

OBW Trip to Sauvie Island – Rentenaar Road & Racetrack Lake (Columbia County)

September 8, 2024

By Tom Myers

On Sunday, September 8th, six birders met at “Grandma’s Kitchen” - the parking area at the west end of Rentenaar Road on Sauvie Island. After introductions and a chat about the day, we crossed over the berm and walked south toward Racetrack Lake.

In the first half hour we had several species fly over, including: a Killdeer, a Wilson’s Snipe, several American White Pelicans and a pair of Greater Yellowlegs. We watched a Cooper’s Hawk dive into a tree after a California Scrub-Jay, then fly out and across an open field. Mixed with several dozen Barn Swallows overhead, we spotted a few Tree Swallows and a single Purple Martin. Along the berm, we heard a Common Yellowthroat and a Swainson’s Thrush, and spotted a Hairy Woodpecker high in a dead Cottonwood tree.

(<https://ebird.org/checklist/S194461875>)

In thickets near the north edge of Racetrack Lake, we encountered a mixed flock of songbirds that included several Black-capped Chickadees and Yellow-rumped Warblers, two Yellow Warblers, two Black-throated Gray Warblers, a Wilson’s Warbler and a Warbling Vireo. We spent several minutes following this flock along the edge of the thicket.

Along the northwest shore of Racetrack Lake, we scoped the birds feeding near the center of the lake. Water levels had recently dropped and vegetation had grown in, but we still found many Wilson’s Snipes, Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Western Sandpipers, and a pair of Pectoral Sandpipers. In an area of open water, there was a single Ring-necked Duck among several Cinnamon Teal and many Mallards, Northern Shovelers and Green-winged Teal.

As we neared the footbridge that spans the slough on the west side of the lake, we spotted a sandpiper feeding among the Dowitchers and Yellowlegs that stood out with a pale eyebrow and long, droopy bill. We spent time scoping and photographing this bird, discussing its field marks and consulting resources before we identified it confidently: a Stilt Sandpiper!



We walked along the slough that connects Racetrack Lake to the east arm of Sturgeon Lake, in order to look out on the mudflats. We spotted Canada Geese, several gulls, more ducks, distant flocks of peeps, several dozen American White Pelicans, a Peregrine Falcon and a lone Tundra Swan (very likely the same bird that had been seen around Mud Lake in previous days).

After scoping Sturgeon Lake, we continued our counterclockwise walk around Racetrack Lake. We had dozens of American White Pelicans fly overhead in single file lines. In an oak tree along the berm, northeast of the lake, we encountered a mixed flock of songbirds that we quickly recognized: the same flock we'd found on the opposite side of the lake earlier that morning! (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S194463388>)

We traveled north to Rentenaar Road on the berm. An eBird report of three Black-crowned Night Herons (and an American Bittern) had the group excited to see if these birds were still along Rentenaar Road. About halfway between Reeder Road and Grandma's Kitchen, we spotted a single Black-crowned Night Heron in the distance, then a Green Heron hunting in the foreground, before finding the American Bittern lurking in the foliage nearby.

While we enjoyed scope views of the herons and bittern, we watched a Red-shouldered Hawk fly in, calling loudly, then land on and eat a small critter on the ground near the Night Heron. The longer we stayed, the more we saw: a Willow Flycatcher and a Western Flycatcher popped up close by and provided side-by-side comparisons, a Savannah Sparrow posed for photos and on our walk back to the lot, a Black Phoebe hunted in a slough.

(<https://ebird.org/checklist/S194463870>)

At the end of our morning, we tallied 75 species. While the Black-crowned Night Heron, American Bittern and Green Heron were exciting County birds for several people, the Stilt Sandpiper was the highlight of the day for most of us.