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## Vermont's Youth Birding Program

In March of 2011, after several months of preparation, I boarded the first of four planes that would eventually take me to Borneo, a large island in South East Asia. My travelling companion was Dr. Alison Styring, a Louisiana State University graduate, now a professor of ornithology at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where I'm fortunate enough to be a student. Evergreen's unique approach to learning allows students to create their own curriculum and pursue faculty sponsored independent contracts, like my spring 2011 contract, entitled: *Avifauna of Borneo: Identification, Bioacoustics, and Research*. In the fall of 2010 when I first approached Alison about a bird focused independent contract, she already had an idea in mind. She wanted to conduct a pilot study in Borneo, (where she did her PhD work and continues to conduct research) looking at the detectability of birds during simultaneous ground and canopy surveys. As soon as she opened her Birds of Borneo field guide I was committed to the project. I spent the next 3 months looking through field guides, downloading bird calls from xeno-canto, and learning how to rig and climb very tall trees; because despite my semi-irrational fear of heights, I was going to be the one conducting the canopy surveys.



Eric Cannizzaro in New Jersey with NBNC for some birding

After 3 days of travel and over 24 hours of flying we finally landed in Sarawak, Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. We were each travelling with two carry-on bags and two very large checked

bags full of equipment. We waited outside the airport for an acquaintance who was coming to take us to the study site, a several-hour car ride out of town into the foothills. It was hot and sunny, and the place looked tropical. Asian Glossy Starlings and Eurasian Tree Sparrows were the only birds in sight. Sometime later as we were driving, what I saw from the car window reminded me of my time spent in Latin America doing similar work with birds.



Studying birds from the treetops

Once I arrived at the study site I met the rest of the team, which consisted of Dr. Fred Sheldon, Alison's research partner, faculty at LSU, and a group of 5 people associated with the Malaysia Forestry department, who would help as needed. The study site was a buffer zone, a selectively logged forest that surrounded a massive acacia tree plantation. We arrived in late afternoon and could hear right away the whistled call of Plaintive Cuckoos, the low thundering booms of a Greater Coucal, and the occasional flock of Long-tailed Parakeets flying by, all the while accompanied by the dull roar of cicadas.

The next morning was amazing; Red-throated Barbet, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Rhinoceros Hornbill, Black-and-Yellow Broadbill, White-rumped Shama, Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler, Diard's Trogon, and Rufous-tailed Tailorbird are just a few of the birds we saw. After a long morning of



It's not hard to see why the Black-and-Yellow Broadbill was a highlight!

birding, the rest of the first day was spent organizing equipment and getting ready to begin the surveys. After several days Alison returned to the U.S. to continue teaching, by then we'd



Eric looks and listens for birds over 100 feet above the forest floor in Borneo.

begun rigging trees and conducting the surveys, something Fred and I would continue doing for the next 4 weeks at two different sites. The birds were amazing, and the climbing was nerve racking. Each morning I'd climb a different tree usually about 35 meters high, and conduct a three-minute distance survey followed by a ten-minute audio survey, while Fred did the same thing on the ground below me. All the surveys were recorded and then transcribed later that day, a very tedious task.

Four weeks after I arrived I said goodbye to Fred and went off on my own for the last two weeks of my contract. I took a plane ride to the other side of the island to Tawau Hills Park (THP) in Sabah, Malaysia. The forest at THP is beautiful primary forest, in contrast to the logged secondary forest I was worked on in Sarawak, which has many different (and many more) species of birds. My room at the park was in one of the main buildings at the entrance, where a large troop of macaques were always hanging around. My task at Tawau Hills Park was to complete audio and distance surveys every 250 meters along a 13.5 kilometer transect up a mountain. I chose to do the surveys in the early morning, and I soon realized I would not be able to complete the surveys and sleep at the main entrance each night. One morning, I woke up at 4 a.m. and hiked 6 kilometers to start a 6:30 survey that I decided I'd head to a bunkhouse 10 kilometers up the mountain and continue from there.



The next day after a long day of surveying and

then hiking, and just a few hours before dark, I came to a small clearing at kilometer 10 and saw the bunkhouse. It was a long-house style structure with a porch that ran along one side. I remember thinking to myself "this was one of the most beautiful places I've ever been". Set on the side of a mountain, and much higher in elevation than anywhere I'd been so far in Borneo, it felt like I was in the clouds. The birds were different, the smell was different, and the evening air was crisp. One of the most vivid memories I have of my time in Borneo was arriving at the bunkhouse, exhausted, putting down my packs, and sitting on the edge of the porch. When I looked up I saw an Ashy Drongo, not far in front of me, the most elegant bird I could ever remember seeing. Ashy Drongos in Borneo are a soft grey - almost white, unlike the darker races on mainland Asia. The best way I can describe this slender insectivore is a cross between a swallow and a jay. They have a long tail that is narrow until the tip where it fans out a bit on the sides, and their erect posture makes them look especially dignified. Just a few minutes after noticing the drongo I saw a smaller bird foraging at the edge of the clearing, a bird that seemed strangely familiar. It wasn't long before I realized it was an Arctic Warbler; I'd seen it in my Sibley countless times. The irony of going to Borneo and seeing an Arctic Warbler made me smile. And the thought that we were both a long way from home gave me comfort; on some level it seemed, we understood each other. It was a good end to a long day.

Written by Eric Cannizzaro, who started birding at NBNC when he was in his early teens, and is a veteran of the World Series of Birding and Great Texas Birding Classic. Eric is currently studying at Evergreen University in Washington.



With just a few weeks left in the year-long quest for birds, Washington County just recorded it's 191<sup>st</sup> species: a Snowy Owl in the Mad River Valley. Even more impressive than the number of species found (which is a new record) is the overall amount of data collected this year on common birds as well as rare ones. So far, nearly 1,800 checklists have been entered into eBird in Washington County, and over 22,000 throughout the state! This plethora of information will help us learn more about the distribution of birds in Vermont, and beyond. Find out more about the county quests, in all counties, at <http://www.vtcostudies.org/quest/>

# Quiz: *Winter Query*

A visit to Lake Champlain during winter could turn up any of the following, but can you tell who they are?

1



Taken in December at Charlotte, VT

2



Taken in December at Charlotte, VT

3



Taken in February in Shelburne, VT

All Photos by Larry Clarfeld

Last Issue's Answers: 1. Nashville Warbler, 2. Black-billed Cuckoo, Hermit Thrush

## Upcoming Programs

All winter programs are *free* to members, but please register at least one week in advance.

### Plainfield Christmas Bird Count

*Saturday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 7:15 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.*

We will scour the greater Montpelier area for every bird we can find, leaving no Chickadee uncounted in our attempt to "census" birds across Vermont and beyond. Optional pot-luck dinner after the count.

Not available for the whole day or want to involve your whole family? Feel free to come by to help us count the species that are found around NBNC from 9am to noon. Binoculars provided. We'll help with bird identification!

### Mid-winter Bald Eagle Survey

*Saturday, January 7, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.*

Surveys of wintering Bald Eagles began in the late 1970's and continue to this day. We invite you to join in this effort to monitor eagles. Our transect will most likely cover the lower portion of the Winooski River, where several eagles typically over-winter.

### Superbowl of Birding IX

*Friday-Saturday, January 27-28*

*Fee: TBD*

This exciting event takes place in Essex County, MA, and over the past three years, we've tallied 78 species! This year, we may extend our trip to be a full weekend, so it's never too early to start thinking about! To be guaranteed a spot on the team, please register by January 5.

### Winter Ducks

*Sunday, March 25, 8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.*

As winter slowly transitions into spring, we will venture to Lake Champlain in search of wintering and migrating ducks. Thousands of geese and over 15 species of ducks may be present, and we'll search for the more elusive individuals such as Tufted Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye.

### Impromptu Owl Expeditions

*Time, Date TBD*

Snowy Owls spend most of their time far north in the arctic, but in some years, they come south... this is one of those years. With over a half-dozen sightings in Vermont within the past few weeks, we may organize an *impromptu* trip should a Snowy show up nearby!

