

In The Champlain Valley, A Brawl of Birders



Noting the long line of cars parked on the shoulder of the road in front of DAR Park in Addison, Vermont, I decided to pull onto the opposite shoulder, only to discover, too late, that said shoulder consisted of a five-foot-deep snowbank into which the right side of my car promptly sank. I tensed up expecting the car to roll onto its passenger side but, *mirabile dictu*, it stayed on its tires albeit at a forty-five-degree angle. I got out to investigate, sunk in up to my waist and then struggled back onto the road, my jacket now festooned with a phalanx of burrs the size of Concorde grapes.

The dashboard thermometer read minus three degrees. I pulled my wife out of the car, and we simultaneously concluded that we needed to get towed out of this mess and that we might as well go and try to see the bird before starting in with AAA and waiting for a tow truck. So what I drove the car into a ditch.

Despite having missed the last six fancy birds we chased, we decided that we absolutely had to chase the common pochard several birders had seen from underneath the Crown Point Bridge the previous day. I equated the probability of seeing a common pochard in Lake Champlain about as likely as seeing an ostrich directing rush-hour traffic at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. A Eurasian species, common pochards show extremely rarely in North America, most often on Alaska's Aleutian Islands, once somewhere in California and another time somewhere in Saskatchewan. A handful of sightings.

The pochard got onto my radar via an e-mail describing some rare ducks seen near Crown Point; the e-mail ended with a mention of the pochard and a link to Vermont's VTlistserv on the off chance anybody felt inclined go chase it. It didn't work for me to jump up and go on a chase, so I went gloomily back to raking the snow off my roof, perhaps my least favorite thing to do. As I started to move the heavy, clumsy extension ladder from one part of the roof to another, struggling with the monster in two feet of fresh snow, my phone started ringing in my pocket.

My friend Larry Master said he was calling as he drove home from Crown Point, where he had observed the pochard for a couple of hours, fairly close to shore, in excellent light for

photographs. Larry urged me to go get the bird soon as possible because the forecast predicted temperatures around minus ten degrees that night, which would no doubt freeze the lake below the Crown Point Bridge and who knew where the bird might go?

I couldn't have picked up my wife at work and made it Crown Point much before dusk, so we went first thing next morning and started our search by driving into the snowbank, after which we walked a half-mile or so into the park, which overlooks the lake, noting the steady line of birders, not a smile on one of their faces, exiting the viewing area. The Lake at Crown Point had indeed frozen, and although hundreds of ducks had gathered above the ice in the open water that DAR Park overlooked, myriad plumes of sea smoke wafted off the water and floated north on a slight wind, revealing and concealing the ducks with maddening irregularity.

Nobody saw the bird that day, but Pat and I ran into quite a few friends, including a woman from Cape Cod, as well as quite a few passing good Samaritans inquiring if we had heat in the car and adjuring us to stay warm in the subzero air. The tow guy showed up in a pickup with a tow chain and with only minor struggling pulled me out of the snowbank backwards. On the drive to the hospital (Pat had a two o'clock meeting) I announced that the odds of finding the next bird we chase must surely have shifted in our favor.

So we forgot about the pochard, not a particularly exciting bird anyway, and three days later, as I checked e-mails before walking out the door to go skiing, I saw a post on Northern New York Birds from someone who had seen the bird five minutes ago from the Port Henry Boat Launch. I showed Pat the e-mail, we exchanged a conspiratorial look, and exchanged our ski boots for our hiking boots.

I pulled into the fairly crowded parking lot behind a car with Wisconsin plates as one with Maryland plates drove past me. Birders walking back from the viewing area had ear-to-ear smiles on their faces. We quickened our pace, reached the crowd and asked a man if he had the bird in his scope and if he did could we take a quick look before setting up our scope.

For an hour the common pochard foraged about twenty feet offshore, never going the whole time more than fifty feet or so from white buoy, diving occasionally and floating back and forth contentedly among a small, mixed flock of mostly common mergansers and mallards.

Then I heard something of an argument behind me about the pochard being an escapee from a zoo or a private collection rather than a wild bird because someone had seen a band on its leg. The other man in the argument wouldn't hear of any such thing—the common pochard was a wild bird and he was taking it for his New York Life List (an escaped captive bird wouldn't count).

Rather than stick around as the argument spread throughout the crowd and turned into a yet another birder brawl, we beat a hasty retreat, only to get stopped immediately by a man wearing an eye patch and speaking with an English accent:

“Is this New York?” he asked.

“Would you like to see the bird?” I responded.

“I’m keen to see it.”

I set my scope down, found the bird in a few seconds and gestured him to take a look.

“Jolly good,” he said, as he stood back from the scope and started back to the parking lot immediately behind us, saying, “Can you tell me how to get to the Thruway? I have to get back to Gloucester right away.”

Addendum: As I was about to post this blog, I learned that a Connecticut waterfowl collector had heard from a New York waterfowl collector that he was missing a male common pochard. Oh well ...

Photo of common pochard near Port Henry by Thomas Berriman.

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