

Bad Weather = Good Birding?

By Kevin Welsh

The oncoming clouds were big and dark. A roll of thunder could be heard in the distance. I am walking home from school with a "non-birder" friend of mine. She looks at the storm and says to me, Uh-oh that looks nasty! I laugh and ask, What looks nasty?

Many times I've planned a birding trip and it rains. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it in a negative way. Take the time I went to Point Pelee in Ontario Canada. It was pouring! I hoped the rain would stop by the time we arrived. When we did arrive, I wish it never stopped! I was getting a myriad number of passerines while standing on the beach soaking wet. Canada, Magnolia, Palm, Ovenbird, and Black Throated Blue warblers came down with the rain. Not just warblers, though, flycatchers, tanagers, grosbeaks, and hummingbirds made their presence noticed in good numbers.

An unusually large flock of warblers or passerines, such as the kind I witnessed at Point Pelee, is a good sign indicating bad weather. A Moving high pressure area might be on its way. Migrating birds tend to avoid bad weather such as a warm or cold front by staying ahead of it.

Not only rain, but snow too, can produce good birds. This winter I took a trip up to Sault St. Marie in the upper peninsula of Michigan with my dad to see if we could get some of the northern owls that were appearing all over. On our first day there it didn't snow. The only birds we managed to get were the wintering finches at local feeders. However, on the second day, there was a blizzard. We got up early and drove through the whiteout. The first bird we came across was a huge Great Gray owl. While watching it sleep (mouths opened and amazed) it stopped snowing, but the wind didn't quit. As the wind rushed by with ferocity we pick up Gray Jay, Ruffed and Sharp Tailed grouse, and even a very stray Gray Crowned Rosy Finch that showed up near Whitefish Point.

The reason why all these northern owls were appearing statewide was caused by weather. Normally, only a few owls stray as far south as the Upper

peninsula during the winter. This year because temperatures were so low, the rodents that owls depend on dispersed and weren't as easy to find. So the owls, in search of food, wander farther south.

Even at home in Novi, Michigan during bad weather I've gotten some surprises. Just last weekend it was raining early in the morning. I couldn't get a ride anywhere so I birded in my neighborhood. I was surprised to find a male Mourning Warbler singing near my house. A mourning warbler in my city--in my county is pretty rare!

Countless times searching the horizon for migrating waterfowl in the dead of winter or getting soaked to the bone while looking for an unusual migrant have proved to be very rewarding. So *now* I *try* to plan my birding trips on days when there's a front moving through or rainstorms blowing in from the south. It makes me wonder what kinds of birds I could get during a tornado!