

Ohio and Michigan

10–20 May 2015

Participants

Stuart Davies
Adam Denyer
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Paul Murfitt
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John and Angela Watts

Leader James P. Smith



Mourning Warbler (Ray Grace)

Day 1 It's always fun, before an unaccompanied flight, to walk around Heathrow Airport trying to spot people who might be on your trip. Yellow luggage tags notwithstanding, you can usually spot birders from half a mile away unless they're travelling in civvies, and my hunch about John and Angela being part of the team turned out to be correct when we met up with most of the group members at the gate. It was sad to discover at this point that, due to family illness, Paul's wife Sue would not be able to join us on the tour. I hope we can meet at the Bird Fair at some point Sue; it would have been lovely to have had you with us. After an uneventful direct flight we arrived in Detroit to meet up with James and collect the two vans for our two-hour drive to Port Clinton in Ohio. We had one hairy moment when Ray and I lost sight of James's van at a toll machine, but luckily we took the right road at a fork and ended up on the way to Port Clinton and not heading into Indiana or somewhere – could have been an interesting ten days and a somewhat different trip report! As is usual at the very start of any tour, the bird list wasn't particularly gripping (although you wouldn't see too many of these back home): Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, Ring-billed Gull and Canada Goose were all picked up from the vans and we added crippling views of House Sparrow with nest material at a rest stop, but today was always going to be more about travelling than birding – the fun wouldn't commence in earnest until the morning. After a long day in transit, at 9pm we arrived at our base for the next six nights, America's Best Value Inn in Port Clinton – a nice little spot with a marina behind our rooms and a nesting Peregrine in a tower several blocks away out front. With a forecast for hot temperatures and possible thunderstorms the following afternoon, we went to bed cautiously hopeful that the weather would bring us some migrants.

Day 2 In what became something of a ritual for the next few mornings, several of us met up in reception at about 6.20 for coffee, orange juice and a Danish pastry while scrutinising the weather forecast for the area. It looked like we were in for a scorcher today, and that turned out to be the case with temperatures hitting about 84 °F (roughly 29 °C). A few more birds were added to the trip list before we clambered into the van – Common Starling, Great Blue Heron (which could be seen flying to and fro over the motel regularly), Herring Gull, Barn Swallow, Chimney Swift and, just for Stuart, Mallard! Our first, brief, stop this morning was to pick

up lunch provisions at Wild Wings – a little shop with a café attached that’s used by the local fishermen. Having stocked up, Steve, Ray and I wandered around out back and found our first Killdeer of the trip along a little channel. A local lady informed us that the big blue dumpster was a great place to spot Black-crowned Night-heron, so we duly checked it out, but there was nothing there this morning. We did, however, pick up our first American Robins of the trip hopping around on the grass. For our first real birding port of call this morning we swam against the tide a bit and stopped in at East Beach at Magee while we watched the streams of traffic heading down to the boardwalk car park. Stepping out of the van, we spotted a few more Killdeers running around on the grass, one with a chick. As we headed towards the beach, some of us were lucky enough to see a beautiful black butterfly with iridescent blue hindwings, which Stuart later identified as a Pipevine Swallowtail. We set off into the little copse just before the beach and picked up our first of scores of stunning Yellow Warblers – the commonest warbler of the trip by far. Also here we found our first Grey Catbirds of the trip – another common bird on most days. Out on the beach among the saplings we picked up White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows scrabbling around on the ground and our first Palm Warbler, pumping its tail as it flitted from one stem to another at anywhere between ankle and waist level, while slightly farther away in the taller trees at the back of the beach we had our first couple of American Goldfinches and Northern Cardinals and overhead wheeled dozens of Barn and Tree Swallows. We also had several high-flying migrating flocks of Blue Jays – I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many at one time as on this trip. After a relatively calm introduction, there was nothing for it but to join the masses heading for the boardwalk. Trundling through the marsh down to the car park we heard our first Common Yellowthroats of the trip, had numerous sightings of Great Egret and our first small party of Trumpeter Swans and had to dodge the family parties of Canada Geese crossing the road in front of us, while the car park itself was, as usual, full of glorious Baltimore Orioles. It was also surprisingly full of Amish families in their traditional costumes – the sight of the black ankle socks was almost too much for Stuart! Venturing onto the east end of the boardwalk trail, just about the first bird we came across was a stunning male Cape May Warbler and there must have been at least three of them in the same tree. Also in that tree we then found a Nashville Warbler and from then on the warbler list really began to take off. The commonest after Yellow Warbler were Magnolia and Bay-breasted Warblers (it astonishes me to think that before this trip I’d seen just one of the latter!), but we also added smaller numbers of American Redstart, Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped and Canada Warblers and a single Northern Parula, just after which we had a lovely sighting of a Tree Swallow flying into a nest hole in a tree just above our heads. A little farther along the boardwalk we came across the first of many huddles of people obviously watching something. It turned out to be a grey-morph Eastern Screech-owl trying to disguise itself against the bark of the tree it was sitting in – a great spot by whoever found it. After watching this obliging bird for a little while, rumours started to filter through of a Black-billed Cuckoo just around the next corner. As Paul and I both needed this, we set off at pace, to be met by another fairly large crowd struggling to get to grips with tricky directions. The bird was distant and partially hidden and it turned out to be something of a jigsaw tick – bit of head, bit of tail, bit of body when it moved! But we did see the bill clearly and it was definitely all dark. Other birds spotted on the boardwalk this morning included Red-eyed and Warbling Vireos, Veery and Grey-cheeked Thrush, Scarlet Tanager, a very brief view of Mourning Warbler (seen only by Paul at this stage I seem to remember) and a couple of Northern Waterthrushes, again only seen by some members of the group. After a wonderful morning’s birding that would happily have filled a whole day, we had still only just arrived at lunchtime! We briefly checked out the roped-off areas in the car park in the hope of finding an American Woodcock, and then, having found nothing, we wandered out onto the beach to claim a suitable log and sat in the sunshine alternating between nibbling and doing a leisurely ‘seawatch’ (technically a lake watch I suppose). A flock of about ten or so Double-crested Cormorants flew past and we had both immature and adult Bald Eagles circling the area. Lunch over, we reluctantly pulled ourselves away from the boardwalk and set off for Metzger Marsh for a change of scenery and species. As we pulled over into the layby, an American lady pointed us in the direction of a flock of American Golden-plovers and we set up the ‘scopes to take a look. Alongside them, we also picked up Black-bellied (Grey) Plover, a small group of Caspian Terns, numerous Common Terns and good numbers of Dunlin. Other sightings whilst here included another Bald Eagle flying along the channel behind us, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Pied-billed Grebe, Greater Yellowlegs, a Peregrine spooking the wader and tern flock, Least Sandpiper and a single flyby Northern Mockingbird. After another reasonable tally, we sauntered through Metzger woodlot and out towards the fishing

pier. Here we had great views of a perched-up Northern Rough-winged Swallow, a raft of Ruddy Duck off the end of the pier and a comical and slightly bizarre view of a Great Blue Heron plonking itself, feet first, into the water and emerging with a huge fish speared on its bill. Not too far out of our way, James found a great little supermarket (Jack's) so that we could stock up on some much-sought-after fruit and a few more nibbles before we headed back to Magee for another assault on the boardwalk. We just about had time to park the van, bump into and have a quick chat with an old friend of Birdfinders, Martyn Kenefick, and find out that a female Cerulean Warbler had been seen on the boardwalk recently before hordes of birders started to rush back to their cars and flee. True to the weather forecast we'd seen at breakfast, somebody in passing told us that a 2-minute severe storm warning had been issued. Hardy Brits that we are (or is that just daft Brits?) we decided to brave it for a while, so we set off to the west end of the trail this time. The good news was that we pretty much had the boardwalk to ourselves for once; the bad news was that the birds weren't quite as crazy as us and many had obviously hunkered down. We'd hardly gone any distance at all before the rain started in earnest and we hot-footed it back to the van (the first of a couple of wet T-shirt moments on this trip!). It was a bit of an abrupt end to the day's birding, but we headed back to the hotel for showers feeling very content with our first day's efforts. By the time we'd freshened up and changed for dinner, the weather gods were smiling on us again and the rain had stopped. We headed off on foot down the main street towards a place called Rosie's on what turned out, quite fortuitously, to be steak night. A great meal was had by all and in something of a rarity on this trip, I don't think we had a single mix-up with the orders or the bills! (Bizarre but true Steve-Wright-style factoid: current Feral Pigeon count stands at 0!)

Day 3 Yesterday had perhaps tricked us into thinking that this trip was going to be gloriously hot, but this morning we had a bit of a rude awakening! After sweltering on the boardwalk the previous afternoon, the temperature today would never get above 55 °F (just under 13 °C) and we spent much of the day shivering and trying to find extra layers. After the now traditional coffee and danish in reception and the equally traditional stop at Wild Wings, during which we day-ticked Martyn Kenefick and began to wonder whether these Black-crowned Night-herons were a bit of a myth – nothing again today – we set off for our first birding stop of the day, the West Beach at Magee. We spent some time watching and photographing Common and Forster's Terns plunge diving off the end of a long groyne before turning off and heading up onto the estuary trail, which I guess is what the Americans would call a levee – a long, narrowish bank between two wet areas, edged with willow and other spindly trees and bushes. Relatively close by on the track in front of us we had a Mourning Dove, while a bit farther ahead James spotted our first Muskrat. Eastern Kingbirds perched up in the willows, and as we walked along we had some truly fantastic views of Prothonotary Warblers singing their little hearts out. The first, typically skulky Wilson's Warbler of the trip put in an appearance in a tangled thicket on our right, as did our first Tennessee Warbler and we had good views of Red-eyed Vireo and House Wren. Frustratingly, we kept hearing Common Yellowthroats, but they remained out of sight for now. On the way back to the van James picked up one of only two Orange-crowned Warblers seen on the trip and we watched the bird for some time, valiantly fighting our urge to rush over to the nearby Traveling Chef for a much-needed warming coffee! The boardwalk beckoned. Having dried out after yesterday's rain, the crowds were back but the birds put on another good show for us. The screech-owl from yesterday was still sitting in roughly the same spot today but there were seemingly a lot more Warbling Vireos around today, together with our first sighting of Philadelphia Vireo – which was constantly on the move and proved a nightmare to try and photograph on any of the days we saw this species. We also spotted our first Black-throated Green Warbler of the trip today, together with further sightings of American Redstart, Northern Parula and Cape May, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue and Yellow-rumped Warblers. The option was there to have lunch on the beach again today, but in the end we were so chilly that we wimped out and ate in the van! After a quick portaloos stop and another '*Chatus Kenefickii*', we decided to follow his recommendation in the afternoon and head for a place called Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, where his party had earlier seen both Red-bellied and Red-headed Woodpeckers. Having dipped on the Traveling Chef's coffee on the estuary trail earlier, we caught up with him again on a lawn here just as we arrived, and this time we couldn't resist joining the (rather long) queue. Sadly, by the time poor Angela reached the front they'd run out and had to make a fresh batch – we did begin to wonder at one stage whether they were growing the beans first! However, we had some nice Purple Martins in a traditional white nest box while we were waiting. Suitably warmed up, we

set off to try and find Martyn's 'zig-zag trail' through the woods. A few new species were added to the trip list as we wandered along – Wood Ducks on nest boxes, Eastern Wood-pewee, a couple of Great Crested Flycatchers high in the treetops, Eastern Phoebe, the first Black-capped Chickadee of the trip sitting very quietly on a branch at shoulder level as we walked past and our first beautiful Blue-grey Gnatcatchers. As we headed farther in, we hit a nice little patch that held Red-bellied Woodpecker, some of our better views of Indigo Bunting, White-breasted Nuthatch and, on either side of the track, a Veery and a Swainson's Thrush. Our last stop today was different again. A Hudsonian Godwit had been reported on the local hotline and we decided it was worth a shot. We pulled up in the car park of Meinke Marina and scanned the field opposite. At first our efforts only produced a handful of Killdeers and Semipalmated Plovers on a wet patch to the left and some Lesser Yellowlegs and a couple of (not very solitary) Solitary Sandpipers towards the trees on the right. It was only when we got some further info from a local that we realised the Godwit was around a corner from our angle. Moving to the far end of the car park, we finally picked it out in the scopes, together with one or other of the dowitchers (unidentifiable at that sort of range and without calling). Also here, Richard amazingly managed to pick out a distant Black Tern flying over a building out on the marina. For dinner tonight we were intending to try the restaurant over the road from the one last night, although James had his reservations having been unable to get in with a group on a previous trip. Sure enough, as we approached, another biggish group of birders emerged, having been turned away because the restaurant couldn't accommodate such a big party. We resorted to Plan B – the sister restaurant to Rosie's, 1812. Steak night may have been and gone, but we still ate well.

Day 4 On another very chilly day that called for multiple layers, we finally connected with the night-herons on the dumpster at Wild Wings. First one, then two of them sat on the top, for the most part virtually motionless, while a Great Blue Heron also tried to get in on the 'action'. We called in at East Beach again this morning, where the star of the show was undoubtedly our first Brown Thrasher of the trip. At first we spent some time just watching it, before we realised that it had a nest in a nearby bush. Retreating a bit to give it some space, we watched as the bird returned to brood, at which point we had some great bins and 'scope views straight into its eye! And so, inevitably, we were drawn back to the boardwalk. As we drove around the car park trying, and failing on this occasion, to find an empty space near to the loos, we spotted a huddle of people in between a couple of parked cars. Thinking that it might turn out to be our much-hoped-for American Woodcock, we parked the van and set off to investigate. It wasn't a woodcock (which sadly never did materialise except in the form of four abandoned eggs); it was something possibly even more bizarre and unexpected – a single, hunched-up Northern Bobwhite. The poor thing sat there, looking exhausted and probably decidedly cold as camera shutters went off all around it – you couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for it. We took our pictures and headed for the boardwalk entrance just as the rangers were coming along, presumably to rope off the area. The boardwalk itself today turned up our first sighting of a Common Yellowthroat, our first Swamp Sparrow and two or three more Philadelphia Vireos along with the usual myriad of stunning warblers. A little better prepared for the cold today, some of us decided to brave lunch on the beach again, and it turned up a couple of birds new for the trip. First up was a single Lesser Scaup out on the water and then Stuart picked up a Ruddy Turnstone over near a groyne to our right. Walking back to the van, Paul, Adam and Richard saw a couple of Northern Flickers disappearing into a nest hole, so we spent a few minutes watching the hole in the hope that they might come out again, but they weren't playing ball and the rest of us would have to wait until a little later in the trip to catch up. Our destination this afternoon was Pearson Metropark – a lovely, well-kept space with some grassy areas, trees and a viewing room with a huge glass wall looking out onto several feeders and a little rockery with a pool and running water. After our first ground-level sightings of Blue Jay for the trip on leaving the car park and brief views of a White-breasted Nuthatch flying away from the feeder area as we peered through a hole in the gate, we set off to explore one of the wooded areas. Eastern Wood-pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Black-capped Chickadee, House Wren and Great Crested Flycatcher were all seen again here and, no sooner had I mentioned that I quite fancied seeing Tufted Titmouse for the first time in years than James heard one and called it in. Thanks James! A wander through some of the paved areas of the park turned up yet another Grey-cheeked Thrush – we did incredibly well for this species on the trip – and I spotted a female Hooded Warbler hunkered down in the undergrowth. To end the visit (or maybe just to warm up a bit to be honest), we headed into the viewing room to check out the feeders. It was great to get up close and personal with a whole host of species

here. I was delighted that Ray finally got some decent views of Blue Jay instead of the flyover sightings he'd had to date, and we also had great views of male and female Northern Cardinal, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, really close Chipping Sparrows, Downy, Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and several Eastern Chipmunks and Fox Squirrels taking advantage of some free food and drink. Speaking of food and drink (although sadly not of the free kind), our evening meal tonight was grabbed in the café part of Wild Wings on the way home. After a cold day, the warming bowls of chilli went down well, as, apparently, did Adam's Walleye sandwich! (Feral Pigeon count still, unbelievably, standing at 0. Are these things extinct in Ohio?)

Day 5 Thankfully, this morning marked another turning point in the weather. After two really cold days, today started a little chilly but warmed up nicely as the day went on, which was particularly good news, since our first targets were some grassland species. Our first, brief stop was at a place called Stange Road, where we scanned unsuccessfully for Upland Sandpiper. The second stop on Kraus Road was also a potential Upland site; again we dipped on any sandpipers but we did have some great views of American Pipit and several Horned Larks. The third stop of the morning was the biggie – Grimm Prairie to try for the much-sought-after Henslow's Sparrow. After passing, with some bemusement, a person scrubbing down the huge but totally blank sign, we walked out along the track for some way before we started to pick up much in the way of bird activity. An Eastern Meadowlark sang from the top of a nest box, and James and I heard a Bobolink singing somewhere, but we never did see one here. A handful of Savannah Sparrows showed reasonably well, but our main quarry was playing hard to get until, suddenly, we came to a corner of the track and stopped en masse as we heard one. Then, in one of those spellbinding times in birding when you think that finding one of these can't be this straightforward, the bird started creeping up a grass stem some way in front of us, singing constantly. He was always a little distant for good photographs and the wind blowing the grass around didn't help, but he gave us a wonderful show – circling between two or three different perches and claiming his patch with gusto. As we were engrossed in watching the Henslow's, suddenly James picked up a Lapland Longspur calling as it flew over our heads. I would dearly love to have reported that we had crippling views of it and that it was in breeding plumage, but sadly it was one of those overhead flyby jobs that we never did see – you can't win 'em all! After deciding that Grimm Prairie thankfully wasn't quite so grim, for the rest of the morning we returned to Metzger Marsh, this time from a different angle. We walked out along a long embankment, where we picked up another distant godwit – this time a single Marbled. Also here we had the usual complement of Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Caspian Terns, Common Terns and some magnificent Red-winged Blackbirds flashing their red wings as they flew towards us. This was also where we had our only group of American Coots on the trip. We picked up lunch today from a Subway. Here, I discovered that they now sell salads as well as sandwiches (result!) and Richard discovered that root beer is, well, an acquired taste which not many people seem to acquire (not quite such a result!). We sat and ate at our next port of call – Maumee Bay State Park, where we started out at a bunch of picnic tables under a rather dark shelter and gradually migrated to sitting on the grass out in the sunshine. While here we had a flyover Osprey and watched a handful of Cliff Swallows coming down to the large pond/small lake in front of us. Lunch over, we headed towards the visitor centre, where a guy outside gave James a tip-off about a Kentucky Warbler that had been showing really well just off the boardwalk. Needless to say, we set off with a bit of a spring in our step. This boardwalk was through far more open habitat than that at Magee – there were some fallen trees and bits of dead branches, but nothing like the same amount of vegetation. It was also far less busy with birders and for good stretches we almost seemed to have the place to ourselves. On our way to the spot indicated by our friendly local, we came across a stunning pair of Eastern Screech-owls – one grey-morph bird poking its head out of a nest box and a dazzling red-morph bird sitting out on a branch. We watched them for a little while, cursing the red-morph bird for constantly looking away from us, before setting off again on the Kentucky quest. Sure enough, as we reached the designated area, almost straight away Stuart spotted the bird darting under the boardwalk in front of us. We then spent some considerable time watching this stunning little warbler flit from one fallen branch to another right out in the open and helping a lovely and very grateful American lady to life tick the bird. With the prolonged views we had, it had to be right up there as one of the birds of the trip. In the same area we had another thrush-fest, with Grey-cheeked, Swainson's and Wood Thrushes together with Veery all showing well. Sauntering farther along the boardwalk, we spotted a Raccoon and had some nice views of White-tailed Deer as well as repeat sightings of many birds

already seen on the trip. A Northern Harrier was seen by some of the group during a loo stop, while the rest of us had some nice views of Indigo Bunting and Common Yellowthroat. This place was, in fact, by far and away the best location on the trip for sightings of the latter – as we headed along the boardwalk towards a lookout tower in the middle of a reedbed with the hope of finding a bittern of some sort (sadly not to be), we had numerous good views of male Common Yellowthroats sitting out in the open before disappearing again. Just around the corner from the lookout tower, a tangle of fallen logs gave some a fleeting glimpse of a Field Sparrow while an American woman had us all excited for a while by claiming, ‘There’s a bluebird out there.’ It turned out to be a Barn Swallow! Sometimes you don’t know whether to laugh or cry! After a thoroughly enjoyable day’s birding, we decided to check out Martyn Kenefick’s recommended Mexican restaurant on the other side of Port Clinton tonight. The food was good although the decibel levels meant that we postponed the log until we got back to the hotel. Many thanks to Paul here for the use of his room and much respect for managing to keep it so tidy – after five days here, ours more closely resembled a bomb site!

Day 6 And so we arrived at our final full day in Port Clinton, and we couldn’t really spend it anywhere else but at Magee. The boardwalk undoubtedly saved the best until last for us and walking it today felt special. The species diversity was up and the number of birds within arm’s reach just off the boardwalk was breathtaking – I will remember today fondly for a very long time. During our two trips today – one in the morning and one in the afternoon when we walked from one end to the other at Paul’s request – we added two distant Olive-sided Flycatchers, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and White-eyed Vireo to the trip list. Non-birding highlights included two Blanding’s Turtles (an endangered species) and a Painted Turtle. Various members of the group also had both Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoos and the grey Eastern Screech-owl from a few days ago was seen again. We had stunning views of a male Bay-breasted Warbler that we could have reached out and picked up, and had to bite our lips when an American guy standing next to us called it as a Magnolia Warbler! (I know what you’re thinking – the polite version goes something like ‘Huh?’) Comically, we encountered the same guy a little later on describing a White-crowned Sparrow as ‘looking a lot like a Fox Sparrow.’ (Sometimes there just isn’t a polite version!) Among the 19 warbler species seen on the boardwalk today, we had gloriously close views of Blackburnian Warblers and real Magnolia Warblers (the ones without the bay breasts), a huge number of American Redstarts and, the pièce de resistance, slowly but surely everybody in the group began to connect with one of the star birds of the marsh – Mourning Warbler. There were at least three or four at different points on the boardwalk and I’m not sure that we all had great views of the same bird, but I think and hope that by the end of the day we’d all had great views of at least one. At this stage, certainly for me and Paul, and I suspect maybe for everybody else in the group, this was the bird of the trip. In between the two visits to the boardwalk, we spent the latter half of the morning at West Beach followed by the estuary trail. There were a couple of highlights from the West Beach this morning – a lovely Prairie Warbler working its way through the saplings and coming close enough to photograph and, in what we originally dismissed as a flock of Ruddy Duck on the water, Richard picked out a single Bufflehead. In addition to the usual glorious Prothonotary Warblers, the estuary trail gave us both Blue-headed and Yellow-throated Vireos and a bit of a sparrow-fest, with a mixed flock of White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows feeding on the track in front of us, several Song Sparrows, a Savannah Sparrow and a Lincoln’s Sparrow. First stop after lunch was Meinke Marina again – the scene of our Hudsonian Godwit a few days ago. We didn’t see it again today but, in addition to the Killdeers, Semipalmated Plovers, Dunlin, Least and Spotted Sandpipers, we did have our best views of numerous Cliff Swallows coming into a wet area on the left of the field. After our triumphant last walk along the boardwalk in its entirety, it was time to bid our farewells to Magee. We had seen a total of 27 species of warbler by this stage of the trip, and more were beckoning as we headed into Michigan tomorrow on the next part of the adventure. Our last meal in Port Clinton was, fittingly, back where we began at 1812, and tonight we were serenaded by a guy with a guitar as we ate – anyone would think they knew we were leaving! Thankfully, we dodged the rain that came down heavily at one point while we were eating – it had stopped again by the time we headed back to Paul’s room for a second consecutive night to do the log. (And still the line for Feral Pigeon remained blank!)

Day 7 This morning it was time to say our goodbyes to Port Clinton, dust off the second van and head into Michigan. Stuart and Paul kindly joined me and Ray in ‘business class’, where we had several snatches of singalong for as long as each radio station lasted (they seem to have a particular penchant for Robert Palmer’s

Bad Case of Lovin' You in these parts). At some stage on the drive, and I have no idea whether we were still in Ohio or in Michigan at the time (but it could have drastic implications for the Ohio population if we'd already crossed into Michigan!), we finally broke our duck on Feral Pigeon, seeing about 20 or so sitting on a bridge across the road. Also from the vans today James spotted a single Sandhill Crane standing in a field and we had an enormous Snapping Turtle sitting in the middle of the road – I have a sneaky feeling a car might have come off worse! Our first stop en route to Grayling was Waterloo Recreation Area, where the first thing we heard on arrival was a singing Blue-winged Warbler, which we failed, at this point, to track down. The second thing we heard was the booming voices of two ladies on horseback heading our way and sounding for all the world like they were armed with megaphones. We headed into the wood and hoped that they would choose a different route – our prayers were answered. Virtually the first thing we picked up as we started to scan was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, quickly followed by another chasing it, and then a third bird! Next up was a new bird for the trip and another nice sighting – a male Eastern Towhee, quickly joined by a female. Heading farther into the wood, we picked up a Broad-winged Hawk sitting quietly in a tree, and one of the more visible Ovenbirds of the tour put in an appearance. Hooded Warblers were singing all around us, but they were remarkably high in the trees and never did really come down for us. As we hit the deepest part of the wood, we started to hear one of our target birds – the beautiful and increasingly rare Cerulean Warbler. They were very high in the treetops for the most part, but I managed to pick one out for a short while before we moved on a little way and had about three birds singing around us. To add to the excitement (if you can ever describe an empid as exciting), we also had good views of two or three Acadian Flycatchers in this area. With some good stuff under our belts we headed back to the vans to try again for the Blue-winged Warbler. We heard it again, but the first thing we saw was a manic Pileated Woodpecker that flew around us several times over, never really landing for more than a minute before he was off again. As we were watching his antics, someone picked out a warbler on a horizontal tree trunk ahead of us – it was the Blue-winged! A bit like the Pileated, it never really settled for very long and was constantly on the move, but we grabbed such views as he was prepared to give us before leaving him in peace. To celebrate, we had brunch at Denny's – the first opportunity for bacon and eggs/pancakes of the trip. And very welcome it was too. The afternoon was taken up primarily with more driving, but we had one further stop before arriving at our overnight destination. Houghton Lake Rest Area was a Pine Warbler site, but this time as we arrived, instead of the horse-riders, we had to contend with a man walking up and down with a noisy leaf-blowing machine! Eventually, he wandered off and we headed into the decidedly insect-ridden pines to try for the warbler. We walked up and down for some time, with much slapping of arms and necks, without seeing anything other than our first Common Raven of the trip. However, as we crossed the car parking area, our luck changed. First of all we finally connected with Pine Warbler, bringing our tally of warbler species for the trip to 30, and then we had stunning close-up views of a Red-breasted Nuthatch that didn't seem to want to leave us alone. After a successful day's birding, we finally arrived at Motel 72 in Grayling. This was a lovely, quiet little motel (with tea and coffee stuff in the room for anybody thinking of doing the trip), although our evening meal in the Ole Barn next door that night was, well, something of an experience! The atmosphere of the place was great, but the service left a lot to be desired: Paul's replacement pizza arrived just as everybody else was ready to pay; Stuart never did get his side salad because it was given to somebody else by mistake; and Richard almost got a free meal when his 'change' turned out to be the amount he'd paid! We did get some grovelling apologies from the owner, and I guess these are the daft anecdotes you reminisce about in years to come...but perhaps it's not too surprising that the place appeared to be up for sale.

Day 8 After a fleeting stop in Grayling, it was time to move on again. This morning we repacked the vans and set off towards our final destination of the trip – Tawas City – but not before James delivered the somewhat gutting news that a singing Connecticut Warbler had been found on the estuary trail back in Ohio the previous day – just one day too late for us! (Surprisingly, the air did not turn as blue as it might have done at this point – I guess there always has to be some reason to come back.). Birds picked up on the drive today included our first party of about half a dozen Wild Turkeys and a flyover Broad-winged Hawk. Our first major stop, at which we spent a thoroughly enjoyable whole morning, was Huron National Forest for a bird high on everyone's wishlists – Kirtland's Warbler. And as wishlist birds go, this was not one for keeping us in suspense – almost as soon as we stepped out of the vans, James heard one singing and I picked out our first, somewhat distant bird over the road in a rusty-leaved oak sapling. As we wandered around, we soon began to spot them all over the place,

throwing their heads back and singing for all they were worth. For the most part they kept their distance and rarely came too close, but the bins views were great and some of the 'scope views were truly magnificent. In a couple of different spots on the roads within the forest, we also picked up a distant Brown Thrasher, heard-only Hermit Thrushes and Field Sparrow and nice views of Clay-colored Sparrow, while I nearly gave myself a coronary by snatching a brief, side-on view of a yellow bird with a grey hood and a full white eyering! I didn't see the individual bird again, but very soon afterwards we heard and saw Nashville Warbler and, with more than a tinge of disappointment, I metaphorically came back down to Earth with a crashing thud (a bit of a dry run for flaking out for real on the flight home). Ah, the power of suggestion...and wishful thinking! In a particularly good little spot we had our best views of Kirtland's – one beautiful male perching very briefly within good camera range for Stuart to get what looked on screen like the perfect shot (hope it came out as well as it looked in the field Stuart). We also had a party of Eastern Bluebirds, a couple of Northern Flickers and flyby sightings of Brewer's Blackbird and our first Red-headed Woodpecker. With the warbler list now standing at a record-matching 31 species, we headed off for another celebratory brunch at the AuSable River Restaurant. It was here that we realised we had some unwelcome extra members of the group, with first James, then Stuart removing ticks. (Invaluable tip: don't take a loo break in Huron if you can avoid it – probably especially if you're female!). Suitably refreshed, we began the afternoon's birding with a meander along a lovely little track in the Mio farmlands, where we were surrounded by the calls of Eastern Meadowlarks, had our first flock of Cedar Waxwings and some stunning views of displaying Bobolink. Our other port of call en route to Tawas was a small reserve that, according to the large sign at the entrance, held Ruffed Grouse. This being something of a bogey bird for me, and it seems for Paul too, we set off, to use one of Ray's phrases, 'all anticipatory'. The first birds we found along the track were a couple of Ovenbirds, which gave us the best views of this species we'd had on the trip. As we rounded a corner, however, we came upon a scene of utter devastation – I have no idea whether it was man-made or natural, but it looked like a tornado had ripped through the place, with a huge swathe of fallen trees strewn out as far as we could see. Undeterred, we ploughed on and came across first one, then a pair of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers chasing through the remaining trees. The saddest sight here was that of a beautiful, but fatally-injured or sick male Scarlet Tanager sitting quietly on the ground waiting to meet his maker. It was quite heartbreaking to think he'd flown all that way for it all to end like this. I really hope that human beings felling trees wasn't the direct cause of his plight. (In other sad news, Ruffed Grouse is another bird that remains mythical!). After some further uneventful driving, we arrived at our final motel of the trip – the Bay Inn in Tawas City. This was another lovely little place to stay, with good facilities, more extensive breakfast options in reception and birding opportunities around the edge of the car park. As James checked us in, we duly had a good scan, although there was little around today. Several whole minutes later, after dumping the cases in our rooms, we were raring to go again, this time to what was meant to be our final birding destination of the day – Tawas Point State Park. En route, as we passed the lake, we saw our only Redhead of the trip sitting on the shoreline with a couple of Common Mergansers. As we arrived at Tawas, the birders certainly seemed to be happy, with one guy saying he'd been going there for years and had never seen it as good – always a statement that gladdens your heart! There was certainly some juicy stuff about; you almost didn't know which way to go for the best. Early finds were a couple of Canada Warblers in the car park, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole and Ruby-throated Hummingbird coming into the feeders at the entrance, three Blue-headed Vireos in the same bush, three gloriously-bright Blackburnian Warblers in the same tree and some more of our old friends from Magee – Tennessee Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, American Redstart, Black-throated Green Warbler, Northern Parula, Bay-breasted Warbler and Chestnut-sided Warbler. As we headed round another track in pursuit of James's tree laden with Indigo Buntings and Scarlet Tanagers, which, sadly, had thinned out considerably by the time we arrived, we also picked up the first Orchard Orioles of the trip in a big conifer. Just as we were getting going, fate intervened. First, James received a tip-off from his friend Scott that a Snowy Owl had been showing in the area and then, walking along the track, he picked up a large white feather with black spots! We held a brief group huddle to decide whether to risk leaving it until the morning or whether to drop everything and go for it now...sorry Tawas, but it was a bit of a no-brainer! Literally a few minutes later we were back in the van and on our way to the disused Wurtsmith Airforce Base. Extraordinarily (would this ever happen in the UK?), there were no padlocked gates, no 'Keep Out' signs, security guards, razor wire or anything to prevent us from driving in. We drove around the perimeter road as per the instructions and almost came to a screeching halt as Richard, from the back of the van, spotted a very handsome, nearly all white

male sitting on top of a small hut. Almost in disbelief, we carefully climbed out of the van and set up the 'scopes still some distance away – the bird didn't so much as flinch. Slowly, we crept a bit closer and a bit closer still, until the 'scope views were breathtaking. The perch may not have been the most photogenic, but we were pretty sure he was considerably closer than when Scott had seen him. The bird's beautiful yellow eyes were mesmerising and we watched him in awe for some considerable time before heading back to the van and leaving him be. New bird of the trip? Lifer or not, I think it had to be. Time was getting on, so we stopped to eat on the way home at a little place called Mama's Kitchen, which turned out to be another comedy of errors (aka a trip report writer's delight!). Stuart decided that he was going to have the moussaka, at which point the waitress looked at him with a decidedly confused expression and asked, 'What's that in English?' (Obviously not much call for the Greek part of the menu around here!) Having replied, 'moussaka' and pointed to it on the menu, we felt we could be in for a long night! Ray and I ordered chicken stir-fries, which mysteriously morphed into chicken strips for a while (not much demand for the Chinese part of the menu either then), and John had a sparring match with an unfriendly, low-hanging lampshade – twice! I think John just about came away with a victory on points.

Day 9 After tearing ourselves away a bit prematurely the previous evening, albeit in a good cause, it was good to get back to Tawas this morning. Today seemed to be a particularly good day for Tennessee Warblers – we saw dozens. Other warblers on the list today were: Black-and-white, Nashville, Cape May, Northern Parula, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Canada and Wilson's, Common Yellowthroat and American Redstart. We also got our hopes up of breaking the trip warbler record when another party reported that they'd just seen a male Golden-winged Warbler in a small area not far from us. Sadly, after scouring the patch in question for some time, we never did find the bird. We spent some time this morning doing another 'seawatch' off the dunes. Among the Dunlin, we picked up Piping Plover and Sanderling for the trip, whilst a Merlin shot past us and we had some seriously confused migrating flocks of Blue Jays that seemed to be migrating the wrong way! Back on the trails, we found a lovely roosting Common Nighthawk sitting on a branch above our heads and a Brown Thrasher scabbling about on the path in front of us – which will forever now make me think of James doing his *Gosney in Texas* impression. We were on a bit of a roll as far as leisurely brunches were concerned, and today, in a place called Big Boy (don't laugh), we even managed to find a competent staff! (Actually, not only was Gale competent, she was like a magnificent matronly mother hen – I'll bet not many people dared cross her.) We ate well and were plied with more drink refills than I think I've ever had anywhere, although none of us was brave enough to try the 'hand-dipped Big Boy shake' advertised on the wall (I wonder what Mr Gosney would make of that if his mind boggles at thrashers thrashing!). Our last birding destination today was a place called Tuttle Marsh, which turned out to be a fruitful little site for us. As we approached the large expanse of open water, we added the only Common Loon of the trip, a lovely perched-up Osprey, several Trumpeter Swans, another circling Bald Eagle and a couple of Hooded Mergansers. Venturing a little farther along the bank we had great views of a singing Willow Flycatcher, a totally unexpected flyby Rough-legged Hawk, calling Pied-billed Grebe and Adam saw a Least Bittern, just as the heavens opened and, for the second time this trip, we legged it back to the van! Typically, almost as soon as we arrived, the rain eased off and within a few minutes had stopped again. Soggy but undeterred, we headed back out, this time in the opposite direction. Our luck was a bit mixed here – on the upside, we had several fleeting views of a Virginia Rail darting between clumps of reed; on the downside, just to compound this morning's frustration, we kept hearing snatches of Golden-winged Warbler song, but despite much searching we never tracked this one down either. As James reckons Blue-winged Warblers can replicate Golden-winged song, without a sighting to be certain, sadly it didn't make it onto the list. With a final view of the water giving us a party of Trumpeter Swans taking off and flying over our heads, we set off back to the hotel to dry off and freshen up before our final evening meal of the trip in the Tawas Bay Resort Hotel.

Day 10 In an attempt to squeeze as much birding into the trip as possible and maybe finally break the trip warbler record, first thing this morning we headed back to Tawas. As soon as we got out of the van, some of the guys picked up a distinctive noise, not a song, but drumming – Ruffed Grouse! We set off to the far side of the car park in hot pursuit. However, from our experience, this is an exercise pretty much guaranteed to drive you

insane. We walked around what was a pocket hanky-sized patch of scrub at least a dozen times; we walked into the area and crouched quietly; we scoured every fallen log multiple times – nothing! We heard the bird repeatedly; we met a guy who'd seen it in the area over the last few days; we still came away with a heard-only. (Insert an appropriate number of asterisks, exclamation marks and other assorted symbols here depending on your level of pain!). Our other mission this morning was to try and track down the Golden-winged Warbler from yesterday, or the Yellow-breasted Chat that had been mentioned. Despite much hunting, again, luck was not on our side and we were destined to stick at 31 warbler species for the trip – and, let's face it, 31 species of North American wood warbler in breeding plumage is not to be sniffed at! Time, sadly, was up and we headed back to the hotel to grab a quick breakfast, discuss the football results from home (thanks Steve) and finalise the packing. In one last little treat before packing the bins away, we had our only perched-up views of Red-headed Woodpecker in a tree at the back of the hotel car park before loading up the vans and setting off on our three-hour drive to the airport. The trip was primarily about migrants and we'd had glorious views of most of the colourful passerines – many closer than I've ever seen them before and some in far greater numbers. We'd also picked up the tricky Henslow's Sparrow, the beautiful and restricted Kirtland's Warbler and a couple of unexpected lingering winter birds in the form of a magnificent Snowy Owl and a Rough-legged Hawk. Hey, we'd even managed to track down a Feral Pigeon or two – no mean feat in these parts it seems! I guess we'll all take away different favourite moments from the trip; among those that will live long in my memory are the final day on the Magee boardwalk, the morning in Huron looking for Kirtland's Warbler and almost seeing a Connecticut (sigh), the walk through the woods at Waterloo and the peace and quiet of the walk down that little road in Mio, broken only by the songs of meadowlarks and Bobolinks. Huge thanks, as always, to James for his expert leadership, careful driving and usual good humour, despite not feeling very well (you'd never have known). Many thanks also to Ray for his equally careful driving of the second van on the transfer days (for those asking on the trip, his final lifer tally was 115) and to all my fellow participants for making the trip so enjoyable with their sharp eyes and banter throughout. Special thanks to Paul and Stuart for the pleasure of their company on the transfer days and for their kind words at the airport – they meant a lot to me. Let's do it all again sometime folks!

Day 11 Arrival back in the UK at the end of the tour.

Helen Heyes