My Philadelphia Big Year in 2007

Frank Windfelder

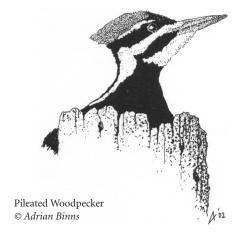
As the years have passed, and despite my participation in a variety of activities, it has become clear that birding is my first love. Plus, when you look up the word *compulsive* in the dictionary, my picture is there. Each year, I have to have a project, and it has to involve birding. In 2005, it was a bird census at Palmyra Cove Nature Park (Windfelder, 2004-2005). In 2006, it was a full year of birding on my property in Northeast Philadelphia. What would I do in 2007? A Big Year in Philadelphia seemed like a natural. I live here.

I read with interest Ted Floyd's article in *Cassinia* (Floyd, 2000-2001), in which he detailed his big year in Philadelphia in 1998. He had tied Ed Fingerhood's similar effort in 1996, having found 208 species. An editor's note in that article indicated that Johnnie Miller held the all-time record of 225 species, set in 1966. My goal was not to try to top any of these marks, but to have fun, play it by ear, and involve other birders in the process. A lot of luck plays into this. Would there be any winter finches? What will the water levels be like at Tinicum? Will any rarities show up? Let the chips fall where they may!

I visited the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum on New Years morning. My best birds were a flock of nine Rusty Blackbirds and a half dozen Hooded Mergansers. On the following day, I was glad to see an old friend, the long-staying adult Lesser Black-backed Gull that has been at the Linden Avenue boat ramp at the Delaware River. At Pennypack on the Delaware (hereafter POD), a Merlin launched a surprise attack on a group of ground-feeding European Starlings. This was wonderful to witness, but not for the starlings.

I continued on to the Northeast Water Treatment Plant to see those now-annual Northern Roughwinged Swallows. I watched about fifty birds swoop down to feed on what are thought to be midges. My next stop was at Franklin Delano Roosevelt Park (FDR), where I was lucky to find two female Redheads, a female Lesser Scaup, and a drake Red-breasted Merganser.

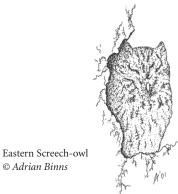
I was told about a possible Orange-crowned Warbler at Tinicum, so I went to look for it on January 5. To my amazement, it proved to be a first-winter Painted Bunting. What a great bird! The following day was the Philadelphia Midwinter Bird Census. I have to tell you that it was 73 degrees that day, and in fact, temperatures had been balmy for a month. Keith Russell had gotten me permission to get into a mitigation area along the Delaware River, part of the previously mentioned POD site. It contained American Tree, White-crowned and Savannah Sparrows and an adult Peregrine Falcon. When a yellow bird popped up, I thought I had my Orange-crowned Warbler. Incredibly, it was a Yellow Warbler, a much better bird in winter, but a slam-dunk in the summer.



In Pennypack Park on the 6th, I heard the territorial drumming of a Pileated Woodpecker. There had been several in the park in December. Meanwhile, Matt Sharp had emailed me about a White-winged Scoter on the Delaware River at Orthodox Street. I tried unsuccessfully the following day, but on the day after that I saw the species there. Wow, it was a drake! I now had 77 species.

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The next couple of weeks were slow, and my mood had worsened because I had missed a Ross's Goose that was reported as being at FDR Park. The relatively warm weather we had been having ended by the third week in January. It had finally started to feel like winter. However, on the evening of the 23rd, Keith Russell called me about a Barred Owl that was calling outside his house. He invited me over; we heard the Barred Owl together, then went over to Carpenter's woods and heard an Eastern Screech-Owl. What a fantastic night! I had 87 species.



For the next 10 days, the birding was slow, but I had an excellent day on February 3. I found 5 Bonaparte's Gulls at the edge of the tidal flats on the Delaware River at the mouth of the Pennypack Creek, part of the POD area. And the main pond at FDR Park contained two Cackling Geese in with the Canadas. The weather had turned bitterly cold, so I wanted to check the Delaware River to see what the weather might have brought in. Sure enough, at the Orthodox Street river access, I enjoyed a continually-diving immature male Surf Scoter. Extra bonuses were a drake Canvasback and two basic-plumaged Horned Grebes.

On the 10th of February, I finally saw the two female Wild Turkeys that had been at Tinicum for months, thanks to a call from Hank Hox. A beautiful adult Red-shouldered Hawk was also there. On the 17th, in the company of Keith Russell, I again saw those two Cackling Geese at FDR. On the 18th, while watching the feeders at my home in Northeast Philadelphia, my jaw dropped when I spotted an Orangecrowned Warbler at one of my suet cages. And a visit to Orthodox Street on the 21st produced a first-cycle Glaucous Gull, riding an ice floe on the incoming tide. I now had 100 species.

March 1 produced a half-dozen American Woodcock and a calling Ring-necked Pheasant in a field adjacent to Tinicum. The following day, Debbie Beer took me to the newly-discovered Bald Eagle nest at the Naval Business Center. It was believed to be the first such nest in Philadelphia in over 100 years. A muchneeded Red-throated Loon along the Delaware River, only 10 yards from the shoreline, was a real surprise. On the 3rd, I saw a Red-necked Grebe at Glen Foerd on the Delaware River that was so close, I could have put it in my back pocket.

Red-throated Loon, Red-necked Grebe, what would be next? I found out on the 4th, when Doris McGovern called me to tell me about a Rough-legged Hawk at Tinicum. It took me several hours, but I finally saw it. While entering the Eastwick area to look for the hawk, a man drove up in a car, rolled down his window, and announced, "Be careful! My daughter saw two cougars running around in there." I must confess to looking around several times. "Could they have escaped from somewhere?" I could see the headline: Birder Attacked by Cougars in Southwest Philadelphia. Of course, I would never have been able to read it myself.

That Rough-legged was the last new bird I was to see for a while. I was trapped between Winter and Spring. But the Osprey at Glen Foerd on the 20th was good omen. The following day, I was treated to several Eastern Meadowlarks at Northeast Philadelphia Airport. It appeared that the drought was over.

On March 26, I met with Sarah Thorp of the Delaware River City Corporation and Paul Racette of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, who are jointly planning a river trail and shoreline restoration along the Delaware. I resolved to do all I could to help. The altruistic Keith Russell later wrote to me, "What a great way to use your big year, to assist local conservation efforts!" On March 28, while walking the dike at Tinicum, I was shocked to hear a persistently calling Virginia Rail. And as Keith Russell had promised, Pine Warblers were present in the pines at Hermit Lane off of Henry Avenue. I had three birds there on the 31st, bringing my total for the year to 117 species.

April began auspiciously. On the 2nd, I found four Long-tailed Ducks sleeping on the Delaware River at Glen Foerd. However, the first half of April turned

out to be unseasonably raw and cold, with a blocking pattern preventing many migrants from arriving. That was good for observing Pine Warblers, because they were everywhere. I finally got Blue-winged Teal at Tinicum on the 10th and a Common Loon on the Delaware River on the 12th. A Caspian Tern on Dennis Brennan's Tinicum trip on April 14 was a real surprise. I hadn't seen a Forster's tern yet! Todd Fellenbaum called me on the rainy 16th to report an American Bittern at Tinicum. When I went there, I found two. Amazing!

I had a great morning at Tinicum on the 24th. I picked up 11 new species, including Blue-headed Vireo. A Least Bittern was calling at Tinicum's "horseshoe" on the 29th. Later that day, I got a call from Matt Sharp about a Prothonotary Warbler at a place adjacent to Cobbs Creek Park called the Nicholas A. Pucciarelli Senior Center in Overbrook.

I found the place with difficulty, and when I arrived, the bird was not singing, so I climbed down a very steep and well-vegetated slope. After "pishing my brains out," the bird popped up for about three seconds, decided it was just a crazy human, and moved off. My elation was short lived, because when I got back to my car, I discovered I was locked inside the parking area. I called 911, hoping the police could get me out, but then a man popped out of the woods. Judging by the amount of liquor on his breath, he must have been in little pain. However, he said he had a "secret" way of getting the gate open. I tipped him, and I was a free man. As I drove away, I wondered if he made a living by working that gate! Anyway, I birded the following day with Keith Russell, picked up 5 new species, and ended April with 161 for the year.

Things did not go as well in early May. Everyone agreed that the migration was poor up to that point. Finally, there were 4 singing male Bobolinks at Benjamin Rush State Park on the 8th. There was a Hooded Warbler in Carpenter's Woods on the 9th and a Kentucky Warbler in Pennypack Park on the 10th. The dam really broke on the weekend of May 12th–13th, with 20-plus species of warblers at both Carpenter's Woods and Tinicum. My best bird was undoubtedly a female Mourning Warbler in the Eastwick area adjacent to Tinicum.

There was a huge fallout in the Philadelphia area on the weekend of May 12th-13th. The warblers were "dripping off the trees" at Tinicum. A birder said to me, "It should ALWAYS be like this." On the 21st, I had a couple of magical hours at Tinicum prior to my softball game. On a tip from Doris McGovern, I heard a Sora. A couple of Common Nighthawks flew by, and there were two Semipalmated Sandpipers by the dike. Among the 17 species of warblers was my first Bay-breasted, a stunning male. I now had 30 species of warblers in Philadelphia for the year. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and a singing male Mourning Warbler topped off an incredible list of birds. I was hot, and stayed hot. That very afternoon, I visited Glen Foerd and found a Cliff Swallow on the Delaware River. A call from Chuck Hetzel resulted in two new birds on the 18th, a Blue Grosbeak and a Yellow-breasted Chat, both at Spring Lane near his home, in the company of Keith as well.

The previously mentioned POD area of Pennypack Park, intersecting the Delaware River and Pennypack Creek, had become one of my favorite spots. This area consists of a mitigation area containing wetlands, weedy fields, a narrow strip of woods, tidal flats at the mouth of the Pennypack, some ball fields, and a trash transfer station on the south end, good for gulls. A very late Lincoln's Sparrow in those woods on the 22nd kept my winning streak alive. Life wasn't all good. One day, while birding one of the trails in Pennypack Park, I was charged by a Great Dane that was the size of a horse. It ran behind me, sniffing me and growling at me. I froze so as not to provoke an attack. When the offending owner approached with two other dogs, neither of which was on a leash, I voiced my displeasure. He then hit me with the "F-bomb." I decided on a full retreat. Thankfully, the remainder of May was uneventful, and I ended the month with 197 species.

On June 1, I was stunned to find a singing male Dickcissel in the POD area. I was able to get mindblowing views in my scope at about 20 yards. However, that was the only new bird I was to see for the entire month. I was away birding in Bulgaria. The only birds I missed while away were a female Purple Martin that had been at Tinicum and some Common Terns that Johnnie Miller saw there. When I returned in late June, there was a drawdown of the impoundment at Tinicum. My eyes sparkled with dreams of multiple

shorebird species. Despite earlier pronouncements about "having fun" and "playing it by ear," I was now going for the kill.

On the 7th of July, I got my first new bird since returning, a Common Moorhen at Tinicum. I then got my 200th bird on July 11, an immature Little Blue Heron at Tinicum. The water levels at Tinicum were now perfect for shorebirds. On the 18th, I saw two alternate-plumaged Western Sandpipers there, and two Pectoral Sandpipers the next day. Things really started to heat up on the 25th. Not only was there a breeding-plumaged Long-billed Dowitcher, but even more surprisingly, a juvenile Sanderling. Four stunning Stilt Sandpipers followed suit on the 26th.

On the 27th, I heard a Red-breasted Nuthatch at Glen Foerd and saw two alternate-plumaged Short-billed Dowitchers at Tinicum. The water levels had been so favorable for shorebirds at Tinicum that I decided to run a DVOC field trip there on July 28. We had a great day seeing 11 species of shorebirds, a couple of young Bald Eagles, and 120 Great Egrets. The White-rumped Sandpiper made my day, because it was number 208 for the year, tying the Philadelphia Big Year marks set by Ed and Ted.

Despite ideal water levels at Tinicum, I was unable to pick up anything new until I found an unexpected adult Common Tern on August 8, which was flying about in Tinicum's impoundment. A Snowy Egret showed up on the 10th, which many people were misidentifying as a Little Blue. It was just a young bird, ergo the confusion. In the ensuing days, I had missed several good birds, until I got a phone call from Todd Fellenbaum on the 20th. Birding in the rain, he had found three Glossy Ibis at Tinicum. By the time I arrived, a group of Black Terns had joined them. Two great birds on the same day! Todd and I were soaked, but it was worth it.

The fun continued on the 22nd. Another visit to Tinicum produced a Wilson's Phalarope. While there, I received a phone call from Matt Sharp who had seen Purple Martins on Kelly Drive near the Philadelphia Art Museum. When I arrived, I found two birds perched on a light pole. Wow, is this bird hard to get in the city! Anyway, I had now picked up both species I had missed while in Bulgaria.

However, along with the high moments, there were some low ones as well. On August 26, after birding Tinicum for several days in a row, I decided to check some spots in Northeast Philadelphia. I didn't get anything new, but in mid-afternoon I got a call from Alan Jackman that there had been a Least Tern at Tinicum that morning. I immediately went there, but the least Tern was gone. Then I found out that a Black-billed Cuckoo had also been there, sitting in the same spot for an hour! I was discouraged, to say the least.

In the ensuing days, my emotions were to bounce up and down like a yo-yo on a string. First, pictures showed that the "Least Tern" was disguised as a Black Tern. OK, I hadn't missed that one. But on the 29th, I got a call from Rick Mellon about a Black-bellied Plover at the POD tidal flats. I had just been there, but not at exactly the same time. Another big miss! Fortunately, two days later I saw one at the same location. I ended the month with 215 species, despite an extremely poor passerine migration.



I lucked into a basic-plumaged Dunlin at Tinicum on September 4. The passerine migration continued to be painful, but I did see a Tennessee Warbler on the 5th. I was to have three amazing days of birding, starting with nice looks at Philadelphia Vireo in Pennypack Park on the 13th. On the 14th, in the POD woods, I had mind-blowing and extended views of a very bright Connecticut Warbler. Then, on the tidal flats at that location, I was stunned to see a flock of at least 25 Red Knots. The fact that later that day a Sora came right out in the open at Tinicum was just icing on the cake. On the 15th, I found a juvenile Rednecked Phalarope at Tinicum. When Doris McGovern and others gathered to see the bird, we were all treated to an amazing hawk flight overhead, including large numbers of Broad-winged Hawks. It doesn't get any better!

(text continues on page 15)

SPECIES LIST

Philadelphia Big Year: January 1 through December 31, 2007 Total species: 233

DUCKS, GEESE, AND

WATERFOWL Snow Goose Brant Cackling Goose Canada Goose

Mute Swan Wood Duck Gadwall

American Wigeon American Black Duck

Mallard

Blue-winged Teal Northern Shoveler Northern Pintail Green-winged Teal Canvasback Redhead

Ring-necked Duck Greater Scaup Lesser Scaup Surf Scoter

White-winged Scoter Black Scoter Long-tailed Duck Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye Hooded Merganser Common Merganser Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

PHEASANTS, GROUSE, TURKEYS,

ALLIES

Ring-necked Pheasant

Wild Turkey

LOONS

Red-throated Loon Common Loon

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe Horned Grebe Red-necked Grebe

CORMORANTS AND SHAGS

Double-crested Cormorant

Great Cormorant

HERONS, EGRETS, AND

BITTERNS American Bittern Least Bittern Great Blue Heron Great Egret Snowy Egret Little Blue Heron Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

Glossy Ibis

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture Turkey Vulture

OSPREY Osprey

HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES

Northern Harrier Sharp-shinned Hawk Cooper's Hawk Bald Eagle

Red-shouldered Hawk Broad-winged Hawk Red-tailed Hawk Rough-legged Hawk

RAILS, GALLINULES, AND

COOTS

Virginia Rail Sora

Common Gallinule American Coot

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover American Golden-Plover Semipalmated Plover

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper Solitary Sandpiper Greater Yellowlegs Lesser Yellowlegs

Red Knot Sanderling

Semipalmated Sandpiper Western Sandpiper Least Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper Pectoral Sandpiper

Dunlin

Stilt Sandpiper Short-billed Dowitcher Long-billed Dowitcher Wilson's Snipe

American Woodcock Wilson's Phalarope Red-necked Phalarope

GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS

Bonaparte's Gull Laughing Gull Ring-billed Gull Herring Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Glaucous Gull

Great Black-backed Gull

Caspian Tern Black Tern Common Tern Forster's Tern

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon Mourning Dove

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Eastern Screech-Owl Great Horned Owl Barred Owl Short-eared Owl Northern Saw-whet Owl

NIGHTIARS AND ALLIES

Common Nighthawk **SWIFTS**

Chimney Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

KINGFISHERS Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker Yellow-bellied Sapsucker Downy Woodpecker Hairy Woodpecker Northern Flicker Pileated Woodpecker

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Philadelphia Big Year Species List (continued)

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

American Kestrel Merlin

Peregrine Falcon

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee Yellow-bellied Flycatcher Acadian Flycatcher Willow Flycatcher Least Flycatcher Eastern Phoebe Great Crested Flycatcher

Great Crested Flycatcher Eastern Kingbird

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo Yellow-throated Vireo Blue-headed Vireo Warbling Vireo Philadelphia Vireo Red-eyed Vireo

CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES

Blue Jay American Crow Fish Crow

LARKS Horned Lark

SWALLOWS

Northern Rough-winged Swallow Purple Martin Tree Swallow Bank Swallow

Barn Swallow Cliff Swallow

CHICKADEES AND TITS

Carolina Chickadee Black-capped Chickadee Tufted Titmouse

NUTHATCHES

Red-breasted Nuthatch White-breasted Nuthatch

TREECREEPERS

Brown Creeper

WRENS House Wren Winter Wren Marsh Wren Carolina Wren

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

KINGLETS

Golden-crowned Kinglet Ruby-crowned Kinglet

THRUSHES AND ALLIES

Eastern Bluebird

Veery

Gray-cheeked Thrush Swainson's Thrush Hermit Thrush Wood Thrush American Robin

MOCKINGBIRDS AND

THRASHERS Gray Catbird

Northern Mockingbird Brown Thrasher

STARLINGS

European Starling

WAGTAILS AND PIPITS

American Pipit

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing

LONGSPURS AND SNOW

BUNTINGSSnow Bunting

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Ovenbird

Worm-eating Warbler Louisiana Waterthrush Northern Waterthrush Blue-winged Warbler Black-and-white Warbler Prothonotary Warbler Tennessee Warbler Orange-crowned Warbler Nashville Warbler Connecticut Warbler Mourning Warbler

Common Yellowthroat Hooded Warbler American Redstart Northern Parula Magnolia Warbler Bay-breasted Warbler Blackburnian Warbler

Kentucky Warbler

Yellow Warbler Chestnut-sided Warbler Blackpoll Warbler

Black-throated Blue Warbler

Palm Warbler

Pine Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Prairie Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Canada Warbler Wilson's Warbler Yellow-breasted Chat

BUNTINGS AND NEW WORLD SPARROWS

Eastern Towhee American Tree Sparrow Chipping Sparrow Field Sparrow Vesper Sparrow Savannah Sparrow Fox Sparrow Song Sparrow

Swamp Sparrow White-throated Sparrow White-crowned Sparrow Dark-eyed Junco

Lincoln's Sparrow

CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Scarlet Tanager Northern Cardinal Rose-breasted Grosbeak Blue Grosbeak Indigo Bunting

Painted Bunting
Dickcissel

TROUPIALS AND ALLIES

Bobolink

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Rusty Blackbird
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Baltimore Oriole

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS, AND ALLIES

Purple Finch House Finch Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

STATISTICS

Species seen: 233

Two Purple Finches in Pennypack Park at Verree Road on the 27th filled a huge gap in my list. The 29th was not such a good day. I knew that a front had come through, and there was a good chance that one of the rarer shorebirds would show up. However, I had an engagement to attend, and sure enough, my cell phone rang. It was Arlene Koch, who lives in Easton, PA. She was relaying a message that an American Golden-Plover was being seen at Tinicum. I cut short my engagement, rushed over to Tinicum, and missed the bird. Ah, the agony of defeat! I ended the month with 223 species.

October began more like July, warm and humid, and nothing was moving. However, a visit to POD produced a Black-capped Chickadee. Not only was it all field mark, but it called and even sang once. I was within one of Johnnie's record. I kept seeing good birds, but nothing new. On the 12th, I got a call from Doris McGovern. That morning, she had banded a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow at East Park Reservoir. I couldn't count a captured bird, but what a great find!

That POD location was to produce a string of good birds. On the 13th, I lucked into a juvenile American Golden-Plover on the tidal flats. I had tied Johnnie's record of 225, and the sting of that miss at Tinicum was gone. The following day, I had crippling views of a Vesper Sparrow, with its bold white eye ring, in the weedy fields at the same location. I had finally eclipsed Johnnie's mark. Finally, I heard an American Pipit going over the Rhawn Street ball fields on the 17th.

I received a call from Tom Bailey on the 25th. He was birding the Taylor Refuge on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. We were in the middle of a four-day Northeaster, and he was seeing numbers of Brant flying low over the river. When I got there, I didn't have much luck at first. Finally, I saw three flying upriver, low over the channel, while I was standing

on the viewing platform at Glen Foerd. Tom, who was birding downriver from me, had alerted me by cell phone that the birds were on the way. Later that day, Tom saw an adult Pomarine Jaeger soaring over the parking lot at Palmyra Cove Nature Park on the New Jersey side of the river. Wow!

I thought the law of diminishing returns had set in, but a visit to Bob Billings' feeder in Northeast Philadelphia on November 7 produced a beautiful adult male Pine Siskin. I thought I had missed Black Scoter, until I found a female in Tinicum's impoundment on the 11th while in the company of Doris McGovern. On November 23, there was a Northern Saw-whet Owl at Tinicum. Apparently large numbers of people saw it, but no one thought to call me. It all turned out well; on the 29th Paul Pulcinella re-found the bird, Gary Stolz called me to let me know, and Tony Croasdale showed me the bird. I ended November with 231 species.

It had been a great year, but I was hoping for just one more bird during December. My prayers were answered on the 15th. While participating in the Pennypack Valley Christmas Bird Count, I received a call from another participant, Tim McFadden. He was looking at a Snow Bunting at Northeast Airport. I rushed over, caught every red light in creation, but the bird was still there, a nice male at close range. Later that morning, I flushed a Short-eared Owl out of the weedy fields at POD. When you're hot, you're hot!

On the 19th, there was a single Cackling Goose at FDR, perhaps one of the birds from last winter. I spent quite a bit of time studying it. Common Redpolls were reported from Tinicum on the day after Christmas; but despite several attempts, I was unable to find any. There are always going to be misses, and I had many lucky finds during the year. I never dreamed I would be able to find 233 species in Philadelphia in 2007.

Literature Cited

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