

Flying Kites 2026 Birdathon Report

The Flying Kites' fourth birdathon is in the books — 100 species across 48 hours, a Mississippi Kite sighting (not our first, but always worth the effort), and the inaugural outing of Eric's "Birding Tunes" playlist, which we'll get to.

As has become tradition, we kicked things off Friday evening at Algonkian Regional Park — the 48-hour clock starting Friday night by design, since experience has taught us that Sunday afternoon is about all any of us has left in the tank. Eric and Rua had the park to themselves for the opener this year. The Common Nighthawks didn't show that night, but the evening still delivered: a Common Merganser mother with 13 of her babies dozing on a log off the point, and a female Baltimore Oriole working methodically through the tall grass beside the crew boats. We had thirty-eight species to start.

Saturday morning had its complications — Abby (13) had a track meet, Rua (11) had a soccer game, and Sadie (9) had a ballet recital — but Eric and Rua carved out a few hours at Algonkian Sanctuary Trail before the day's obligations took over, and it was time well spent. Sixty species at the trail alone. The Merganser family made another appearance, this time on Sugarland Run, where we watched the babies leap effortlessly from the water onto a mid-stream log, clearing a good 15 inches without a second thought. The warbler showing was excellent, with Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Hooded Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Black-Throated Blue Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, Chestnut-Sided Warbler, Yellow-Rumped Warbler, and Black-Throated Green Warbler all making appearances. The biggest treat may have been a Barred Owl that came into view as we wrapped up the trail — almost certainly the same bird we had heard calling nearly continuously when we started two hours earlier. We finished with a quick stop at Algonkian Regional Park by the cabins, where Magnolia Warbler, Black-And-White Warbler, Cape May Warbler, and American Redstart rounded out the morning.

After Sadie finished her performance, Eric and Henry (6) slipped away for stops at Middlesex Drive Pond and Thunder Road — spots perfectly suited to a kid who loves not just birds but turtles, dragonflies, and planes. Henry got a kick out of the buzzy song of the Grasshopper Sparrows and lit up at the bright yellow breasts of the Eastern Meadowlarks. The highlight may have been driving inches from a Killdeer strolling down Thunder Road, completely unbothered.

Saturday closed with the full Flying Kites — Eric, Kiersten, Abby, Rua, Sadie, and Henry — finally together for a picnic dinner at Bles Park, which had been closed for renovations the past couple of years. As we finished eating, a Yellow-Billed Cuckoo flew into the tree directly above us. Walking the trail afterward, we came within a few feet of a Wild Turkey crossing the path — who appeared considerably less startled by the encounter than we were.

Sunday brought our other birdathon tradition: the annual trek out to Sweet Run State Park. The drive alone has its rewards — a reliable Rock Pigeon sighting as we pass the overpasses heading toward Leesburg — and the park itself is a welcome step away from the busyness of

normal life. The birds delivered, as they always do, with Kentucky Warblers, a Canada Warbler, and a Louisiana Waterthrush all singing in the forest. We closed the day with Trumpeter Swans along Piney Swamp Road, a visit to Broadlands Wetlands Nature Preserve for the snapping turtles (always a draw regardless of the birds), and finally — because what would a Flying Kites birdathon be without the attempt — a stop at Golden Meadows Road in Ashburn to look for the resident Mississippi Kite breeding pair. They showed up, just as the clouds darkened and rain moved in.

The kids are older and the schedules are busier, and the enthusiasm is not uniformly distributed across all family members — but where it has waned in some, it has grown in others. We're grateful for everyone who supports this effort year after year.

One final note for the historical record: 2026 marked the inauguration of Eric's "Birding Tunes" playlist. Reactions varied by song and by family member. When "The Albatross" came on, some younger team members were disappointed to discover it was the 1971 Lobo version rather than the Taylor Swift track they had hoped for. The only Swift songs on offer that day were those of the Chimney Swifts overhead.

Here's the full eBird trip report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/514501>



