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These baby Common Loons grew up too fast to let us see them hitching a ride on their mother's back.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL TRIP?

"Get up here quick, they're riding on the mother's back now!" I have wanted for some time to photograph Common Loon babies peeking out of the mother's feathers as they comfortably ride across the water when they are still quite small. For three years in a row, ever since our friends moved from Pennsylvania to a lakeside home in Maine, where Common Loons are quite common every summer, I have made the jaunt to Maine, hoping to find baby Loons joy-riding during the first few days of their lives.

A couple of years ago I was much too late. See my 2013 column on loons.

Now the call came again, and we left for Maine immediately the next day. Alas, we were, once again, too late. The babies were already on their own, too big to hitch hike on Mom's back. Why my obsession with Loon babies, you may ask? Because babies peering out from their mother's back feathers is the very essence of cuteness. (*Sandhill Cranes, right*)



OK, unsuccessful on quest Number One, but we are now in Maine, so let's try for another target bird: the gorgeous male Spruce Grouse. The tried and true technique for finding Spruce Grouse is to drive remote country roads in Northern Maine where spruce trees are abundant. The Grouse come out along the road edges to pick up small gravel, which they ingest to help them digest the fibrous conifer needles that they eat. www.naturallynorthidaho.com/2012/09/look-for-spruce-grouse-on-gravel-roads.htm. We drove almost two hundred miles of likely roads around Moosehead Lake but

saw nary one Spruce Grouse. However, along the way we did see and photograph a soaring Broad-wing Hawk (*left*) and a number of colorful Cedar Waxwings. (*below right*) Skunked again on another target bird!

Let's try for one more: the should-be-easier-to-find Ruffed Grouse. Same "drive the roads" technique, but it's not necessary to drive so far from our host's home, as Ruffed Grouse are more common and not as fussy about their habitat requirements. Along the way we kept hearing the



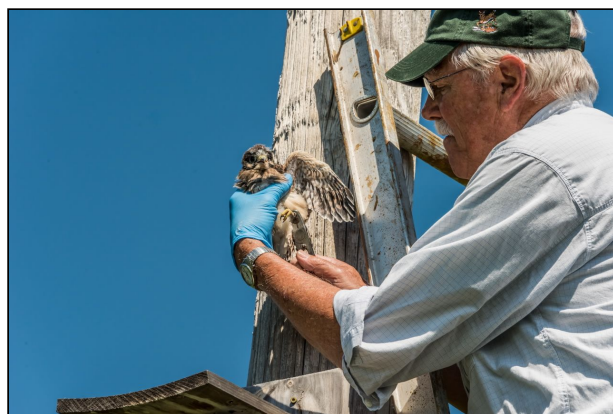
song of the Chestnut-sided Warbler, but rarely got a glimpse of them. Finally, we spotted one low along the road and were able to get a photo of it peeking out from behind the leaf it was using for cover. (*above left*) Shortly after the Warbler encounter we spotted a Ruffed Grouse crossing the road only a hundred yards or so in front of us, which quickly disappeared into the underbrush. (*below*) At last, at least a modicum of success.



Our host, a veteran falconer and long-time bird bander, specializing in hawks and falcons, maintains a trail of American Kestrel nesting boxes, and our fortuitous visit coincided with the proper time for banding the young Kestrels before they fledge from their boxes. The banding requires our host to climb a ladder to the box, reach in through the top, and quickly hand inspect the health of the developing young bird before applying the appropriate USFW band, while an associate records all the pertinent data for filing with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

While all this was occurring, the Kestrel mother kept frantically flying around trying to drive the large two footed predator away. Kestrels are normally a very difficult bird to photograph, but this mother kept screaming and diving at our host and afforded the opportunity for this close-up flight photography. (*below*)

Once again, the trip goes into the books as unsuccessful. And yet, we spent four wonderful days with good friends, saw numerous birds that we don't regularly see, and were able to obtain photos of some birds that are often difficult to get.



Like so many times in life, when circumstances don't live up to expectations, we write them off as unsuccessful. But if we tabulate all the surrounding circumstances, opportunities and experiences that went into not being successful, it was still a pretty good trip! How many times have we gone looking for a reported rare bird, only not to find it? More often than I care to remember. But on virtually every one of those unsuccessful trips, we found birds that we don't commonly see around our home haunts, and/or met, birded with, or socialized with old friends and new friends, all of which, and whom, turned an unsuccessful trip into a most enjoyable time.

And besides, we still have a reason to go back and try again another year. I guess it all depends on your definition of "unsuccessful."

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