

Avian and Floral Delights in the Cypress Hills by Phil Horch

Many Canadians are not aware that Medicine Hat has a secret unheralded backyard and many Hatters are quite happy to keep it that way. It's called the Cypress Hills. On Saturday, July 9, six GN'ers headed south on a field trip to document the breeding birds of the Hills. That mission was duly accomplished but on this day the Hills were so gilded in a "splendiferous" display of wild flowers that the expedition was in constant danger of morphing into a botanical field trip! Phil Horch, trip leader was severely challenged in keeping the group focused on its avian goals! Nonetheless, mother nature entertained us with a grand total of 74 bird species and under the tutelage of Annalora and Elaine, a grand total of 44 wild flower species. For a while, it seemed like the wild flowers might outstrip the birds!

The trip started slowly with missed birds just south of the Hat. A supposedly nailed-down YellowBreasted Chat failed to perform and a pair of Long-Billed Curlews just east of Longfellow Hall missed their curtain call. Phil half-heartedly tried to explain that birds stop singing by mid-July and that the breeding season is nearly over.

Just a little further down Black and White Trail, tragedy struck. A freshly road-killed Sharp-Tailed Grouse was in the center of the road and circling around in utter confusion were several young birds urging mother back to life. Bob muttered under his breath that those young won't have much of a future without mom. We drove on in grim silence. Our spirits were lifted a little farther down the road as we arrived at the Garden of Eden...errr the Cypress Hills. The grassy meadows were ablaze with Bergamot, Alpine Lupine, Sticky Geranium, Harebells, Asters...and those were just the purple flowers. Complementing them were Tall Yellow Buttercups, Brown-Eyed Susans, Ox-Eye Daisies, Alberta Wild Roses, Yellow Potentilla, various Vetches, Cone Flowers and too many more to mention. And best of all for the birders, were flocks of new Mountain Bluebird families darting about among this cornucopia of colour.

Although, it's true that most songbirds cease or diminish their singing, after the first week of July, many of the Cypress Hills birds begin their breeding a little later than many prairie species because of the Hill's high altitude and later season, so there was still plenty of song evident upon our arrival. In one Aspen copse along Jackpot Road, our group tallied Least Flycatcher, Western Wood Peewee, House Wren, Pine Siskin, Yellow Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, Tree Swallow, American Goldfinch, and a Red-Naped Sapsucker. Not bad for one little stop.

As we plunged deeper into the Hills, some forest species were soon observed including Ovenbird, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Warbling and Red-Eyed Vireo and American Redstart. White-Crowned Sparrows sing almost everywhere in the Hills and Clay-Colored, Chipping, Song, Savannah and Vesper sparrows are common in their appropriate habitat. Near the lakes, our group soon added Caspian Tern, Black Tern, RedNecked Grebe and several duck species.

One of our target birds for the day was the beautiful Western Tanager, a neo-tropical species, that is annually present in the Hills but not always easy to find. However, upon our arrival at Spruce Coulee, it was the first bird we heard singing. After some prowling around the edges of the campground, the bird was located at the tip of a White Spruce sounding like a Robin with a hoarse voice. This cooperative male then made himself totally visible to everyone for the next fifteen minutes. With its red

head, bright yellow body, black and white wings and black tail, it is easily one of our most spectacular birds. For Milt and Bob the bird was their year's first sighting. For Paul it was a "lifer!"

However, not to be outdone, the undercover botanists in the group (Elaine and Annalora), came up with what may be the rarest find of the day, a spectacularly tall Woodland Pinedrop plant growing at Spruce Coulee practically underneath the Tanager. It is considered rare in Alberta, found only in Waterton and the Cypress Hills.

Overall this trip was a spectacular success simply because mother nature contributed so generously with great bird sightings, a glorious parade of wildflowers, and fabulously sunny and cool 19 degree weather. And we didn't even mention the plethora of butterflies! There was only one hiccup on this field trip. For some reason Annalora convinced Milt about the edible qualities of Bergamot. Ever the adventurous gastronomer, Milt dutifully ate some Bergamot. From therein, the group noted Milt's behaviour was altered. We hesitate to say he was hallucinating but his behaviour became quite the source of merriment until our picnic at Elkwater. Did Annalora fail to mention any of Bergamot's other properties? Our conclusion of this experiment was, "Do not try this at home!"

Participants of this trip were Phil Horch, leader, Annalora Horch, Milt and Elaine Spitzer, Bob Frew, and Paul Thibault.