

CUYAHOGA VALLEY TOWPATH TRAIL CENSUS MONTHLY NEWSLETTER - APRIL 2023
(CVTTC)

HISTORY & FACTS of the APRIL CENSUS

APRIL	13-YEAR TOTALS of SPECIES / INDIVIDUALS							
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
49 / 758	50 / 975	57 / 691	52 / 730	57 / 878	59 / 984	49 / 593	57 / 760	61 / 972
2019	2020	2021	2022					
55 / 1,024	57 / 979	59 / 698	56 / 816					

Most Species seen in April : 61 on 04/07/2018.

Most Total Birds seen in April : 1,024 on 04/06/2019.

Fewest Species seen in April : 49 on 04/02/2010 & 04/02/2016.

Fewest Total Birds seen in April : 593 on 04/02/2016.

Species Average in April : 55.2 Species.

Total Birds Average in April : 835.2 Individuals.

Lowest Temperature on April Census : 24-degrees F on 04/06/2013.

Highest Temperature on April Census : 85-degrees F on 04/02/2010.

Longest Time Afield on April Census : 10 hours & 25 minutes on 04/06/2019.

Shortest Time Afield on April Census : 7 hours & 5 minutes on 04/02/2010.

LAST APRIL'S FIELD REPORT

04/01/22	TOTAL SPECIES:	56	START / END TIME:	7:20am - 4:00pm		
	TOTAL BIRDS:	816	TIME AFIELD:	8:40	FT. MI.:	13.65
ROUTE:	Red Lock Trailhead south to Merriman Valley.			TEMP.:	34F ~ 41F ~ 38F	
OBSERVERS:	John Henry (Red Lock Trailhead to Hunt Farm) and Douglas W. Vogus.					
CONDITIONS:	Overcast and gray with winds from the west; intermittent snow flurry fall-outs throughout the day with no accumulation; very gray at 11:40am and 12:25pm with stinging ice-pellet fall-outs lasting less than five minutes each; occasional ten minute breaks of partly sunny, only to give way to more overcast conditions from the west winds.					
TRAIL CONDITIONS:	Fair with some puddling and muddy sections in the usual low spots; a couple of sections where the crushed limestone got washed away from the overflowing river from heavy rains a couple of weeks ago.					
RIVER CONDITIONS:	Above normal and muddy - few rockbars or sandbars showing.					

FIVE YEARS AGO on the TOWPATH TRAIL

On April 07, 2018 we set a census high for the American Coot with a total of 6 birds seen on the census route. But, in all actuality, they were all seen at only one place along the census route, the Ira Beaver Marsh. This calm water loving marsh bird will be difficult to find anywhere else along the Towpath Trail route, due to it being basically a lowland river bottom.

APRIL 2023's BIRD SPECIES PROFILE

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

DESCRIPTION:

Whether swimming on a lake, grazing on a golf course, diving for submerged vegetation, or wading along a pond, this comical, chickenlike rail is one of our most familiar waterbirds. Slate gray and duck-like; short white bill and white under short tail; eyes red; legs and feet somewhat green; immatures lighter in color, brown eyes, gray bill.

LENGTH: 13" - 16"

WINGSPAN: 23" to 28"

WEIGHT: 13 & 1/2 oz. to 1 lb. 13 oz.

VOICE:

Pairs call "kuk-kuk-kuk" or "coo-coo-coo-coo" by day or night or utter loud cackles, whistles, croaks, grunts, and babbling sounds with much splashing about in water.

HABITS:

Coots have to run along the surface of open water to take flight, but once in the air their flight is strong and fast. Can occur in large flocks. When swimming, coots pump their heads back and forth and when feeding, they dive like a duck but do not stay down very long. In shallows, they will tip up like a dabbling duck. Feeds on leaves, fronds, seeds, and roots of aquatic plants such as potamogetons, water milfoil, bur reed, also fond of chara or musk-grasses (algae); sometimes eats wild celery uprooted by Canvasbacks and other ducks; will also eat small fishes, tadpoles, snails, worms, water bugs and other aquatic insects; sometimes flocks feed far from water, clipping off with bill grasses of meadows or sprouting grain; sometimes eats eggs of other marsh birds.

NESTING:

NEST: Built by both sexes, about 14 inches across, of stems of marsh plants on foundation of same materials, floats on water attached firmly to reeds or other standing plants; partly or well-concealed in bulrushes or cattails of marsh, or at edge. **EGGS:** April to July, 6 to 22 eggs, most often 8 to 12 eggs, pink to dark buff, evenly spotted or dotted with browns. **INCUBATION:** By both sexes, 23 to 24 days; young first fly at 49 to 56 days after hatching. Soon after hatching and drying, young swim well and follow parent birds to be fed.

HABITAT:

Wetlands, marshes, ponds and lakes; occasionally in slow-moving rivers.

RANGE:

Found throughout North America from northern Canada (below the tundra line) south to Mexico; absent in the mountainous Appalachian regions; migrates south in winter.

STATUS:

Abundant. Currently stable, but has declined historically. Is considered a game bird and is actually hunted in many states.

DID YOU KNOW?:

The awkward looking American Coot has been coined with plenty of other regional names? Quite the list: Baldface, Blue Hen, Blue Peter, Crow-Bill, Crow-Duck, Flusterer, Hen-Bill, Ivory-Billed Coot, Meadow Hen, Moor-Head, Mud Coot, Mud Duck, Mud Hen, Pelick, Pond Crow, Pull-Doo, Sea-Crow, Spatterer, Shuffler, Water Hen.

DID YOU KNOW?:

From Grammarphobia: The noun "coot" came to mean an old man in the 19th. Century? The earliest citation in "Green's Dictionary", which we've expanded, is from "High Life in New York" (1844), by Jonathan Slick, Esq., pseudonym of Ann Sophia Winterbotham Stephens: "There is no cheating that old coot, he's wide awake as a night hawk."

Abundance Codes on the graphs below indicate the best time of year to find the American Coot in Northeast Ohio.

Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.
uuuuuuuu	uuuuuuuu	CCCCCCCC	CCCCCCCC	CCCUuuuu	rrrrrrrrrr
Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
rrrrrrrrrr	rrrrrrrrrr	uuuCCCC	CCCCCCCC	CCCCCCCC	CCCCCuu

- CCCCCCCC** = Common to Abundant. Frequently encountered in this region during this time of year.
- uuuuuuuu** = Uncommon. Occurs regularly during this time of year but not frequently detected.
- rrrrrrrrrr** = Rare. These birds can occur more or less annually but are easily missed in their scant presence in the region.
- OOOOOOOO** = Occasional. Limited history in this region and are not to be expected.
- ******* = Accidental. Few records in the past 60 years. Not expected in this region during this time of year.
- |||||** = Fluctuating Abundance. May occur some years yet absent other years. Irruptive or overwintering birds.

History of the American Coot on the Cuyahoga Valley Towpath Trail Census 2010 ~ present.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
JAN.								
FEB.						1		
MAR.		1	1			1		
APR.		1	3	1	4	4		
MAY								
JUN.								
JUL.								
AUG.								
SEP.								
OCT.							1	
NOV.								
DEC.			1			1		

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	DID YOU KNOW?:
JAN.							As the history of this species shows on this chart, it's been a while since our last American Coot sighting on the census. Many of these previous sightings only last for a few days before the birds move on. And even though the Abundance Code graph above shows that the species is quite prevalent during most of the year, in all reality it takes a very large permanent marshland for this species to actually nest in Ohio. By far, the best place to find this species in large numbers in Summit County is at Summit Lake. The shallowness of this lake is perfect for coots.
FEB.							
MAR.							
APR.	6*						
MAY							
JUN.							
JUL.							
AUG.							
SEP.							
OCT.							
NOV.							
DEC.							

- *** = HIGHEST COUNT TOTAL ON CENSUS.
- BOLD #** = HIGHEST COUNT FOR THAT YEAR.



Often an afterthought on most birdwatchers' day lists, the American Coot is commonly found on calm ponds and lakes.

(photo by: Daniel Irons)

APRIL'S DID YOU KNOW?

DID YOU KNOW?: *In light of the recent Norfolk & Southern Railroad disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, I could write a whole article on what's been going on. Unfortunately, it's still going on and the environmental effects are yet to be fully known, with thousands of fish already dead in Little Sulphur Creek and surrounding streams, other wildlife being affected, and now the local residents experiencing various health conditions such as coughing, burning skin, rashes, etc.*

From: Matt Simon at wired.com:

"The plastic crisis looks like a sperm whale filling up its stomach with bags. It looks like cucumbers and bananas - which have perfectly good skins of their own - wrapped in single-use plastic. But before all that, it looks like a burning train wreck in East Palestine, Ohio.

Before it derailed, Norfolk Southern's 9,300-foot-long freight train was carrying 20 cars containing hazardous materials. The fire cooked off a haul of vinyl chloride - the chemical that makes PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic and is also a carcinogen - and bathed the area in a plume of smoke loaded with highly toxic chemicals. Also on the train were butyl acrylate and ethylhexyl acrylate - both toxic ingredients in plastics - and a slew of other chemicals, which mixed together and burned. The incident has made global headlines, but the cause of this toxic slurry - namely corporations' insatiable appetite for plastic - hasn't been the focus."

As for East Palestine, it's definitely a fluid situation, likely to have longterm environmental and human effects.

DID YOU KNOW?:

In this month's issue we will focus on another train disaster, one that didn't affect human life indirectly as in the chemical payload, but one that affected people directly due to negligence when it came to the early railways in regards to infrastructure.

PART I: THE ASHTABULA TRAIN WRECK - HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

The Ashtabula, Ohio Railroad Disaster, often referred to as the Ashtabula Disaster or the Ashtabula Horror, was one of the worst railroad disasters in American history. The event occurred on December 29, 1876, when a Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railway Train, the "Pacific Express," plunged into the Ashtabula River, about 100 yards from the railroad station at Ashtabula, Ohio. It's topped only by the Great Train Wreck of 1918 in Nashville, Tennessee.

More than 90 of its 159 passengers and crew were killed when the bridge collapsed, and the train fell some 70 feet into the river below before igniting into a rolling ball of fire. The bridge, designed jointly by Charles Collins and Amasa Stone, both of whom ended up committing suicide, was the first Howe-type wrought iron truss bridge built. Though Collins was reluctant to go through with building the bridge as he felt it was still "too experimental," higher powers prevailed; the bridge was built and lasted only eleven years before it collapsed.

The following account is from the Chicago Tribune, the day after the tragedy, on December 30, 1876. There are a few discrepancies between the above paragraphs and this account, as this was well before the first official radio news broadcasts in 1920 and way before television was even a thought. Due to this fact, the account is quite graphic, at a time when the nation got their news from people who actually wrote stories in newspapers for the masses.

The proportions of the Ashtabula horror are now approximately known. Daylight, which gave an opportunity to find and enumerate the saved, reveals the fact that two out of every three passengers on the fated train are lost. Of the 160 passengers who the maimed conductor reports as having been on board, but 59 can be found or accounted for. The remaining 100, burned to ashes or shapeless lumps of charred flesh, lie under the ruins of the bridge and train.

The disaster was dramatically complete. No element of horror was wanting. First, the crash of the bridge, the agonizing moments of suspense as the seven laden cars plunged down their fearful leap to the icy river-bed; then the fire, which came to devour all that had been left alive by the crash; then the water, which gurgled up from under the broken ice and offered another form of death, and, finally, the biting blast filled with snow, which froze and benumbed those who had escaped water and fire. It was an ideal tragedy.

The scene of the accident was the valley of creek, which, flowing down past the eastern margin of Ashtabula village, passes under the railway three or four hundred yards east of the station. Here for many years after the Lake Shore road was built, there was a long wooden trestle-work, but as the road was improved, this was superseded about ten years ago with an iron Howe truss, built at the Cleveland shops, and resting at either end upon high stone piers, flanked by heavy earthen embankments. The iron structure was a single span of 159 feet, crossed by a double track seventy feet above the water, which at that point is now three to six feet deep, and covered with eight inches of ice. The descent into the valley on either side is precipitous, and, as the hills and slopes are piled with heavy drifts of snow, there was no little difficulty in reaching the wreck after the disaster became known.

The disaster occurred slightly before eight o'clock. It was the wildest winter night of the year. Three hours behind time, the "Pacific Express," which had left New York the night before, struggled along through the drifts and the blinding storm. The eleven cars were a heavy burden to the two engines, and when the leading locomotive broke through the drifts beyond the ravine and rolled across the bridge, the train was moving at less than ten miles an hour. The headlamp threw, but a short and dim flash of light in the front so thick was the air with the driving snow. The train crept across the bridge, the leading engine had reached solid ground beyond, and its driver had just given it steam when something in the under gearing of the bridge snapped. For an instant, there was a confused crackling of beams and girders, ending with a tremendous crash, as the whole train but the leading engine broke through the framework and fell in a heap of crushed and splintered ruin at the bottom. Notwithstanding the wind and storm, the crash was heard by people within doors half a mile away. For a moment, there was silence, a stunned sensation among the survivors, who in all stages of mutilation lay piled among the dying and dead. Then arose the cries of the maimed and suffering; the few who remained unhurt hastened to escape from the shattered cars. They crawled out of windows into freezing water waist-deep. Men, women, and children, with limbs bruised and broken, pinched between timbers and transfixed by jagged splinters, begged with their last breath for aid that no human power could give.

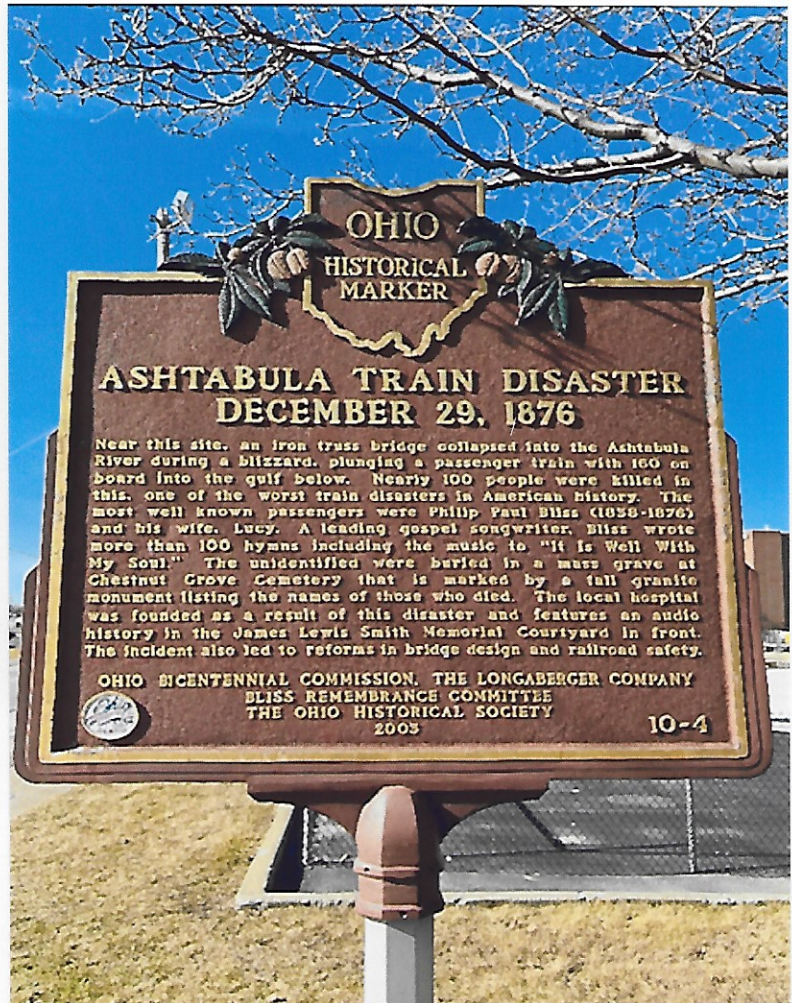
Five minutes after the train fell, the fire broke out in the cars piled against the abutments at either end. A moment later, flames broke from the smoking car, and the first coach piled across each other near the middle of the stream. In less than ten minutes after the catastrophe, every car in the wreck was on fire, and the flames, fed by the dry varnished work and fanned by the icy gale, licked up the ruins as though they had been tinder. Destruction was so swift that mercy was baffled. Men who, in the bewilderment of the shock, sprang out and reached solid ice, went back after wives and children, and found them suffocating and roasting in the flames.

The neighboring residents, startled by the crash, were lighted to the scene by the conflagration, which made even their prompt assistance too late. By midnight, the cremation was complete. The storm had subsided, but the wind still blew fiercely, and the cold was more intense. When morning came, all that remained of the "Pacific Express" was a row of car wheels, axles, brake irons, truck-frames, and twisted rails lying in a black pool at the bottom of the gorge. The wood had burned completely away, and the ruins were covered with white ashes. Here and there a mass of charred, smoldering substance sent up a little cloud of sickening vapor, which told that it was human flesh slowly yielding to the corrosion of the fires. On the crest of the western abutment, half buried in the snow, stood the rescued locomotive, all that remained of the fated train. As the bridge fell, its driver had given a quick head of steam, which tore the draw head from its tender, and the liberated engine shot forward and buried itself in the snow. The other locomotive, drawn backward by the falling train, tumbled over the pier and fell bottom upward on the express car next behind. The engineer, Folsom, escaped with a broken leg; how he cannot tell, nor can anyone else imagine.

There is no death list to report. There can be none until the list of the missing ones who traveled by the Lake Shore Road on Friday is made up. There are no remains that can ever be identified. The three charred, shapeless lumps recovered up to noon today are beyond all hope of recognition. Old or young, male or female, black or white, no man can tell. They are like in the crucible of death. For the rest, there are piles of white ashes in which glisten the crumbling particles of calcined bones; in other places, masses of black, charred debris, half underwater, which may contain fragments of bodies, but nothing of human semblance. It is thought that there may be a few corpses under the ice, as there were women and children who sprang into the water and sank, but none have thus far been recovered.

DID YOU KNOW?:

As I mentioned, there are a few discrepancies, as in number of actual train cars, number of living versus perished, yards to the station, and even the exact time of the tragedy, which was actually at 7:28pm, all probably lost in translation, from the village of Ashtabula to the writer at the Chicago Times. But the most glaring discrepancy may be that of engineer Charles Collins and that he died by his own hand. Part II continues in May...



Top left: Michelle gives some size perspective to the monument of those who perished in the train disaster.

Bottom right: The historical marker in Ashtabula near the original sight of the failed iron Howe truss trestle.

(photos by: Douglas W. Vogus)



CHARLES COLLINS

Charles Collins: Distracted engineer? Victim of a revenge murder from a family member of the dead? Or, silenced to keep from testifying to the Ohio Legislative Committee? (1877 engraving per Stephen Denison Peet)

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