I initiated the winning of a trophy – made with the help of Ken Gowing – for the best story and the most owls seen or heard. However, this year, only two teams wrote about their adventures, the team of Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing and the team of Katharine MacLeod, Fred Pinto, Joel and Jérémie Corbeil. Both tales follow this introductory owl article.

The trophy this year will go to Katharine MacLeod's team, with the trophy presentation taking place in September at our Bird Wing meeting.

Congratulations, Katharine and team! And don't think Lori and Ken are left out as winners because they were our very first winners.

This will be the last year I will ask survey participants to write about their owl adventures. However, if participants want to write about them – or for that matter any surveys in which they might participate – they can still send their articles to me and I will include them in the regular Bird Wing Report as opposed to doing a separate owl package. Once the trophy makes its rounds to all members of Katharine's team, it can be retired for the time being now that most participants over the years have been winners, although in reality all who take part on a cold April's night past the bewitching hour are winners.

I was never officially a winner, but taking that long drive to McConnell Lake Road and the long drive back and surveying on a road often still packed with snow and no one around should something truly go bump in the night, I think constitutes a winner. Besides the owl population along that road seemed to have dropped off as the years went by and unless you see or hear an owl, it can be an even longer cold night!



Northern Saw-whet Owl, Gary Chowns



Northern Hawk-owl, Renee Levesque

Here's to Dick Tafel, a silver owl surveyor, who surveyed McConnell Lake Road for 26 years and here's to Gary Sturge whose enthusiastic writing of his nighttime wonders kept me going, encouraging others to get their reports in. He truly was my inspiration.

For those who didn't get an opportunity to read the past entertaining owl survey reports and want to read them, you can find them on the Nipissing Naturalists Club's website under Year End and Owl Survey reports:

<https://www.nipnats.com/club-activities/bird-wing/reports-and-bird-counts/>.

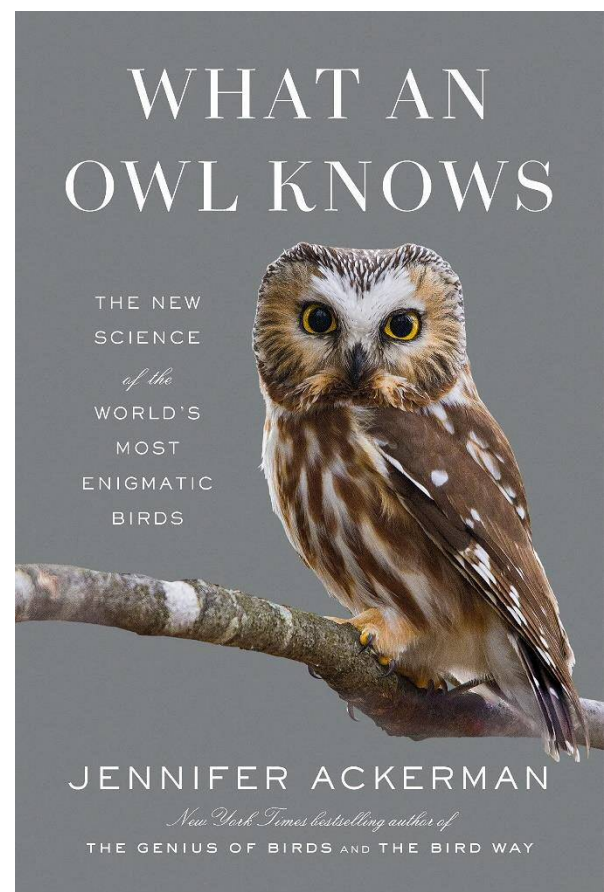
Note: Jennifer Ackerman's book *What an Owl Knows* is available in hardback, Penguin Press, June 2023, for approximately \$40.00.

Jennifer is a great writer. A couple of years or so ago, I wrote about a chapter in her book, *The Bird Way*, a thoroughly entertaining book, nothing dry about it at all. We do have a book review section on our website, so if you want to read about *The Bird Way* or other bird books, see:

<https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-wing-book-reports/>.

Bird book reviews are always welcome, even fictional bird books, like the detective mystery books by Steve Burrows.

- Renee Levesque



Four Barred Owls, some dancing and a shooting star

By Katharine MacLeod

After a week of watching the precipitation and wind forecast, we decided to meet at the MNR building on the evening after the full moon, Thursday, April 6. There were 5 of us - Fred Pinto, Oriana Pokorny, Joel and J r mie Corbeil and myself. It was great to meet Joel and J r mie and have young ears listening for distant owl calls.



Janet Sparks

It was a perfect evening for our Feronia Route.

The star constellations were amazing. We even saw a shooting star, perhaps a good luck sign. By the third stop, the almost full moon rose in the clear evening sky.

In total, we heard four Barred Owls. Our last lonely owl of the night vocalized a lot along with our taped "BARRs." It flew right over us and landed in a nearby tree, offering us an excellent look. I think it was the same owl Dan Kiminski photographed last year.



Oriana Pokorny

Even though the temperature dropped only to minus 4 degrees, we still got quite chilly. However, we kept ourselves warm with hot chocolate and some calisthenics/ dancing.

J r mie, our youngest Bird Wing member, impressed us all with his knowledge and enthusiasm and by hanging in there until the last stop!

Two Barred Owls, an exciting start and a starlit night

*By Lori Anderson with
Ken Gowing*

Choosing the perfect night to survey owls can be a challenge. An ideal evening brings little interference from cars, wind, water noise, frog noise, dog noise and cloud. Sunday, April 9, proved to be ideal in all respects.



Ken Gowing

The drive to the route start point at twilight was exciting. (Graham Lake, Owl Route 42) While navigating the infamous potholes of Chisholm Township, we noticed a Rough-legged Hawk, 3 Racoons, 3 Wilson's Snipes and 10 White-tailed Deer!

Stop #1 is a very quiet place in the woods not far from Genesee Lake. The Boom Box blasted into the clear night air. After the second broadcast, a frantically hopeful Barred Owl swooped in from the woods, perched beside the car, and pleaded so sadly for a friend to join it. Remaining until the end of the survey, it then flew off, disenchanted. During all the serenading, Ken counted 3 American Woodcocks!



Renee Levesque

We heard Canada Geese and more American Woodcocks as we made our way through the next few stops.

Stop 6 is just north of Graham Creek where it exits Graham Lake. Our response to the broadcast here was most unusual. After the recorded Barred Owl call played, a Barred Owl swooped down from the clear night sky without a sound. It perched silently in a small tree nearby, listened to one more recorded call, and then glided quietly away, uninspired by the impostor. On a dull night we would not have even noticed this individual.

We proceeded through the remaining stops and were rewarded with only silence and a lovely starlit night sky.

Seeds and Cones

Fledglings, Juveniles and Immatures: I quite enjoy birding in the latter part of July when the birds have stopped singing. I have to switch from hearing to visual and when it comes down to it, I much prefer visual, maybe because I took up birding later in life without the ears of a young person. Mainly, though, what I like is that my area birds are out with their young and I get to see the fruits of their labour. It has been a long haul for them, but they did it! I am rather devoted to them after weeks of hearing them sing, all in their more or less usual spots, the spots they have been in since I became aware of them during the years of my morning birding strolls in my yard and along the easement and part of the woods at the back of my yard.

For those of you who were at the April meeting, you may recall that Ken Gowing told us about a pair of Eastern Phoebes that were building a nest where he didn't want them to – on a swinging lamp on his garden shed, an area Ken is in and out of daily. But before he could discourage this, the phoebes had their nest built. Ken recently told me they laid two eggs that soon became five. However, although Ken saw four adults hanging around the area, he never saw a phoebe sitting on the nest. Then, a second nest construction began on top of the first nest and again five eggs were laid, but at least this time around, a phoebe was sitting on the nest. Hatching was successful and it seemed fledging was too. Ken being Ken dissected the nest after the birds were fledged and discovered the five eggs in the first nest!



Steve Pitt

I don't think my robins made it like Ken's phoebes. One day the hatchlings were in the nest totally helpless, the next gone. They were way too young to be fledged. The nest was askew and there was trampling on the flowers underneath the nest, built very low in a ninebark bush by my patio. Steve's photo of his robin hatchlings is above.

An immature Red-eyed Vireo that I managed to capture graces the cover of this month's Bird Wing Report. A few years back, I also took a photo of a Red-eye that had just fledged, but I wasn't able to find that photo. Had it not been with its parent, I would not have known it was a Red-eye.

White-throated Sparrow: I received emails from a couple of members somewhat disconcerted by the description of a White-throated Sparrow as nondescript in the article "The sparrow with four sexes" in June's Bird Wing Report.

The White-throated Sparrow is one of my favourite sparrows. Its song for me is somewhat heart-wrenching. When we lived in Hamilton, right in the city, I would sometimes hear the White-throat sing and long for the north, not necessarily for North Bay, but for the wilds of Algoma where I grew up and where we camped for a decade in the 90s.

I also received an email from a member, not about the White-throat, but about the colour indigo that I wrote about in last month's "Seeds and Cones". She sent me a photo of the indigo milk cap, an edible mushroom found in Eastern North America, East Asia and Central America. Check it out online.



Lifer: While I am on the topic of sparrows, Sue Gratton, whose article on the birds of Cozumel is in this report, recently saw what birders call a lifer, a bird seen for the first time. Sure she saw plenty of lifers on her trips to Cozumel and to Scotland this year, but there is nothing like getting a lifer almost in your own backyard. Well, not in her backyard, but close enough to her South River home, on the famed Peacock Road. Not a Black-backed or a Spruce Grouse which I bet she was hoping for, but a Lincoln's Sparrow! (Photo of one in my backyard at left.)

Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP): In the spring 2023 edition of *Touching Down*, FLAP's newsletter, there is an article about the growing number of volunteers that have rescued a bird, written a social media post, made a donation or contributed to wildlife conservation as we in Bird Wing do yearly. This includes homeowners, apartment and condo dwellers, businesses, corporate and institutional buildings, and many others who have made their windows bird

friendly. Still, in 2022, over 4,000 dead birds were found in the Greater Toronto Area and those were only the ones found and gathered by volunteers. Although we are doing so much more than in the past, we can't afford to let our guard down.

Hotspots: If you want to find the birding hotspots in Ontario, go to birdinghotspots.org/CA/Ontario. You can also contribute to any of the hotspots with which you are familiar by adding photos or information such as restrictions, washroom availability, accessibility features, description of the area, birds that might be seen, trail information and other general information. I added some information on Cache Bay, considered an Important Birding Area.



Kim Stevenson

Keys to the City: Not many of us will ever receive keys to a city, but that is just what Bev Kingdon did on July 1 when she received the key to the City of Burlington from its mayor for her much appreciated work with Trumpeter Swans these many decades – and what a beautiful key it is! Congratulations, Bev. Well-deserved.

- *Renee Levesque*

Cozumel offers great birding!

By Sue Gratton; photos by Elvis Jiménez unless indicated otherwise

Over the last two winters, my husband Darcy and I visited Cozumel, Mexico, for some sunshine to combat the February blahs. We first chose Cozumel for our getaway simply by Googling “Caribbean snorkeling”. Although we did enjoy the snorkeling, I was bewitched by the beauty and plenitude of the bird life. As it turned out, I spent more time looking through my binoculars than my snorkeling mask!

About Cozumel

Cozumel is a small island in the Caribbean Sea, lying close to the mainland of Mexico just off the east coast. It is roughly 50 km long and 15 km wide. There is a bike path around the island that cyclists easily cover in a day. We stayed on the west side of the island where it is sheltered and tropical. The east side is wavy and rough – it looks more like the Atlantic and there is almost no development.

Cozumel is actually named after its birds. It means “Land of Swallows” in Mayan. We didn’t see any swallows (at least I didn’t identify any), but we did see plenty of Vaux’s Swifts.

Geologically, the island is flat. The climate is dry with stable temperatures in the high 20s throughout the year. At the north and south tips of the island are lagoon systems and mangroves. The southern tip, known as the Punta Sur Ecological Park, is a protected strip of shoreline with huge lagoons and spectacular shorebirds, such as the Northern Jacana whose photo is at right.

I didn’t know this at the time, but Cozumel enjoys relatively high biodiversity. There are 338 recognized bird species – almost 60% of the species found in the

Yucatan Peninsula overall. This is a bit surprising since the island is classified as “oceanic”. It formed from an underwater volcano and was never linked to the mainland. Therefore, the island is ecologically insular, and several endemic species have evolved, including three endemic bird species. All to say that Cozumel offers great birding!



First Cozumel Visit

Our first trip to Cozumel in 2022 was one of those fortuitous, snap decisions. We had not planned to fly during the pandemic, but then came a particularly harsh cold snap in January and I impulsively booked a flight leaving six days later.

At the time, I was a new birder and unprepared for the rich bird life around our resort. It felt like May in South River. There were warblers galore and other species I recognized from up north, as well as some new species I found by downloading the Bird Pack for Mexico on eBird. (For more information on Bird Packs see: <https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/bird-packs/>.)

That first year, my favourite was a Cape May Warbler perched in a palm tree just off our balcony. The previous summer I had a Cape May Warbler perched off my balcony in South River, but in a giant spruce tree. I like to think it was the same one.



Sue Gratton

As for Caribbean species, Brown Pelicans (at left) commuted daily along the shoreline, flying north in the morning and south at sunset. Great-tailed Grackles were everywhere, drinking from the pool and calling loudly for attention. Tropical Mockingbirds were also habituated to resort life, singing an array of songs much as our Northern Mockingbirds do. Bananaquits and Yellow-faced Grassquits foraged for seeds and fallen fruit on the lawns.

I was sending Renee almost daily emails with pictures for her ID assistance. She patiently answered each one, helping me to identify Indigo Buntings, Summer Tanagers, Hooded Orioles, and Palm Warblers, among others.

Guided Birding with Elvis

When we decided to go back to Cozumel in February of this year, I was determined to do some serious birding. I convinced my family to hire local naturalist, Elvis Jiménez, for a five-hour birding tour around the island.



Elvis, who runs his own business, Gala Naturaleza Photography, proved to be a great choice since he is a committed birder himself, not merely a tour guide. He is doing a “Big Year” in Mexico this year and is birding throughout the mainland as well. At the time of writing (June), he has 135 species in the Cozumel region on eBird. (Photo of Elvis with Sue and family at left.)

If ever you are travelling, I recommend a birding guide. Elvis knew just where to look so it was very efficient. He had a spotting scope and used a laser pointer which cast a small, neon green dot beside the bird in question. I’m not sure if this is ethical, but the birds didn’t seem to mind.

Elvis picked us up at our condo building at 8 am. Once the predictable Elvis-themed jokes were out of the way (“Elvis is in the building!”), we were on our way.

During our five hours, we saw 57 species. It was sometimes hard to know where to look, there were so many birds. I took hundreds of pictures with my inadequate camera, but have only a few worth sharing. Elvis agreed to allow me to use his photos for my presentation and for this report.

Cozumel Endemic Bird Species

Of the three species endemic to Cozumel, we saw two of them, the Cozumel Emerald Hummingbird and the Cozumel Vireo.

The Cozumel Emerald Hummingbird is a variant of another Emerald subspecies. It is common on the Island and relatively easy to spot. It is a tiny hummingbird like our Ruby-throated. Elvis’s picture at right features the male with his long-forked tail held partly open.



Cozumel also has the Green-breasted Mango, another species of hummingbird, but a larger one, double the size of the Ruby-throated. We saw many of these as well.

The other endemic species, the Cozumel Vireo, is also common on the island, but it is difficult to see because it likes to skulk in thick brush. However, with Elvis's help, see it we did! Photo at right.

In all, we saw four different species of Vireo, including the Yucatan Vireo – endemic to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico – the Rufous-browed Peppershrike, and the White-eyed Vireo which we get in southern Ontario.

The Cozumel and Yucatan vireos are similar to the vireos we get here in Ontario. The Cozumel vireo is in the eye-ringed group of vireos like our Blue-headed Vireo, while the Yucatan vireo is in the olivaceous group like our Red-eyed Vireo. The Peppershrike is a separate genus, ranging from Mexico south to Argentina.



Other Endemic Species and Subspecies

In addition to the Yucatan vireo, we also saw some other species endemic to the Yucatan Peninsula. This included the Yucatan Woodpecker which I must mention given our Bird Wing meeting this past March when we watched the PBS documentary, *Woodpeckers, The Hole Story*. As we learned from that documentary, there are 233 species of woodpeckers in several different genera.

The Yucatan Woodpecker reminded me of the Red-bellied Woodpecker that I frequently see in Toronto. Sure enough, it is in the same genus – *Melanerpes*. This genus also includes the

Lewis's Woodpecker that took up residence on Manitoulin Island earlier this year.

A subspecies endemic to Cozumel is the Cozumel Yellow Warbler. It is unique with a rufous crown and so often called the Golden Warbler. This lovely warbler is pictured at left.



Elvis Jiménez
Gala Naturaleza

Similarly, there are local variations of Bananaquits and Yellow-faced Grassquits, although I confess these subtleties were lost on me. The Bananaquits are roughly the same size as warblers and also favour yellow, but they can be distinguished from warblers by their sharp beak which curves downwards.

We had a good look at a Western Spindalis, which is a bit of an anomaly on Cozumel since it is found on many Caribbean Islands but not on the Mexican mainland.

(A confusing sidebar on classification: The Bananaquit, Yellow-faced Grassquits and Western Spindalis are listed in *The Sibley Guide to Birds* as types of Tanager. And the Scarlet Tanager is listed as a type of Cardinal. I still have a lot to figure out here.)

Exotic Flycatchers

We also saw five species of flycatchers. Apparently flycatchers are the most diverse family of birds worldwide. The Tropical Kingbird, a slightly bigger kingbird than our Eastern Kingbird, was common. It has a soft grey head and back and a lovely tropical yellow belly. It frequents telephone wires like our Eastern and has great posture. Photo of one is at left.



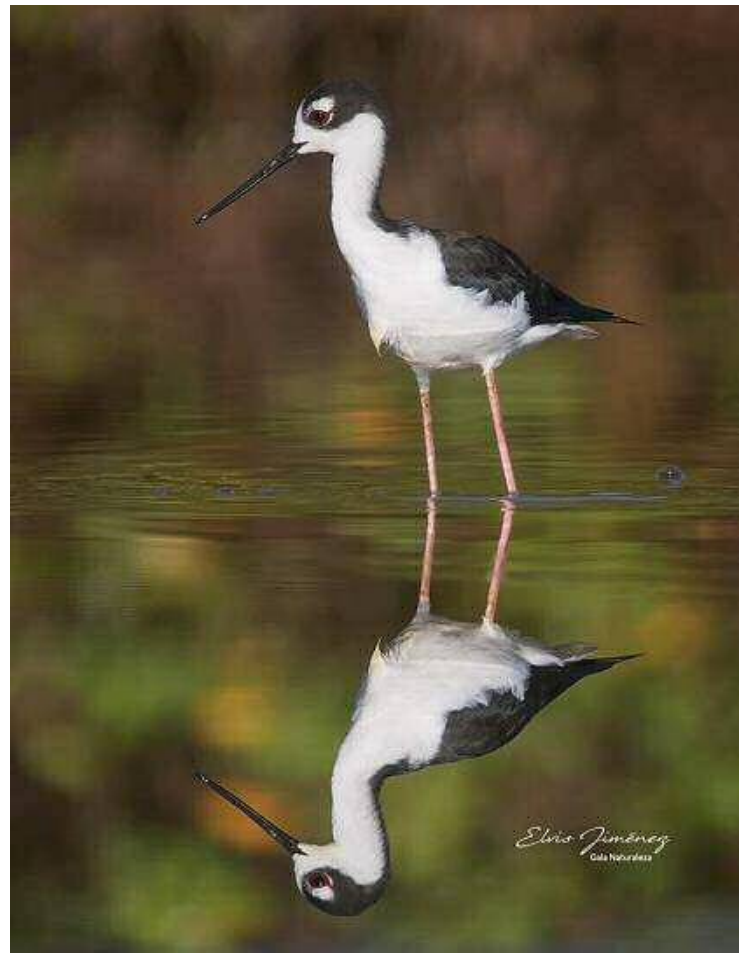
Sue Gratton

We also got glimpses of the Caribbean Elaenia, Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet which despite their exotic-sounding names are rather drab. The Great Kiskadee, on the other hand, is a flashy bird with a bright yellow belly, thick black eye mask, and a distinctive call from which it derives its name. (In 2018, the Great Kiskadee was a prominent visitor in Rondeau Provincial Park on Lake Erie. It stayed for some time with many birders flocking to see it.)

Shorebirds

There were a few shorebirds which I found particularly interesting. The Northern Jacana (photo near heading) is a marsh bird with outrageously long toes, allowing it to walk on floating vegetation. For this reason, these jacanas are apparently called “Jesus birds” in Jamaica.

I thought the Black-necked Stilt (photo at right) was especially elegant. This bird is apparently not supposed to range as far north as Ontario, but there are several sightings on eBird for southern Ontario. (From the Government of Canada website: The



Elvis Jiménez
Gala Naturaleza

Black-necked Stilt was first observed breeding in Canada in 1977; it has since bred in several provinces. Sightings of non-breeders have also become more numerous, and are spread from coast to coast. The cause of this range expansion is not entirely understood.)

We saw an adult and a juvenile Little Blue Heron which we also get in Southern Ontario. The adult looked like I expected, but the juvenile was completely white and can be difficult to distinguish from a Snowy Egret.

Summary

Here is a list of the 57 species of birds we saw in 5 hours, roughly grouped by family:

Least Grebe	Spotted Sandpiper	Caribbean Elaenia	Gray Catbird	Western Spindalis
Brown Pelican	Ruddy Turnstone	Yellow-bellied Elaenia	Black Catbird	Morelet's Seedeater
Magn't Frigatebird	Wilson's Snipe	Great Kiskadee	Tropical Mockingbird	Bananaquit
Great Egret	Northern Jacana	Tropical Kingbird	-----	Yellow-faced
Snowy Egret	-----	Northern Beardless	Cedar Waxwing	Grassquit
Tricoloured Heron	Ruddy Ground Dove	Tyrannulet	-----	-----
Little Blue Heron	Eurasian Collared Dove	-----	Tennessee Warbler	Orange Oriole
-----	Common Ground Dove	Yucatán vireo	Golden warbler	Hooded Oriole
Turkey Vulture	White-winged Dove	White-eyed vireo	Northern Parula	-----
Black Vulture	White-crowned Pigeon	Cozumel vireo	American Redstart	Great-tailed Grackle
-----	Groove-billed Ani	Rufous-browed	Palm Warbler	-----
Blue winged teal	-----	Peppershrike	Yellow-throated	Lesser Goldfinch
-----	Green-breasted Mango	-----	Warbler	
Common Gallinule	Cozumel Emerald	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Magnolia Warbler	
-----	-----		Yellow-rumped	
Wilson's Plover	Yucatán woodpecker		Warbler	
Black-bellied Plover				
Black-necked Stilt				

Of all the birds we saw, the most exciting for Elvis was the Cedar Waxwing. Perhaps a bit ironic since it is so common here. Most of the birds we saw are common in Cozumel, but the Cedar Waxwing is a bit less so.

I learned a tremendous amount in one day and, along with the research I have done for the purpose of this report, it has taken my birding to the next level.

I will close by observing that guided birding is an intense and exciting introduction to birds of different environments. Still, nothing beats the stillness of our northern forests; the sighting of a single Boreal Chickadee at the feeder on a crisp, cold morning in January; and, finally, after a long winter, the cacophony of warbler songs in May. I guess this might be called "slow birding" but no matter, it remains my first love.