



GREATER AKRON

# AUDUBON *Matters*

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## **Witt's End**

### *Of Birds and Jail Birds*

As birders, we attach an esthetic value to birds others don't always understand. And there are people who attach values to birds that make us ask why. This story is a bit of both. I have to use the word alleged, a lot, to protect the guilty, because this is America where you are innocent until you run out of money.

Last year I wrote how, through the Herculean efforts of our son-in-law, a professor at Transylvania University, Susan Jones and I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view one of the few (four?) remaining, intact collections of John James Audubon's *Elephant Portfolio*. These works, and other originals so rare it's hard to imagine they're real in this digital age, are housed in the university's Special Collections Library. It's an appointment-only place and you only get an appointment if you know the right people. For birders it's about as close to a spiritual experience as you can get.

With guidance from the librarian, we reverently turned the pages of this remarkable collection of lithographs from 1856-1857, painted in 1855 and given to the university in the 1930's. We were only one degree of separation from John Audubon! The pages are so large and fragile it requires a labor of love for three people to turn a page. We also looked at first edition's by Charles Darwin and original pencil drawings by Audubon. These were at first thought to have been destroyed, as much of his original work was, by his printer in 1856.

Others, however, see another kind of value in these works of art. In December, a student at the university, following protocols, arranged to view the collection as part of some alleged research he was doing. The librarian who had treated us so warmly, knowing as birders we could appreciate these rarities, opened the collection to him. This student allegedly assaulted and restrained her, then made a cell phone call to his buddies waiting nearby in a van.

Only vaguely aware of what they were allegedly stealing, the bad guys attempted to carry off the set's four volumes of

the *Elephant Portfolio* (each page is about 36"x40" and each volume about four-inches thick), dropping two volumes in the process. They did get away with two volumes, plus one first edition of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 20 of Audubon's pencil drawings, and some other volumes dating back to 1425.

Four days later two of these alleged rocket scientists went to Christie's auction house in New York. Employing unique names like Mr. Smith and Mr. Williams, they allegedly represented a person allegedly wanting to sell the works. Christie's quietly alerted the Lexington, Ky. cops and also sent along a CD produced from its security cameras.

When the Lexington police and FBI agents busted down the door at the home of these "fine young men" (as described by their friends and families, yet all had been arrested before), a gun-toting suspect wisely dropped his weapon. All of the art work was recovered, unharmed.

The good news is, the art work is safely back in its secure room, unscathed. The not-so-good news is, henceforth, individuals such as we, who get our reward by just viewing these treasures, will probably never again have such open access. Things are worth only what you make them worth.

— By Clyde Witt, editor

## **More Meetings, More Diversity**

Just in time to warm the chilly spring weather, Mark Purdy, chapter president, along with his wife and interpreter Claire, will share with us their great adventure to the Galapagos Islands. On **April 26** Mark and Claire will take us to this remote spot in the Pacific Ocean where Charles Darwin and many others since have watched 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. He has been involved in a number of on-going studies of conservation and management.

**June 28** we'll have our annual picnic. This year's event will be held at Bath Nature Preserve. A guest speaker

from the University of Akron will talk with us about BNP research activities and how we, as citizen scientists, can get involved. We'll officially start at our regular time, 6:30 PM, however, you are encouraged to come early and enjoy the activities of bobolinks and eastern meadowlarks, along with many other birds nesting at the preserve. We've invited Western Cuyahoga AS, Canton AS, and others to enjoy this outstanding place. You're responsible for your own picnic meal. We'll have more specific details in the next newsletter.

Our meetings are always the fourth Tuesday of the month from September through June, except in December when we substitute the annual Christmas count. 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 and also a number of trips at Bath Nature Preserve.

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 8 AM.

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.

We will also be holding bird walks at BNP on Ira Road, Sundays May 8 and 15. Meet in the parking lot for an 8 AM start.

And here's another great birding opportunity. Dike 14 near E.72<sup>nd</sup> Street in Cleveland will be having a special event, Saturday May 21. Bird Walks, live animals and displays are planned. For a listing of scheduled event times see the website: [www.wcasohio.org/Whats\\_New.htm](http://www.wcasohio.org/Whats_New.htm)

### **BNP Activities**

It's not exactly a field trip, however, the chapter is holding its annual Garlic Mustard Pulls at BNP on Saturdays April 9 and 16. This year we will have additional hands involved: members of the University of Akron biology department and the Bath Garden Club have been invited. Meet in the parking lot at approximately 12:45 PM.

Bring gardening gloves and prepare to kneel and sit on the ground.

On February 27, hearty volunteers from the chapter braved warm temperatures and sunshine to clean six wood duck boxes on the preserve. The boxes were installed years ago by Boy Scout troops but not well maintained. The intrepid team (that worked without sunglasses) included Mark Purdy, Mike Edgington, Marc Nolls, and Lew Monegan. The team checked structural integrity of the six boxes, emptied the old nest material and re-filled the boxes with fresh wood chips and shavings. The team plans to establish a monitoring schedule so that use and nesting success can be determined.

### **Portage Lakes Purple Martin Society**

The Chapter has joined the Portage Lakes Purple Martin Society. If you would like to know more about this association, talk with chapter member Larry Hunter, its foremost spokesman and advocate. As a show of support for this worthy cause, the chapter has pledged funds to purchase two nesting gourds that will have our chapter's name inscribed on them – in case the purple martins are picky about where to build their nests this year.

### **Support For Our Nation's Rivers**

As you know, America's rivers are in trouble. Eroding water quality, insufficient water for river health and urban sprawl are taking a significant toll on our rivers. American Rivers, one of Audubon's more trusted and valued partners, has pulled together a report entitled the *Citizens' Agenda for Rivers* -- a national plan identifying policies that our nation's leaders can implement today to improve the health of our rivers. National Audubon Society has enthusiastically signed on in support of this plan. Our chapter has signed

on in support of the plan, as well. If you'd like to review the plan, visit this Web site: [www.healthyivers.org](http://www.healthyivers.org)

### **Bird's Eye View**

In February, Jim McCormac had the chance to ride along with Division of Wildlife staff on a mid-winter waterfowl survey, which covered the region from Sandusky Bay west to Bay Shore power plant, just east of Toledo. They used a high-wing twin prop Partenavia aircraft, which allows for generally excellent views of the terrain below.

They covered all of the marshes, and except for scattered open water leads, most were still frozen over. Nevertheless, where there was open water, quite a few birds were present. The dominant species were common merganser, scaup (hard to be certain of species from up

#### **In Memory**

The chapter received a generous donation last month in memory of member Madonna Sullivan who died in February.

there, but the few that Jim saw well in flight appeared to be greater, as did many of the very white bodied drakes (on the water), common goldeneye, and red-breasted merganser. In shallower areas of the marshes, it was mallards and American black ducks, Canada goose and a few northern pintail.

Interesting were all of the Bald Eagles congregated around Sandusky Bay. He saw at least 35. Basically, anywhere that open water leads of decent size occur, you can expect to see an eagle, and usually several. Not so good were at least 35 Mute Swans queued up in a marsh on the east side of the bay. This non-native species seems to still be on the increase, especially in that part of Lake Erie.

A definite highlight, says Jim, was found in a big agricultural field near Route 2 and the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge as they flew back to the Port Clinton airport. About 250 Tundra Swans were bunched together, making for a spectacular sight, and a very noteworthy winter concentration.

### **Christmas Count Information**

Here are some highlights from the annual Christmas Bird Count last December. Count compiler Marie Morgan says this count, 86 species, was our best since 1987 when we had 88 species. Remarkable, considering the challenging weather. We had some good species, such as the white-eyed vireo which is a first for us. We had more than a 50 percent increase in numbers of American crows, and a drop of more than 50 percent in the number of black-capped chickadees and titmice. There was also a 50 percent decrease in the number of downy woodpeckers reported. Other species showing significant fewer numbers were song sparrows, swamp sparrows, house finch and house sparrows. The full report can be viewed on the chapter's Web site, [www.cs.uakron.edu/~pelz/gaas/activ03.html](http://www.cs.uakron.edu/~pelz/gaas/activ03.html).

### **'05 Eagle Total Shy of Record**

A near-record number of bald eagles were observed in the state during the annual Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey, conducted by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife.

A preliminary total of 366 bald eagles were observed, including 247 mature bald eagles and 119 immature eagles (birds less than 5 years old). Last year, a final count revealed 372 bald eagles during the mid-winter survey, a group composed of 282 mature and 90 immature birds. Last spring, 127 eaglets fledged from a record 108 nests. Bald eagles were observed in 55 of Ohio's 88 counties during this year's two-week survey. Counties along the western shore of Lake Erie continue to report the largest number of eagles. Sandusky County had the greatest number of sightings with 56 birds. Counties with the

highest counts of bald eagles were: Sandusky-56, Ottawa-49, Erie-35, Wyandot-27, and Trumbull-19. Summit county reported only a single bird this year.

### **Spring Birding**

In spring, it's sometimes hard to judge who is more strange, the birds or the birders. Recently we've had an American robin who alternately admires himself, then attacks his image in our front window. Seems that this is not atypical behavior according to the Cornell Lab or Ornithology. Passions run high in spring, when birds are hormonally primed for defending territories and mating. Birds have been known to fly at windows and attack car mirrors and hub caps in attempt to fend off intruders. In these battles, it's a blow-for-blow exchange until the other guy tires and the match always ends in a draw. Life's lesson here for our politicians might be that the next time an enemy approaches, they should just hold up a giant mirror.

Here are some more factoids from Cornell: The smallest bird nests are about the size of a thimble. Bee hummingbirds in Cuba build tiny cups just .8 inches across and one inch high. The largest nest prize goes to bald eagles. One nest near St. Petersburg, Fla., was 20 feet deep and 9.5 feet across. Our resident mathematics wizard, Wolfgang Pelz, is working out how many bee hummingbirds could take up residence in the bald eagle's nest.

Did you know a pair of barn swallows make more than 1,200 trips, carrying mud in their bills, to build a nest? One osprey nest was reused by various pairs for 45 consecutive years. And the "Good Parent" award goes to the Illinois house wren that brought food to his nestlings 1,217 times in a single day. For more great birding information, visit Cornell's Web site, [www.birds.cornell.edu](http://www.birds.cornell.edu).

### **Medina Raptor Center**

Laura Jordon, director of the Medina Raptor Center reports that in 2004, the center treated 250 birds and mammals; 109 of which were raptors. The center had a release rate of more than 70 percent of its patients.

She says the center saw 20 cases of West Nile Virus which it treated and was able to release many of the patients.

Of special note, she says, were some birds she does not usually see. A king rail chick was brought in, as was an American woodcock, brown thrasher, common loon, peregrine falcon, yellow-bellied cuckoo, horned lark, pileated woodpecker and a red-necked grebe.

Also of special note is the center's new Web site, [www.medinaraptorcenter.org](http://www.medinaraptorcenter.org). Now you can take a look at the activities of this organization, make needed donations or inquire about its Adopt-a-Bird program.