



GREATER AKRON

# AUDUBON *Matters*

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## Witt's End

### *Educating the Masses*

Whatever numbers you want to believe – 60 million birders spending more than \$2 billion annually are a couple of my favorites – all indications are there are a lot of us out here. It's easy to forget not everyone is a birder when your entire circle of friends see nothing out of the ordinary about pausing in mid sentence to observe a flight of Canada geese, or chasing after a rare bird when you should be doing something (anything) else.

This fact came home to roost with me recently. We had spent the previous evening with folks from the *Cleveland Bird Calendar* (a great, inexpensive publication available from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History). It was a business meeting, however the business was birds and everyone around the table spoke the same language. There was no confusion about what was what.

The following day I was walking through my neighborhood when I heard crows mobbing a probable hawk. I looked around. Sure enough, a Cooper's hawk, just out for an afternoon sparrow snack, was dueling with a half dozen crows.

To the hawk's credit, he landed in a large conifer, his back to the trunk and faced the coal-black denizens, all of whom were chicken to get closer than a couple of feet. There was a lot of noise and wing flapping, however no blood was spilled. (Interesting; most animal confrontations involve a lot of wing flapping and noise with no injuries. Maybe humans could learn something.)

All-in-all it was a one of those encounters with nature we birders thoroughly enjoy. At about that moment, I glanced up to see a neighbor coming around the corner, also focused on the ruckus in the trees. I said something memorable and intelligent like, "Neat, huh?" She indulged me as she would any six-year-old kid and said, "I couldn't figure why they were not in formation."

Taken aback, I stammered a bit and said, "You mean the crows, there? Chasing the Cooper's hawk?"

She looked at me like I didn't know the difference between an American robin and fried chicken and said, "No, those geese making all that noise. They usually fly in a nice V formation when they're landing."

Oh, my. I should have taken the opportunity to invite her to one of our meetings. Instead, I started to talk about how crows mob raptor species. At about the same time, her dog stopped sniffing my shoes and started to take an unnatural interest in my pants' leg. I shifted the conversation to the weather and that's when she began to give her dog more leash.

Well, we can't educate the whole world. And 60 million birders is a nice round number.

— Clyde Witt, editor

## Meetings to Fit the Seasons

Our new meeting location proved to be the right choice in November when we packed the house for author Jim McCormac. His presentation on birds of Ohio was outstanding and helped prime us for the Christmas Bird Count.

This month, **January 25**, we have Casey Tucker from the Audubon Ohio office. He will get us up to speed on some of the state-supported programs, primarily Audubon At Home. GAAS's own, Joyce Pelz has been active in this statewide initiative and will give us some details on what our chapter is planning.

**February 22** we'll face the cold hard facts of winter with a hot new program presented by Wendy Weirich, the well-known naturalist from the Cleveland MetroParks. Learn how plants and animals survive the harsh conditions of winter. Have you ever wondered what really goes on in the nivian and subnivian zones after dark? Here's your opportunity to learn the truth.

Dr. Todd Blackledge of the University of Akron has an interesting tale to weave and he'll do it **March 22**. We are going to learn about web builders, highlighting local species of arachnids. If time permits, Blackledge will tell us about silk and why biotech companies are so interested in what nature does as a matter of course.

Just in time to warm the chilly spring weather, chapter president Mark Purdy, along with his wife and interpreter Claire, will share with us their great adventure in the Galapagos Islands. On **April 26** Mark and Claire will take us to this remote spot in the Pacific Ocean where Charles Darwin and others since have seen evolution in action.

**May 24** we'll get an up close and personal look at the critical wetland habitats in our own backyard, the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Larry Feinstein is a biology graduate student at the University of Akron and has been involved in a number of on-going studies of conservation and management.

**In June** we'll have the annual picnic. The executive committee is working on another special event and venue so watch this space for all the details.

Our meetings are always the fourth Tuesday of the month from September through June, except in December when we substitute the annual Christmas count and sometimes in June if we have to find a different date for the picnic. The meetings are free and open to the public so be sure to bring a friend this month. We meet in the Mingo Shelter on Sand Run Parkway in Sand Run Metro Park. Mingo Shelter is about 1.3 miles west of Portage Path, or 1.75 miles east of Sand Run Road. Doors open at 6:30 PM and the program begins promptly at 7:00 PM.

### **Field Trips Aplenty**

One sure way to beat the winter blahs is to start thinking about those beautiful birds of spring returning to our area. This year the chapter has planned a series of field trips in cooperation with the MetroParks Serving Summit County.

Members of our chapter will be leading field trips at Firestone Park on April 30, May 7, 14 and 21. These are all Saturday mornings and coincide with peak warbler migration times. We will meet at the Tuscarawas Shelter (off of Harrington Rd) at 8AM.

Birders of all skill levels welcome. And, like the birds, we go rain or shine so don't use the weather as an excuse not to enjoy this hot birding spot.

### **Good News Department**

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources reports that barn owl numbers appear to be increasing. Sightings of barn owls in Ohio were first recorded in the mid-1800s. As the original forests were cleared for agriculture, barn owl populations increased. Their population peaked in the 1930s when grassland-associated agriculture such as hay, lightly grazed pasture, and meadow, was common-place. These grasslands provided habitat for meadow voles, the barn owl's primary prey. Farming practices shifted in the late 1940s and 50s resulting in a decline in our barn owl population, as well as many of our other grassland wildlife species. Grass and small grains were replaced by corn and soybeans across much of Ohio's agricultural landscape. The loss of grasslands continued and, in 1990, the barn owl was listed as the only endangered owl in the state.

The division of wildlife barn owl program began in 1988 to determine the distribution of Ohio barn owls and to annually monitor their population and productivity. Nesting boxes were erected within 0.5 mile of quality grassland habitat. Since the program's beginning, more than 200 nest boxes were installed throughout the state.

Active barn owl nests have been found in 34 of Ohio's 88 counties, mainly along the glaciated-unglaciated boundary from northeast to southwest. Over the last 16 years, 420 nests were recorded ranging from 11 to 49 active annually; 1,614 barn owl chicks have been banded. Data collected during the barn owl program has resulted in the down-listing of barn owls from endangered to threatened status in spring 2002. At last report, 44 active nest sites had been located and 158 chicks have been banded.

### **Every Species Needs a Home**

A program to restore habitat for Northern bobwhite quail is now available to property owners in 35 Ohio counties, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife.

The Northern Bobwhite Quail Habitat/Upland Bird Initiative, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program, aims to create 250,000 acres of essential upland bird habitat in 35 states nationwide. In Ohio, the goal is 14,200 acres. The new program seeks to create nesting and brood-rearing cover along cropland field borders, while establishing travel corridors.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for private landowners interested in attracting bobwhite quail," said Steven A. Gray, chief of the Division of Wildlife. "Grassland buffers along crop fields enhance the movement of existing quail coveys and are a critical component of this restoration program. The program will provide a much-needed habitat niche that is lacking in counties within the existing quail range. It will be great to once again hear the distinctive whistle of the bobwhite quail on Ohio's farms."

Nationally, Northern bobwhite quail numbers have declined in the past 20 years, largely due to loss of early successional grassland corridors and the transitional development of once grassy fields into woods and row crops. In Ohio, the blizzards of 1977-78 decimated quail numbers, which have yet to rebound to 1977 levels.

To be eligible, the cropland to be enrolled must satisfy the basic eligibility and cropping history criteria for the Conservation Reserve Program. To determine individual eligibility for the initiative, farmers and landowners in the counties named should check with their local Farm Service Agency office. Producers will receive annual rental payments for up to 10 years.

— By Robert White, wildlife expert, guest columnist

### **Don't Forget to Feed the Birds**

Winter weather chases many of Ohio's songbirds south, yet several species not only stick around during the cold months, they are joined by a variety of new feathered faces. Invite some fun and brighten your landscape this season by adding a bird feeder to your backyard.

Backyard bird feeding is a popular pastime in the Buckeye State, and feeders of every shape and size can be found on the market today. In fact, some first-time feeder buyers might find making a selection a little overwhelming.

To help simplify the decision, here's some information for the Division of Wildlife. Keep in mind that there are really only three basic types of feeders: the hopper, tube and platform. Additionally, each of these feeders along with the seed you use attracts different bird species.

Also, birding experts suggest that the ideal bird feeder is one that's sturdy enough to withstand harsh winter weather, seals out moisture to keep seed dry, and is large enough that you don't have to be out refilling it every day.

**Hopper feeders** are the most common and widely recognizable feeders. Often resembling a barn or gazebo-like structure, they feature a lift-off roof for easy filling and traditionally hold lots of seed. Depending on the seed you choose, birds of every size and type will visit this feeder.

Finches and some of Ohio's small woodland birds, such as chickadees, titmice and nuthatches are common visitors to cylinder-shaped **tube feeders**. Most of these feature six to eight opposing perches that are positioned beside portals from which birds extract seeds. Additionally, the small perches found on these feeders discourage larger birds, such as grackles and doves as well as seed-robbing squirrels. Tube feeders can be hung from a tree limb or pole.

Get an unobstructed view of your feathered visitors with a **tray feeder**, which can be suspended from a tree branch or pole, or placed on the ground with fold-out legs. Cardinals, jays, woodpeckers, cedar waxwings and many other birds readily accept the open, shallow design and wrap-around ledges of a tray feeder. Trays placed low to the ground are beneficial to ground-feeding birds such as dark-eyed juncos, towhees and sparrows. Ring the dinner bell with an assortment of food staples, such as dried fruit, nuts, a variety of seeds and chopped suet then watch as a wide array of birds flock to the feast.

Suet, placed in a small wire or plastic mesh cage, is another feeder alternative. These "fat cakes" offer birds a tasty, high-energy treat, which is particularly helpful in the winter. To discourage less desirable guests from devouring the suet, choose a feeder that offers the food from the bottom. Woodpeckers and nuthatches will have no trouble hanging upside down to feed, but neighborhood raccoons, cats and starlings are easily defeated by this approach.

Birds use feedings stations as supplements to their natural diet especially when deep snow or ice covers the ground. But don't get caught up in the myth that wild birds cannot survive without your generosity. After all, they were successfully surviving winter weather well before the first pilgrim ever scattered a fistful of cracked corn on Plymouth Rock.

For Further Information Contact: Laura Jones (614) 265-6811 or [laura.jones@dnr.state.oh.us](mailto:laura.jones@dnr.state.oh.us)

## **Ohio Winter Bird Atlas**

In hopes of gathering more data and coverage for the Ohio Winter Bird Atlas, Julie Shieldcastle of the Black Swamp Bird Observatory is asking for your help.

This will be the fourth year of data collection for the Atlas. Vic Fazio was instrumental in creating this project and the Observatory is continuing his fine efforts. She asks that you help with making the Ohio Winter Bird Atlas as good as it can be by participating this January.

Shieldcastle is looking for bird observations from each DeLorme block in Ohio. (Except Maumee Bay State Park, 27C5, or Marietta 81A7.) It can include your backyard, your favorite walking area, your drive to work, etc. It would be helpful and provide more information if it is conducted in the same block every week, however, she will gladly accept data from any block during January. Data can be sent to her or go to the project's Web site [www.aves.net/winter-atlas](http://www.aves.net/winter-atlas) for downloading the data sheet. More information can be found at that Web site.

All you'll need to provide is the date, DeLorme block location, name of observer(s) and species numbers observed. Sort of like a Christmas count only you pick the territory.

Thanks for your help while out birding in January. If you have any questions please send them to Shieldcastle at: Julie Shieldcastle - Black Swamp Bird Observatory, [bsbobird@thirdplanet.net](mailto:bsbobird@thirdplanet.net)

## **2005 Wildlife Diversity Conference**

The Ohio Department of Natural Resource's Division of Wildlife will hold its annual Wildlife diversity Conference March 9 at the Aladdin Shrine Complex, in Columbus.

This year's conference will feature presentations involving wildlife issues and species that are either big, bold and beautiful.

The keynote speaker will be Mark Shieldcastle, wildlife biologist with a salute to the recovery of the American bald eagle in Ohio.

Then, you can discover how extensive reclaimed surface-mined areas are benefiting birds in the state.

Next, explore the bold behavior of the American bullfrog. Details of significant undercover law enforcement operations protecting native reptiles and amphibians from poachers will also be presented.

Another big comeback story is the river otter. Learn about the current status of these playful, seldom seen creatures.

There will also be an opportunity to learn more about darters that call the Big and Little Darby Creeks home. What these creatures lack in size, they make up for in color.

You will be amazed at the industrious nature of Ohio's ants and gain insights to their vast underground communities. The day's presentations will wrap up with a stimulating revelation of the beauty of bird and other animal sounds.

The conference will also provide opportunities to ask questions, share ideas and network with others interested in natural resource conservation and management.

For information, please call 1 800 WILDLIFE, or watch for information on [www.ohiodnr.com/wildlife](http://www.ohiodnr.com/wildlife).