Greetings Earlham Birding Big Day Friends,

The Earlham College “Global” Big Day (May 6/7, 2011) was great fun. The folks who sent in lists were excited about being able to participate in the field as well as by making their pledges. This year’s report is in three sections: the Whitewater River Valley (the 29th consecutive year of EC Big Days!), the US and the World. Again, Jonathan Doherty ’80 has prepared a Google map with locations and site lists. You can check them out [here](#).

**The Whitewater River Valley**

This area includes the headwaters in Randolph County south through Richmond, Liberty, Connersville and Brookville to the areas around the confluence of the Whitewater with the Great Miami River in Ohio near Cincinnati.

2011 was a near record-setting year for this region! More than fourteen observers in ten parties found a total of 162 different species (record is 165 in 2004) in the valley. A number of current students, recent alumni and their relatives checked Earlham’s back campus, Wildman’s Woods, Cope Environmental Center and the Test Biological Study Area. Many had only a few hours to participate as graduation and its preparations as well as awards ceremonies were scheduled, others had more time. A few of us had more time in the field or took the opportunity to go out both days and reached more distant parts of the watershed.

Those who visited (or attempted to visit) Brookville Lake found the water level held back to control flooding in the Ohio and Mississippi at a record high 20 feet above summer pool. Most approaches to the lake could not be accessed. Only the causeways could be used to check the water birds. Agricultural fields were flooded — producing too much shorebird habitat, diluting the birds that were around.

- **Phoebe Lackawana Oaks ’12**, working back campus on the 6th, found two species not found by the rest of us: Black-billed Cuckoo and Cedar Waxwing.

- **Wendy Tori** (EC Faculty) and **Joel Hogle ’12** visited Whitewater State Park and environs and found Philadelphia Vireo, Lincoln’s Sparrow and Purple Finch. Wendy ended up with 101 species for her efforts over the weekend. They got drenched in a morning shower on Friday.

- **Brent Smith** (EC Faculty) took advantage of brief periods on both days to round out his list and found two unique for the Whitewater Valley list species: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and the beautiful Black-throated Blue Warbler (he was gushing!).

- **Topher Weiss-Lehman ’10, Michele Bahnick ’11, Kellen Cedar Paine ’12, Ruthie Carter ’11 and Patrick Raines ’10** and others canvassing the environs near Richmond reported dodging rain showers and having fun dragging their parents and families along with
them to locations that had been important in their field research and recreational times at Earlham.

- **Bill** (EC faculty emeritus) went out on both Friday (133 species) and Saturday (110 species). He checked out the southern reaches of the valley near and around its confluence on Friday, visited middle parts of the Valley on Saturday. At the Miami-Whitewater Wetlands he waded the edge (it too was over its normal pool) where he flushed an American Bittern and 16 Sora! The best bird of the day by far was a Garganey (a Eurasian duck for which there are widespread but very few records in North America) that had been located in the week before at the Fernald Preserve near the confluence of the Miami and Whitewater. Before this, Bill had only seen this bird once before, in winter in Kenya.

The quality of the lists provided in the Whitewater Valley was excellent and only **John Howell** (faculty) received the “I.I.T.” (“Interesting, if true!”) on his record of a Rotisserie Chicken — the sighting (ingestion?) was rejected due to the inability of proving its provenance (globalization of poultry distribution is rampant) nor could continued breeding in the region be foreseen. The species was dropped from our totals.

The United States

Earlamites and friends of Earlham sent in 24 lists for the US ranging from locations in Maine to Florida to Alaska to Hawaii and Arizona. These lists added 225 species to those found in the Whitewater Valley to produce a US total of 387 species (a highly respectable portion of the birds of the breeding birds of the US). Highlights from these lists and the notes that came with them follow (in rough geographic order east to west as the sun rises):

- **Michael Good ’82**, Down East Nature Tours, kept his list while hosting workshops and migration festivals during a migration wave on and around Mount Desert Island, ME. Highlights included this year’s only: Black Scoter; Razorbill; Black Guillemot, Winter Wren and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

- **Evan Dalton ’08** spent the morning bird banding at the Manomet Center for Conservation Science near Plymouth, MA. Observations along the net lanes and from the cliffs overlooking Cape Cod Bay produced a good variety. One highlight was an American Woodcock that flushed into one of the nets (see photo)! Evan also had Surf and White-winged Scoters, Long-tailed Duck (one of Evan’s all-time favorites!), Horned Grebe — all the only ones found on the overall count this year.

- **Scott Comings ’93**, Nature Conservancy, searched Block Island, RI, for the Big Day. He tersely commented, “Usual suspects, no migrant push this day.” His highlight species included Common Eider, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Merlin, Piping Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, and the only Barn Owl on this year’s big list!

- **Alan Hansell ’65** relocated from CA and his stepdaughter went out in southeastern VT and north central MA for part of the day. He sent in the following highpoint of the season:

  Just a note on the Common Yellowthroat. I was sitting at my dining room table and it just landed on the table and sat there for about 15 seconds before flying over to
my windowsill and tried to get out. [It] must have come in earlier when I had my patio door open. It made me think about spending all those years in California trying to get a Yellowthroat to pop up out of a bush at a distance of 20 yards!

• **Emma Olsen ’08** and friend Steve Martin worked southwestern CT and Jamaica Bay NWR, NY. Emma reported she took over 300 pictures that day -- and still had a great list of 84 species! Their highlight bird of the day was an out-of-range Tricolored Heron.

• **Jane Nicklin Olsen** (mother of Emma) and her 10-year old protégé, Sydney Adamsen, birded around their school in New Canaan, CT. The first of multiple highlights they reported was, “my eagle-eyed 10-year-old student, Sydney, spotted something in the phragmites that she insisted looked exactly like a raccoon. We climbed up an observation tower and kept hunting for it, and eventually we both spotted him hopping around amid the skunk cabbage and ferns. It was a Common Yellowthroat, and when I played his song to him on my ipod, he came closer and flew up into a pine tree next to us. This was a life list bird for me!” (Another yellowthroat story! BB)

• **Trish Cope ’78, Dotty ’79 and Jonathan Doherty ’80, and Toni ’79 and Bruce Evans ’79** came in with the honors for the fourth largest US list! What a great day we had! Weird though, missed some typical ones, like downy woodpecker (!) and too many warblers! Don't know where those warblers were, we wondered if they got tornedo-ed away! But we had some terrific surprises, mainly the Purple Gallinule who many birders were gathering to see at McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area. Trish, Bruce and Toni planned for us to start there, not knowing this stray would be wading through the spatterdock. Wonderful!

This group had two species unique to the overall list: Willow Flycatcher and Grasshopper Sparrow. (You gotta love those folks who still have ears, as far as I can tell the species is extinct! BB)

• **Becky Evans Marvil ’80** was vacationing in NC from ME this year looking for local specialties, both for her life list and the big day. One was the Swainson’s Warbler. She tells an interesting story about the nature of bird chasing:

The Swainson’s Warbler came about quite unexpectedly. It started with Herb Wilson, the ornithology professor from Colby College in NC, and knew a spot for the warbler. Awesome! Or so I thought…until I received his email with directions, and one comment that stood …over 30 years ago! Arrgh! Herb even lamented that the woods might not even be woods anymore. I never made it to find out — so much for (finding) the Swainson's Warbler. Until...“Great Kiskadee, right?!” Huh? I turned around. “Oh yes, that's right,” I told the man behind me, as we both exited the visitor's center in Manteo, NC. See, I was wearing my Texas bird T-shirt, and a Great Kiskadee was featured on the back. It was Winger West and his brother George West (who wrote the ABA Birding Guide to Alaska [and was a friend of Jim Cope’s]), and they were passing through, in search of, you guessed it, a Swainson's Warbler. How fortunate — actually for both of us! They had the treasure map, and I
had the ears they lacked — a perfect synergy. We had instant success at the first X on the map!

Becky, also came up with Brown Pelican, White Ibis and a very out of place/season Iceland Gull for the big day list.

• Gretchen Schurr Lugthart ’86 with husband John and friend, David DesRochers, avian ecologist at Dalton State, covered Whitfield County, GA:

   The highlight of our time was seeing the Gray-check Thrush in the backyard of our house. We also reveled in sunlit views of the colorful Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager, Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeak on top of Rocky Face Mountain.

   Their species included the only Whip-poor-will on this year’s compiled list. They also found a Common Nighthawk in nearby TN, adding a state to those checked, albeit briefly.

• Todd Engstrom ’76 and Wilson Baker ’62, arguably two of the best naturalists in the region, checked many areas in the Florida Panhandle, including the Apalachicola NF and St. Marks NWR:

   Our objective was to see bird species that are found primarily in the southeastern U.S. — not to maximize our species total. We ended up with a total of 108 species, including Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman’s Sparrow, Purple Gallinule, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and others. A few of our target species, Limpkin and Wood Stork, eluded our search.

   Their discoveries made up the third longest US list and added Swallow-tailed and Mississippi Kites, Marbled Godwit, three Terns, Black Skimmer, Gray Kingbird and six others to the total list.

• Dan Gertiser, an avid birder and father of the Alumni Relations Birding Big Day team member Alison Warren ’06, visited the famous migrant stopover area at Magee Marsh along Lake Erie in OH. His list produced the only Eastern Screech-Owl and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher for this year’s Big Day. A further highlight because of its eastern location was a Lark Sparrow.

• Kelly Lyddan Stevenson ’92 and her 11-year old son, Tom, checked out the Louisville, KY, and IN sides of the Ohio River. Kelley reported that after working their yard, “our first stop was actually a nod to the other big event in town today — we stopped by to see the garland of roses that would drape the winner of the KY Derby in a few hours.” After that brief stop (which added American Crow to their list) and breakfast they continued on to the Indiana side of the river and found a variety of warblers among other migrants. (Seems appropriate that the Kentucky Derby on Birding Big Day was won by a horse named Animal Kingdom! BB)

• Kevin Schmidt ’12 visited the Morton Arboretum in Chicago and had a number of good species including the 2011 Birding Big Day’s only Least Bittern — a lifer for Kevin!
• **Frank Sterrett ’71** as part of a group doing the IL Big May Day Count visited DuPage County’s Pratt’s Wayne Woods Forest Preserve and environs. His substantial list of 85 species included two that no other US counts found: Golden-winged Warbler and Henslow’s Sparrow.

• **Dave Peake ’06** visited city park hotspots in St. Louis, MO. He found 63 species including the local specialty: Eurasian Tree Sparrow!

-- **Paul Ode ’86**, Colorado State University, began the day on Pawnee National Grasslands in the high plains east of Fort Collins. He reported:

> I started the day nearly driving into a ditch while trying to discern what a large flying bird was off to my right. It turned out to be a Great-horned Owl — not too bad for my first bird of the day, followed soon after by a Long-eared Owl, which I hadn’t seen in a couple years. I enjoyed seeing more McCown’s Longspurs than I think I’ve ever seen before…I think my list is remarkable for some of the species that are missing. One of the more embarrassing omissions (of several) is the American Crow (I mean, really, I can't remember the last day in my life when I have not seen these things, yet on the day when it would count, I can't find them anywhere!!!).

He added 11 species to the big list, including: Common Goldeneye, White-faced Ibis, Burrowing Owl, White-throated Swift, Loggerhead Shrike, Violet-green Swallow, Clay-colored Sparrow and Lark Bunting.

• **Katie Weiss ’78** and a friend birded the area around Bozeman, MT, while her son, Topher Weiss-Lehman ’10, was birding the Cope Center in IN. She reported the “best moment occurred early in the morning as we were traveling down a dirt road near the headwaters of the Missouri River. A Short-eared Owl flew right in front of our car!” They had the US list’s only Wilson’s Phalarope, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Mountain Bluebird and Evening Grosbeak — in addition to the owl.

• **Terri Belisle ’08**, Laboratory for Algae Research and Technology at Arizona State University, visited the Gilbert Riparian Preserve in Phoenix. Her list added Neotropical Cormorant, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet and Long-billed Dowitcher to the overall total.

• **Nancy Bourke Pearson ’64** kept track of sightings in Tempe while her husband, Dave Pearson and six Arizona State University students, birded east to Pinal Mountain. They found 93 species of which an amazing 41 (44%) were unique to the US list! Species highlights included Harris’s and Zone-tailed Hawks, six flycatchers, three vireos, two titmice, three orioles and four “ladies” — Olive, Virginia, Lucy and Grace’s Warblers!

• **Elly Vandegrift ’97**, Eugene, OR, sent in a short list that included the only Vaux’s Swifts among the US counts and wrote:

> While still in our pajamas, we saw a flock of five Western Tanagers sitting in the sweet gum tree in our front yard. Picture attached (of us…not the birds)...I'm the
very pregnant one wise enough to be wearing a coat, and my 3-year-old son is the one only in his underwear and fireman boots.

**James Sterrett ’99 and John Wagner ’04**, Portland, OR, found a Wilson’s Warbler in their backyard and then:

Biked to Mt. Tabor and walked the mountain. It was a fantastic day — we have been getting some big numbers of birds moving the last two days. Highlights were several big leafed maples in one clump that had at least 30 to 40 warblers just going nuts on the insects — it was almost like a fall out.

They added Band-tailed Pigeon, Cassin’s Vireo and Hermit Warbler to the US list. Using bicycles, they had a carbon neutral day!

**Tom Evans ’76**, National Wildlife Service, who attended the Cordova Shorebird Festival on the Copper River Delta, reported 32 species of which 12 were unique to the total count. These included Pacific Loon, Pelagic Cormorant, Hudsonian Godwit, Black-legged Kittiwake and the newly split-out Pacific Wren (formerly part of Winter Wren).

**Karen Hibbard-Rode Mager ’04**, University of Alaska, sent in a list from Fairbanks. After helping at a banding station, she “finished off at the Botanical Garden, hoping to find Bohemian Waxwings in the introduced cherry trees. It was really quiet there, but just as I was leaving I saw something fly past, and saw two waxwings land in the tree right next to me! They are one of my favorite northern species.”

**Elaine Reese** (wife of Gerald Morsello ’60) in Hawaii reported 10 species new to the list, including the Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Great Frigatebird and, amazingly, this year’s only Cattle Egret (none from the mainland!).

The World

Only three overseas lists came in this year, but they were wonderful and added a further 218 species to the EC Birding Big Day final tally of 605 species.

**Jay Roberts** (EC faculty) and family have been in New Zealand this spring with the Earlham program. They were in Christchurch and survived the devastating earthquake relatively unscathed, but had to move their program to the North Island (see Jay’s wonderful blog on the Earlham website). They returned to Christchurch at the end of the semester and on Birding Big Day took the opportunity to bird watch on the estuary. Their list included such great birds as the Royal Spoonbill and the Paradise Shelduck.

**Megan Griffiths-Ward ’97** and her husband David, 3-year old daughter Gemma, 11-day old son Liam (!!) and visiting grandparents Jon and Betsy Griffiths produced a three-generational team and an amazing list from South Africa. Megan wrote:

The day dawned rainy but there was a nest of flying termites emerging in our backyard, so we quickly picked up a number of our more common residents (Red-eyed Dove, Laughing Dove, Fork-tailed Drongo, Dark-capped Bulbul, Kurrichane
along with the Hadeda Ibis, Black-collared and Crested Barbets, and Brown-hooded Kingfisher. David quickly headed off to the Darvill Bird Sanctuary, where he saw an impressive 44 species, including some special ones such as the Hottentot Teal and African Fish Eagle. With the weather clearing a bit, David, Gemma, Betsy and Jon went to Tala Game Reserve where they saw another 23 bird species, including the Common Ostrich and the African Purple Swamphen. At Tala they also had incidental wildlife sightings: White Rhinos, Hippos, Blesbok, Blue Wildebeest, Zebras, Impalas and Warthogs. Meanwhile, Megan and Liam were covering the home front and Megan was thrilled to see both a Wooly-Necked Stork and a Black Sparrowhawk from the veranda. In the afternoon David and Jon made a final outing to Cumberland Nature Reserve, where they saw Trumpeter Hornbills and a Peregrine Falcon. They came home through Pietermaritzburg Centre in a final effort to find a Black-Crowned Night Heron and a Feral Pigeon (it counts as a species, right?). At the end of the day we had an even 100 species. Not bad, considering the multiple handicaps of rainy weather, wrong season for the Southern Hemisphere (making it difficult to identify the bishops and weavers, and meaning that some migrant species were absent) and, of course, 11-day-old Liam who kept Megan confined to the house and garden. But a great time was had by all, and Gemma especially enjoyed helping David identify the birds in our garden and at Tala. She is becoming a great little birder and has been helping her Grandma and Grandpa identify the birds they see.

• Ricardo Guindon ’83, a naturalist guide, canvassed his home tropical mountaintop. He wrote, “What fun being able to participate from here in Monteverde, Costa Rica. I tried to cover a lot of ground to give folks an idea of the range of our biodiversity.” His list of 127 species included 20 endemics and certainly gave evidence to the area’s snazzy diversity. Read his full list on Jonathan Doherty’s Google map. But, imagine a list with evocative names like Green Hermit, Violet Sabrewing, Coppery-headed Emerald, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Resplendent Quetzal, Gray-throated Leaftosser, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Long-tailed Manakin (my kind of bird!! WT), Three-wattled Bellbird, Nightingale Wren, Black-faced Solitaire, Spangle-cheeked Tanager and Golden-browed Chlorophonia to name only a few! It is interesting that Ricardo also had lingering migrants that were already peaking in the US: Western Wood-Pewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Swainson’s Thrush and Wilson’s Warbler. Ricardo says, “when ever anyone wants to bird-watch in Monteverde, Costa Rica…here I am!”

Summary

In a communal effort many alumni and friends of the College have put together their bird discoveries from across the Whitewater Valley (162 species), the nation (387 species) and the world (605 species). We have had a great time being in the outdoors, searching and finding some of the incredible organisms that share the planet. The activity has served many purposes, some of them individual, almost spiritual. Others have been communal and for the purpose of supporting the opportunity for students to experience Earlham. I hope you find this a fun way to raise support for the Earlham Fund. All of you who sent in lists should not feel off the hook to send in a financial contribution as well!! For those who didn’t do the birding this year, know that knowledge of your support pushed us on to spend extra time,
seeking more species, building support for Earlham. Having been here for so long (Bill) and so deeply involved (both of us), we know Earlham is a place worthy of that support.

As we look at the range of graduation dates and the levels of interest in birds across all these generations of Earlhamites we, Wendy and Bill, are proud to be a continuing part of an amazing tradition in the study of birds and natural history at Earlham. The tradition in natural history began with Joseph Moore and was given its deep foundation by Jim Cope, Carolle Markle and Lucky Ward. Next year will be the 30th year of the Earlham Birding Big Day activity. When Jim and Bill started this they didn’t anticipate it would continue so long!

The Alumni Relations folks will be including a summary of what your pledges come to given the number of species we found this year, if you have not already sent a lump sum gift. If anyone out there didn’t read the earlier letter about this being a “global big day” carefully or read only the pledge card that unfortunately went unedited, tell us what you meant to pledge and send it in!!

Warm regards,

Bill   Wendy

Bill Buskirk and Wendy Tori