

From Norfolk to New York

Thanks to the Cameron Bepolka Trust, a mere six weeks after our BTO Bird Camp, A Level student **Amy Hall** found herself jetting off to New York State to attend the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's 'Young Birders Event'. Here she tells us about her eye-opening experience.

The BTO Bird Camp in Norfolk in May 2016 was wonderful. I met 19 fantastic young birders, each with so much knowledge about birds and other wildlife, as well as being some of the friendliest people I have ever had the good fortune to encounter. A few weeks after the camp, I received a phone call from the BTO telling me that I had been chosen to go to the Young Birders Event at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. I have never been so

excited and nervous all in one go like I was after this call – I would have to go to America alone, and would be meeting a whole new set of birders who are used to a whole new set of birds!

Travelling to Heathrow on the morning of the 6 July, I felt sick with anticipation; the day had finally come. The journey across the North Atlantic to New Jersey was about seven hours, and then I had to take the connecting flight to Ithaca. At Ithaca airport, Jessie Barry (who works in the Macaulay Library at the Lab) met me, and drove me back to her and Chris Woods' house just a few minutes away. At the house, I was met by Vitor, a Brazilian with an infectious enthusiasm for anything with feathers! That night I slept well, with the most magical view from my

It soon became clear that the Americans were proud of their huge variety of birds, and they were more than keen to help me learn



▲ Amy arrives at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, all set for an intense three-day ornithological extravaganza.

◀ This very obliging Virginia Rail was among the many new species Amy encountered during her trip.

window; fireflies dancing in the Cornell woodland as the noises of the night lulled me into a deep slumber.

The next day, Vitor and I were taken to the Lab. It was a beautiful modern building with a swampy lake which could be viewed from a giant glass panelled wall within. A steady flow of young birders arrived as it neared 3 o'clock; the nationalities represented were American, Canadian, Brazilian and British. It was great to hear where everyone was from and what they were looking forward to seeing and doing. I was feeling very foreign, and comments like "You're not from round here, are you?" sparked conversations detailing the types of birds I see in the UK compared to the sheer number of species found in the States and Canada. It soon became clear that the Americans were proud of their huge





▲ Amy at Heathrow Airport, ready for her American Adventure.
 ◀ Amy joined young birders from across the globe at Cornell's event.



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variety of birds, and they were more than keen to help me learn which species we would be seeing.

Each day began early so we could go birding for a few hours to find species like Blackburnian Warbler, Catbird, Red-eyed Vireo and Chestnut-sided Warbler (to name but a few!). On one of the days we learned sound recording techniques, using both a shotgun microphone and a parabola. This proved hard in woodland; standing still to prevent background noise is nigh on impossible with mosquitos feeding on any patch of exposed skin! Later on the recordings we made were added to the Macaulay Library, an honour for all of us young birders, especially after we had seen the huge collection which began many years ago by people pioneering the use of birdsong in research.

LEARNING THE US BIRDING ROPES

Throughout the camp we did a lot of birding (as you would expect!), stopping at places which were known for special species, such as Bobolink and Upland Sandpiper. A trip to Montezuma (at the top of Cayuga Lake) resulted in many species added to my life list, notably Purple Martin, Marsh Wren (which has a beautifully exuberant song), Black Tern

and a very 'posey' Virginia Rail. One thing which struck me at Montezuma was how common Ospreys are there. I live very close to Rutland Water, where the Rutland Osprey Project operates, monitoring nests after reintroductions of young Scottish Ospreys took place in 1997. To see Ospreys on roadsides, nesting on telegraph poles, and being ignored as they flew over really took me aback; I won't deny that I noticed a few funny looks at my delight as I watched my first American Osprey hunt in some water close to where we were!

In the evenings, we received talks from experts who shared their knowledge and experiences, ranging from film making to migration calls. The staff at the Lab also showed us the projects they are working on, particularly eBird, the American equivalent to BirdTrack. The data from eBird are used to create accurate distribution maps, which are then used in animations, depicting the movement of species such as Indigo Bunting throughout their migration. These talks were inspiring, and demonstrated just how vast the field of ornithology is.

The final day of the camp came around too soon – we spent the morning cramming in some more birding locations

before we had to depart. The final bird we saw was a Mourning Warbler with fledglings, but unfortunately the heavens opened and I didn't get any photos because of the rain. The rain truly was pathetic fallacy for how we were all feeling. These people were so friendly and passionate, and I am proud to call them my friends. I still receive emails from them and hope to see them again someday.

A TRIP TO REMEMBER

I would like to thank both the BTO and the Cameron Bepolka Trust, who funded this truly incredible trip! I will never forget my time at Cornell, and would also like to thank Jessie, Chris and Ian (as well as the other staff members I met during the camp) who made this whole experience a friendly and informative one. I am truly honoured to have been selected for this trip, and may never be able to thank everyone involved enough! ■

Get involved

- www.cameronbespolka.com
- btoyounghirders.blogspot.co.uk
- www.bto.org/young-fund
- www.birdtrack.net

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