



The Birds of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

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Harpers Ferry is where the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers meet. Harpers Ferry is where abolitionist John Brown's raid may have actually started Civil War. Harpers Ferry is a beautiful place in the mountains of the Mountain State. Harpers Ferry is where I knew I wanted to do my 50/50/50 birding in West Virginia. And with the help of Beth Poole, that's exactly what I did.

There have been some horrendous floods at Harpers Ferry and there had been so much rain the week before I got there that there was a lot of wet areas on a couple of roads and fields had casual water, but it was at most a nuisance and our birding day was lovely. This photo from the town of Harpers Ferry itself shows why flooding is to be taken seriously. That 1935 flood was more than 10' above where I was standing and I was standing 10 feet above the river level. Yikes!!

Flood History



The story of how I met Beth Poole is like similar stories in other states and they are the best parts of my 50/50/50 Adventure. Through some listservs and Ebird Reports I discovered the Potomac Valley Audubon Society (PVAS). From their web page I learned that a walk was scheduled at the Cool Spring Preserve on May 15th – the day after my schedule had me birding West Virginia. I couldn't really change this date because my visits to Magee Marsh and the Tawas Festival in Michigan were set in stone on subsequent days. I contacted PVAS and had a wonderful conversation that bolstered my confidence that birding at Cool Spring would be a good idea and they gave me contact information for Beth Poole who would be leading the walk on the 15th. They also loved my 50/50/50 project and raised my spirits about it even higher than they already were.

I contacted Beth and she suggested I join her on a scouting trip at Cool Spring on the 14th and she offered to take me other places afterwards if more species were needed. As I said this is similar to other stories. Time after time, members of our birding community have stepped to help with time, suggestions, and support. I would be happy to have any of them as friends or birding companions anytime and anywhere.

Like I had done in previous states, I checked out Cool Spring when I got to Harpers Ferry on the afternoon before the scheduled official day of birding. In more than 90 minutes I only found 19 species, but it was mid afternoon and not many birds were singing and I did not recognize some of the songs I heard. I figured Beth would help in the latter regard and that morning would be better – but I was a bit worried.

I got in some early morning birding before meeting Beth and had identified 14 species. One good find was a flooded field along a road near the Preserve that had both **Solitary Sandpipers** and **Killdeer** and had a **Pileated Woodpecker** calling.

Solitary Sandpiper



Beth was enthusiastic and optimistic as we started out at Cool Spring Preserve. There was more activity than there had been the previous afternoon – but it was not real birdy and some expected birds were not found. We did have **Field Sparrows**, **Indigo Buntings**, **Baltimore Orioles**, **Great Crested Flycatcher**, an **Orchard Oriole (female)** and **Eastern Kingbird** – but only two warbler species.

Indigo Bunting



Baltimore Oriole



Great Crested Flycatcher



Orchard Oriole (female)



Eastern Kingbird



Certainly not a rarity but a favorite photo from the visit was a pair of **Tree Swallows** at a **Bluebird** nesting box. It took a while but we finally found an **Eastern Bluebird** at another box.

Tree Swallows



Eastern Bluebird



After revisiting the pool I had discovered earlier to show Beth, we had 34 species and it was just after 10:00 a.m. – lots of time left but lots of species needed. We drove into the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park and picked up a handful of species. I found an unexpected **Grasshopper Sparrow** so at least I felt like I was contributing something.

Grasshopper Sparrow



This is where Beth came through like a champ and proved how valuable local expertise can be. We headed down to the Shenandoah River and birded a number of different spots that mostly seemed like the same to me. But we added a species or two here and there at each stop: **Chimney Swifts** and then an **Eastern Phoebe**, a **Song Sparrow** and a **Blue Gray Gnatcatcher**. Soon we were at 46 species. An **Acadian Flycatcher** brought us to 47 and a Double Crested Cormorant was #48. It was now past noon. Would we get to #50? What would it be?

Acadian Flycatcher



We moved a little bit off the river and hit a magic spot – seven new species in less than 15 minutes and one was the bird of the day. As I got out of the car to look at a **Hairy Woodpecker** that Beth had found, I spied a flash of yellow and then the flash perched right in front of us – a gorgeous **Prothonotary Warbler**. I couldn't have chosen a better 50th species for the day.

Prothonotary Warbler



Time to celebrate with a lunch in Harpers Ferry at a funky old place dating back more than 150 years. It also gave us a chance to see some of the historic buildings including one where John Brown had been. I really liked the feel of the town – probably moreso with over 50 species (and a good lunch) under my belt. These little additions were an integral part of the positive experiences that came with my adventure.



We picked up a couple more species and ended the day with 58. Especially after a little worrisome start, we were thrilled. We went back to Cool Spring Preserve and shared the news and took an acknowledging photo.

Beth Poole and Blair Acknowledging the 50 Species Success



It would now be on to Ohio with an intermediary stop for the night in Somerset, PA to break up the drive. First some more background on Cool Spring Preserve taken from the Potomac Valley Audubon Society info page:

Preserve History

In 1752, 22-year-old George Washington made his first land purchase of 1,459 acres along Bullskin Run, including the area that is the present day Cool Spring Preserve. Washington leased his land in 200-acre parcels. Each lease tenant was to build a 20' dwelling with a good 40' barn, plant and care for specific crops, install certain "creatures," erect and maintain fences, plant an orchard and vineyard, and preserve the woodlots without overcutting.

In 1830, 146 acres, including most of Cool Spring Preserve, was sold to Thomas Grigg's Jr. The rest of Cool Spring Preserve was located on a neighboring property to the east, which was owned by the Haines', a quaker family. On February 5, 1869, siblings Edward, Alvinia and Mary sold one acre of land to a freed slave, Susan B. Thornton, for \$1. Mrs. Thornton's cottage still stands on Cool Spring Preserve.

Between this time and 1998, the property was used as a dairy farm and named Cool Spring Farm. Later it was sold to Jefferson Orchards who used the land to grow peaches and nectarines. During this time, existing buildings fell into disrepair and the fruit crops eventually failed.

In 1998, Cool Spring Farm was purchased and underwent a three-year renovation to bring life back to the buildings and property. In 2008, the adjoining 12 acres including Mrs. Thornton's cottage were purchased and CraftWorks at Cool Spring, a non-profit designed to connect art with nature was established.

Cool Spring Preserve is named after Cool Spring Farm. It was donated to the Potomac Valley Audubon Society by CraftWorks in 2016.

Nothing about birds in that write up but if it were not for my birding and this adventure in specific, I would know nothing about this, would not have visited Harpers Ferry or any of the many other places I had already been or would later go. Each place has a story. Who knows maybe I had walked in some of the same exact spots that had been walked by George Washington at Cool Spring or by John Brown at Harpers Ferry. Birding opens doors to interesting people and places and tops them off with special birds like **Prothonotary Warblers**. How fortunate we are to have such a passion.