

New York City, August/September 2007

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New York City, metropolis extraordinaire, not perhaps the first place that springs to mind when planning a birding trip! However, amongst the towering blocks and a population that packs in at 25,000 persons per square kilometre, the city has two major saving graces, stunning locations that offer just fantastic birding - Central Park in the heart of Manhattan and Jamaica Bay out beyond JFK airport. It was to these that I decided to focus my short break, a week of excellent birding in the ultimate of urban jungles, the third most populous urban area in the world.

Timing of the trip was crucial to its success - lying on the East Coast flyway, the city falls on a major migration route and, in an otherwise virtual sea of concrete, the 330 hectares of Central Park and almost 4000 hectares of Jamaica Bay act as crucial stopovers for tens of thousands of birds. Jamaica Bay, famed especially for its waders, is at its best from late August to early September, whilst Central Park sees the annual warbler migration commencing from late August and building up to a peak about a month later.

Visiting the city from 27th August to 2nd September 2007, the idea had been to capture the best of both worlds, the height of the wader movements and the start of the warblers. By the end of the week, I think I had achieved my goal, 140 species recorded, all to the backdrop of arguably one of the world's most stunning city skylines. In short, my itinerary was as follows: Central Park on the 27th, 28th and 30th August, plus the 2nd September; Jamaica Bay on the 29th and 31st August; and an excursion into Connecticut on the 1st September.

CENTRAL PARK

At the heart of Manhattan, Central Park is an oasis of greenery. Running more or less north to south, the park offers a mosaic of habitats from manicured lawns through to mature woodland with dense understorey. The most productive areas are typically those better vegetated, less disturbed and with running water - without doubt, the single best area is The Ramble, a tangle of paths winding through mature woodland with many vantage points overlooking streams, pools and canopy edges.

Day One - 27th August! It's a pretty amazing world when you can have your morning tea in Eastern Europe, breakfast in Brussels and be walking down central Manhattan for lunch! Emerging from the subway into Manhattan was certainly an assault on the senses - trying not to look too much like a tourist, it was difficult to not just stand in awe - buildings towering off up into the sky, constant hooting and police sirens, street hawkers, the smell of food wafting everywhere! However, for all the million and half people that seemed to be emerging from every direction, there was not a bird to be seen, bar a few scrawny feral pigeons! Soon that would change though - after dumping my bag in the hotel, I crossed 8th Avenue and onto Broadway and then ambled down to Central Park. Jeepers, a million and a half people there too, probably something to do with the sun and high temperatures! Central Park is huge though, so plenty of space to find the quiet corners favoured by birds. I hurried on through the masses, trying not to get knocked down by speeding bicycles as I stopped to gawk at my first American Robins and Grey Catbirds, just about the two most common birds in the park. And then I got to 'The Ramble', an area of 40 odd hectares of fantastic habitat, few people and rather more birds. By now, what with time differences, I confess to becoming rather jaded, but soon the first jewels were on show, perking me back to life - all early migrants, I was soon looking at a very nice Black and White Warbler, a female Magnolia Warbler, a male Common Yellowthroat and four American Redstarts, not a bad start for what was essentially a lazy afternoon stroll. One Ruby-throated Hummingbird appeared, but also disappeared in almost the same instant, leaving me with just impressions of a little buzzing type thing. Actually loads more birds too, Mourning Doves and Cardinals all over the place, a Northern Flicker on a lawn, both Least and Spotted Sandpipers on The Lake and a Blue-headed Vireo on the edge of the Ramble. By evening, as my legs became a little weary, I left the relative tranquility of the park, re-entered Broadway and walked up to Time Square ...and for the second time was left in awe! Gordon Bennett, a million and a half more people with a million and a half lightbulbs flashing up and down, carpeting every building in sight! Even the police

department had big flashy lights going pink and blue along the side of their building! Day Two - 28th August My first full day in New York, so I spent virtually the whole of the day in Central Park, entering before 7.00 a.m., a good way if nothing else to see American Robins by the hundred - every grassland had dozens of them hopping about and just about every thicket had a half dozen more! Pretty much the same with Grey Catbirds, two a penny and not in the least bit timid! Also fairly common, but none the less impressive, Northern Flickers, Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Downy Woodpeckers were all found without too much trouble. For this day, I stuck almost entirely to the Ramble, about half way up the park and full of separate little birding areas. Plenty of New York birders in there too, all real friendly, but they kept saying how quiet it was! I guess it is all relative - as they spoke, the bush we were looking at had one Chestnut-sided Warbler flitting through it, an American Redstart in and out and a Yellow Warbler popping out from the top! And up above, a Great Crested Flycatcher hawked from an overhead branch and a Blue Jay bathed just adjacent! Now that is the style of 'quiet' that I like! I notched up just over 40 species during the day, about half being new for me! No less than nine warbler species, including a couple more Black and White Warblers, several Common Yellowthroats, a stunning Blue-winged Warbler, an equally stunning Magnolia Warbler and two Prairie Warblers, plus one Northern Waterthrush scurrying along a lakeside as I sat and watched a Ruby-throated Hummingbird flit from flower to flower just a metre or so from my head. Top spots visited during the day included The Maintenance Field (very good in the early morning), Willow Rock (a fine spot overlooking an overgrown bay) and Azalea Pond (particularly productive during the heat of the day). What more? One Pied-billed Grebe dodging model boats on a little boating lake just east of the Ramble, a big Northern Goshawk flushing a Solitary Sandpiper and three Least Sandpipers from an area of The Lake they had drained and, I guess an everyday sighting for locals, but weird for me, a Red-tailed Hawk soaring to the backdrop of skyscrapers! Also managed two Wood Thrushes during the day and three Veeries, both Least and Alder Flycatchers, a few Song Sparrows in the evening and several Northern Orioles. Plus all the non-bird attractions - turtles of various descriptions in the pools, Grey Squirrels by the dozen and stunning Monarch butterflies fluttering through every few minutes. All in all, an amazing collection for a city park!

Day Three - 30th August Another day in the park, but a day with a difference, I was to meet Luke Tillar, a British birder based just north of New York. He kindly had agreed to meet up for a day's birding and he would show me some of the other riches of the park. Of course, me being me, I almost fluffed the meeting! In my defence, my watch had stopped and I got terribly distracted by bumping into a fantastic Ovenbird at the beginning of the Ramble, simply a brilliant bird! A few moments later, at almost the same spot, there were two Northern Waterthrushes to further waylay me and, sure enough, I had now completely lost track of the time! As I ambled on towards the agreed meeting place, I was sure I still had time to while away a few minutes at Willow Rock, a very nice spot where I had seen a Ruby-throated Hummingbird the day before. All very pleasant I was thinking when a birder stopped to ask if I had seen much ...hmm, a bit of an English accent there I could detect, so I ventured 'Are you Luke?' Indeed it was, though my watch still said 7.10, his said 8.15! His was right, I was very late! However, apologies over, we got on with the business - birding the park! There then followed very many kilometres up and down the the length of the park, exploring the Ramble I already knew fairly well, along with the northern regions of the park, most notably the North Woods and adjacent areas. Locals again said migrant numbers were on the low side, maybe they were, but still plenty to keep me happy - a small fall of Red-eyed Vireos, two Black and White Warblers, a Chestnut-sided Warbler, a bunch of American Redstarts, quite a few Canada Warblers and a couple of Common Yellowthroats, plus my first White-breasted Nuthatch. I think Luke wanted me to work harder for the birds as when we made the tactical decision to return for a coffee, he walked us in a massive loop ending up at exactly the same spot in the far north of the park. I swear he added a dozen kilometres to the route, perhaps to avenge my lateness in the morning! I had to forgive him though, as the Northern Woods had already produced Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Phoebe, American Goldfinch and a couple of other new birds for me!

Eventually we got back for a much needed coffee, then headed out for an afternoon session a little less hard on the legs - mostly we sat on a bench in a rather good spot just adjacent to the Azalea Pond watching what was turning up - another Canada Warbler, a stunning male Black-throated Blue Warbler, a Wood Thrush just nearby and a Veery too. Just as we decided it was time to leave, one White-throated Sparrow also appeared, hopping along the path in front of us. T'was a good day, but I did have darn sore feet as a result!

Day Four - 2nd September One last day in Central Park, but a day with a real buzz. Winds had become light northerlies and, with the change, an air of excitement in the park ...migrants would be moving and a good day was near guaranteed. And it was, even New York birders were saying so! Not long after sunrise, stood at the Maintenance Field, I was in the thick of my first flock of the day - Red-eyed Vireos and mixed warblers flitting everywhere! Amongst the most frequent were Blue-winged Warblers, Common Yellowthroats and American Redstarts, plus the Red-eyed Vireos, but dig a little deeper and there were some superb little gems moving through - a Magnolia Warbler, a Tennessee Warbler and, possible bird of the trip, a stunning Worm-eating Warbler, the latter appearing in a tree just metres away, pure magic. Then there was a sudden punctuation in the action - a Red-tailed Hawk dropped down and snatched a Brown Rat! It then proceeded to dismember and consume the unfortunate victim right in front of us! This event did not terribly impress the local bird fauna - virtually every American Robin and Grey Catbird on the block, along with a Northern Oriole and various warblers, sat and scolded the hawk through the entire process! Even a Ruby-throated Hummingbird took a look for a while, before thinking better of it and returning to nearby flowers! Just about at this time, a female Mourning Warbler also decided to put in an appearance. As the sun rose and the day became hotter, this fairly open area became quiet, so I walked across to Willow Rock, bumping into several Veery on route. Once there, the action got going again - a Rose-breasted Grosbeak within minutes of getting there, a party of five Bay-breasted Warblers low in the willows and two Ruby-

throated Hummingbirds buzzing the flowers. Also more American Redstarts and Common Yellowthroats, a Philadelphia Vireo to add to the Red-eyed Vireos and a Northern Waterthrush creeping about on a boggy bit of ground. Also strolled over to the nearby model boat pool for another look at the Pied-billed Grebe then reluctantly looked at my watch - it was 2.00 p.m. and time to leave the park. And that was that. By early evening, I would be on one of the planes thundering out over Jamaica Bay, gulls underneath and skies ahead, Europe just hours ahead.

JAMAICA BAY All within the limits of New York City, Jamaica Bay is an internationally renowned wetland encompassing 3700 hectares of open bay, saltmarsh and assorted fresh and brackish pools. For the birder, it is the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge that is of primary interest - sitting just south-west of JFK International Airport, the reserve comprises two large freshwater pools, separated by the the so-called gardens, a strip of woodland and scrub that is frequently rich in passerine migrants. **Day One - 29th August** The day started with an amble through the 'deserted' Manhattan streets at 6.00 a.m. to catch the subway out to Jamaica Bay. When talking about Manhattan, of course, the term deserted is relative - still plenty of people about to barge with my tripod, cafes and restaurants open to hurry by, forgetting I really did want a morning coffee. Forty minutes later and I emerged from the subway into a paradise! What a fantastic place and such a contrast to Manhattan - virtually devoid of humans, but absolutely teeming with birds! I started off in the gardens (which I quickly discovered are not gardens, but very dense bush-forest growths). Already bored of lugging a telescope and tripod, I slung them in a bush and began my search for migrants and resident specialities - soon I was to encounter Cedar Waxwings by the dozen, both White-eyed Vireo and Red-eyed Vireos and mixed warbler flocks consisting mostly of Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats, but with the odd Black and White Warbler thrown in too. On the paths, Northern Waterthrushes hopped up from beneath my feet and, quite super, a flock of Brown Thrashers put on a very good show, flitting back and fro across the path and rooting about in the sandy soils. Overhead, one Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Chimney Swift appeared and, nesting on an electricity post, an Osprey sat staring down at me. Other new birds for the day included Red-winged Blackbirds and a roost of Yellow-crowned Night Herons and Snowy Egrets. It was already shaping up to be a good day!

By now it was about 10 a.m. and I wandered back towards the entrance where a reserve centre is located ...thoughts of morning coffee and breakfast! Oh shucks, got there to find commercialisation had yet to reach this little corner of New York, not even a little cafe! Now I began to regret hurrying past all those little coffee shops in Manhattan some hours earlier - it was going to be a long hot day without my mandatory coffee top-ups!

What to do? Retrieved my scope from the bush and headed out to the West Pool, a large freshwater pool with a trail all the way round - several Great Blue Herons, one Little Blue Heron, a few Great White Egrets and Snowy Egrets and one Green Heron, they all helped me to almost forget the coffee disappointment. Then some more Yellow-crowned Night Herons (but still no Black-crowned), a variety of gulls and the first waders of the day - a Semi-palmated Plover, several Short-billed Dowitchers and Greater Yellowlegs mostly.

Now was getting hot, so returned to the shade of the so-called gardens, added a Downy Woodpecker and Solitary Vireo to the list of morning birds and then decided it was time to hit the East Pool. This long freshwater pool is harder to view, but much richer in waders ...I decided to take the trail that loops around the south, wellies advised I had been told, but those were for softies I thought. By the end of the day, I was the proud owner of a very nice pair of mudflat-black gungy shoes and jeans that reek of intertidal mud! Still it was worth it, I had a very nice time sitting and scanning all the waders - both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, dozens of Short-billed Dowitchers, oodles of Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Least Sandpipers, a good scattering of Western Sandpipers and a few Stilt Sandpipers too. Plus Spotted Sandpipers, Semi-palmated Plovers, American Oystercatchers and a few others. On the way back, a stunning and close Great Blue Heron and I did think about going to the north end of the East Pool, where Wilson's Phalaropes had been reported, but I was far too lazy, so with that and a few more nice birds - Boat-tailed Grackle, Black-crowned Night Herons - I staggered back to the subway station, found a shop a block further up, quenched my thirst and then headed back to central Manhattan. **Day Two - 31st August** Back to Jamaica Bay. I'd had a good day earlier in the week, but I had barely scratched the surface ...arguably the best bit, the north end of the East Pool I had not even visited! Dawn started well enough, Rufous-sided Towhee got the day going in good style, as did a Wood Duck several American Wigeon, a few Blue-winged Teals and oodles of other waterbirds, but I had desires to get over to the East Pool, so I hiked off in that direction and got there to find it was going to be one muddy day, the 'path' was cleverly designed to take you straight through quicksand, stinky black gunk and green slimy stuff. Now I had no wish to subject my shoes to such treatment for the second time, so I deposited them in the reeds and continued bare foot. I waded out into the soft mud of the lagoon - and seconds later was face to face with a Red-necked Phalarope, a very good bird for these parts. Paddled out a bit and squatted down in the shallow waters and waited - moments later, the phalarope was feeding right round me, so too a dozen or so Least Sandpipers and a few Semi-palmated Sandpipers. With a few photographs taken, I then continued my way, sloshing further up the lagoon to a spit that I could see was crawling with waders, gulls and terns. Here I hoped to see my target, the Wilson's Phalaropes that had been reported earlier in the week. Waders at Jamaica Bay are amazing for their tameness, barely batting an eyelid however close you are ...and so it was here, I slowly walked out, put a plastic bag in the mud and sat upon it to watch the spectacle unfold before me. Hundreds of waders lay paddled in front of me, many

just metres away. And there, right near the front were two of the Wilson's Phalaropes, magical birds running, stalking and prodding for prey. Not fussed that I was in their midst, they soon danced the muds very close, allowing me many a good photo. Hundreds more Semi-palmated Sandpipers provided the backdrop, with a good number of Western Sandpipers waiting to be picked out. Semi-palmated Plovers were even tamer, some venturing within two metres on occasion. Also here a good hundred or so Short-billed Dowitchers, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs in large numbers, stacks of Grey Plovers, two Hudsonian Godwits and a Willet. It must have been a good few hours I sat there transfixed, barely ever even using binoculars, the birds were so close. Hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls and Laughing Gulls, Forster's Terns and Common Terns added to the general mix. A young Peregrine also enjoyed the birds, though I think his intentions were somewhat different to mine!

Eventually I decided it was time to leave ...the plastic bag that I was sitting on was slowly filling with mud! Back I wondered to the Red-necked Phalarope and there I found the other two Wilson's Phalaropes! All of them daintily feeding the shallow water together!

Another fine day in New York City was coming to an end, but first I returned to the West Pool for some more photography, one little snake, one Merlin and Cedar Waxwings coming to drink.

CONNECTICUT An excursion out of New York, taking the train north for an hour to the State of Connecticut. Not part of my original plans, this fantastic day owed its origins to the very kind invitation of Luke, an offer to see the local birding hotspots of his area. And what a good way to spend the first day of September, enjoying the company of Belted Kingfishers, Piping Plovers and American Kestrels amongst others! Arriving at the station at 8.00 a.m., I was soon whisked off to begin the day's birding. First stop, a couple of small wooded areas near West Port to look for migrants, but bar a very good, but very brief Yellow-breasted Chat Warbler, little was moving, just a Black and White Warbler and a couple of American Redstarts. So we moved on. Next up was a hike in the wooded hills near Easton, our goal being an open ridge, home to hopefully many nice species. It was a fantastic couple of hours - dozens of Tufted Titmice and Black-capped Chickadees in the forest, plus Scarlet Tanagers and Wood Thrushes, then a feast of species on the ridge. Initially it had seemed quite quiet up there, but then suddenly someone turned the bird tap on! A flock of at least seven American Kestrels appeared, including an absolute corker of a male, plus a half dozen Turkey Vultures and a whole bunch of different sparrows and allies. First Savannah Sparrow and a few Bobolinks, then Chipping Sparrows and Indigo Buntings, then a few Field Sparrows to round them off! A Cooper's Hawk also flew over at this stage and an Eastern Phoebe flitted along the fence posts. Aside birds, the ridge was excellent for butterflies too - in addition to various sulphurs and fritillaries, there were some right bundles of colour on the wing! As everywhere during the week, Monarchs were common, mostly drifting south, but here were a couple of new species too - both Eastern Tiger Swallowtail and Black Swallowtail, stunners both! Next up was a quick stop at a nearby reservoir, a very picturesque spot, but moreover the location of my only Belted Kingfisher of the trip, a real stunner of a bird, a female. An Osprey also hovered overhead and five Wood Ducks lurked in the backwaters. Then I made a mistake! I walked all of ten metres back to the car to change lenses on my camera and then could hear Luke grunting something, so back I walked to find he'd been saying a Common Nighthawk was flying over! I didn't see it and, just as I thought what unlucky timing that had been, he exclaimed 'Bald Eagle!' A distant spot in the sky he said, but the bugger (eagle not Luke) disappeared behind a ridge before I understood which spot in the sky we were referring to, so I didn't see that either!!! Humph, but onward we marched, the next stop on the grand Connecticut tour was the coast ...and I was in for more treats there! First a small reserve near Milford, an excellent little place that provided me with not only crippling views of a Piping Plover, but also a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, another Osprey, a Northern Harrier and a very obliging Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Also very satisfying was to sit on the beach and sift through the numerous Semi-palmated Sandpipers (and Least Sandpipers) to pick out Western Sandpipers. We found twelve, a very good number for this locality. Then, via a bit of suburbia, we arrived in the Stratford area for our last few stops of the day. Quickly found Wild Turkeys and Killdeers on the edge of an industrial area Willet (and Western Willet) on a nearby mudflat, Brown-headed Cowbirds on a road junction and Seaside Sparrows and Marsh Wrens appropriately enough in a seaside marsh! As dusk fell, a few Northern Harriers quartered the saltmarsh beyond, a Yellow-rumped Warbler flitted up and we then headed for the station! After a very good day, notching up over 70 species, I got back to New York City at about 10 p.m., totally satisfied and much in debt to Luke, many thanks.