

Another Look at the Birds of Hocking Hills

by Frank Renfrow

The illustrious Cincinnati naturalist, Worth Randle, had a special passion for the Hocking Hills. Worth tracked the birds of Hocking during the second week of June for just about every year from 1961 to 1993. During the course of these years he documented the presence of many species of birds of northern affinities. These included:

Least Flycatcher—one record, 2 calling, Conkle's Hollow.
Blue-headed Vireo—increasing; nest at Old Man's Cave, 1961.
Brown Creeper—one record, 1977.
Winter Wren—one record, a nest at Conkle's Hollow, 1974.
Ruby-crowned Kinglet—1 singing, Old Man's Cave, 11 & 13 June 1974.
Veery—present some years, not others; nest at Old Man's Cave, late 1980s.
Hermit Thrush—increasing; nest at Conkle's Hollow, 1966.
Chestnut-sided Warbler—several singing, Cedar Falls area.
Magnolia Warbler—most years; breeding at Conkle's Hollow, 1966.
Black-throated Blue Warbler—one singing, Cedar Falls area.
Black-throated Green Warbler—common.
Blackburnian Warbler—at campground 1962: none noted after 1975.
Mourning Warbler—one singing, Cedar Falls area.
Canada Warbler—most years; one nest at Old Man's Cave, late 1980s.
Rose-breasted Grosbeak—one record.
Purple Finch—one record, Old Man's Cave.
Red Crossbill—2 records, Conkle's Hollow, Rock House.

During the late 1980s, Larry Gara began to accompany Worth on his avian explorations of the Hocking area. After Worth's death in 1993, Larry and Lenna Mae Gara continued to take summer trips to Hocking. At this time I was devoting much of my energy to the birds of the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. Intrigued by what the Garas were finding, I turned my attention to Hocking Hills in June of 1998.

My first walk through Conkle's Hollow was a revelation. With my wife Veronica at my side, we listened as the ethereal song of the hermit thrush echoed through the gorge. Also heard but not seen were a magnolia warbler and a brown creeper. Upon passing through a narrow passage between two huge slump blocks, we entered a magical world. Feathery ferns and thick mosses festooned the Blackhand cliffs of the narrow canyon. A lush, green understory of sweet birch saplings was overhung by tall, young tuliptrees and hemlocks. Here was the realm of the Canada warbler, not one but two, singing away, "chip-chupety, swee-ditchety." A lucky view through the green leaves revealed a glorious black necklace, bathed in dazzling yellow.

Searching elsewhere at Hocking, the Canada and magnolia were not so easy to come by, but I found blue-headed vireos and black-throated green warblers plentiful in most of the gorge areas. Hermit thrushes were surprisingly numerous. I found them at Ash Cave, Cedar Falls, Old Man's Cave, Conkle's Hollow and many areas in between, as well as in several sections of the Hocking State Forest.

Conversely, I could not find a hermit thrush or a blue-headed vireo at Cantwell Cliffs or Rock House, although I did find the black-throated green warbler at both locations. However, all three of these species were found once again just a few miles to the north at Clear Creek.

Being especially interested in nuthatches, I had listened in vain for a tell-tale "yna, yna" in the deep hemlock gorges. Imagine my surprise when after two nights at the campground, high on a ridge, we found a pair of red-breasted nuthatches excavating a hole just a short distance from our campsite. Another surprise was our second singing brown creeper, also found in the stand of red and white pines at the north end of the campground.

Larry Gara has also found many interesting birds at the campground, including a singing chestnut-sided warbler in 1993. Worth found his first Blackburnian near the campground water tower in 1962. Although deciduous woods now surrounds the water tower, a close look reveals many dead and dying pines, now shaded out by the broadleaf canopy.

The next year, we returned to the campground on 31 May 1999. We selected a site that was nestled in a grove of tall white pines. A Blackburnian warbler was singing directly above us as we set up camp. Veronica got an excellent view of this lively wood sprite's flaming, orange throat. The planted white pines proved to be a key to locating this species, and we soon found other Blackburnians along the rim of Conkle's Hollow and still more at the picnic area at Old Man's Cave. Another red-breasted nuthatch nest was located, this time in red pines by the cabins.

Canada and magnolia warblers were once again found at Conkle's Hollow. There was also a singing brown creeper whose mate disappeared under a loose slab of bark on a dead snag of a large tuliptree, probably a nest site. Three more magnolia warblers were located in two different areas of the Hocking State Forest.

I have now made eight trips to the Hocking area during the past two breeding seasons. I have noticed that some species can be very vocal on one trip and totally silent the next. One good example of this was the Blackburnian that was singing at the picnic area on 11 June 1999. I checked this area thoroughly on the mornings of the 14th, 15th, and 16th with no hint of the bird. If I had not returned on the 19th and found the colorful "Mr. Blackburn" singing away at this same spot, I could have easily dismissed it as an "unmated male" that had moved on. I now wonder about the many references to various species at Hocking being present one year and gone the next. I have yet to find Worth's veeries but I may not have been in just the right place at the right time, as they are still found at Clear Creek.

At Hocking Hills, there are many deep gorge areas outside the state park as well as many difficult to access areas within the park. There are also several nature preserves within the state forest area with restricted access and few trails. With this abundance of excellent habitat, I would be very surprised if Canada and magnolia warblers do not breed in the Hocking Hills area somewhere every year.

On visiting the state forest headquarters I was shown an aerial photo of Conkle's Hollow taken during the 1930s. Much of the area had been recently logged and was being planted in pine seedlings. It is amazing how this area has regenerated in such a short span of time. Considering how quickly their numbers have been able to rebound, these northern species may well have been more numerous before this area was cleared and settled.

The red-breasted nuthatches and Blackburnian warblers seem closely associated with the planted red and white pines. This limits their distribution here somewhat, although there are quite a few pine plantations in the state forest area. It is possible that these species may frequent some of the hemlock gorges. Scattered stands of Virginia, shortleaf, and pitch pines line many of the rim areas. These native pines may also attract these two pine-loving species.

The Hocking Hills is also an excellent area for several bird species of southern persuasion. These include black vulture, summer tanager, and worm-eating and Kentucky warblers. A red-cockaded woodpecker found by Eddie Bower on 22 April 1975 was located independently by Worth Randle a week later. This bird may not have been as out of place as one might think. A close examination of many of the upper slope areas at Hocking reveal the remains of many shortleaf pines that have been overtaken by a progression to deciduous woods.

Acadian flycatchers, eastern wood-pewees, eastern phoebes, wood thrushes, red-eyed vireos, ovenbirds, hooded warblers, pine warblers, yellow-throated warblers, northern parulas, Louisiana waterthrushes, and scarlet tanagers are all common throughout the Hocking area. On the other hand, cerulean warblers are decidedly scarce, probably due to a lack of old growth forest in the area.

Species which frequent the gorge rims include hairy woodpeckers, great-crested flycatchers, white-breasted nuthatches, and yellow-throated vireos. White-eyed vireos, prairie warblers, and yellow-breasted chats can be found in the cut-over areas. As night approaches, whip-poor-wills can sometimes be heard at the campground and barred owls can be found at Conkle's Hollow.

The hawks are well represented at Hocking. These include red-tailed, red-shouldered, Cooper's, and sharp-shinned. Cantwell Cliffs is a particularly good area to view these raptors as they soar on thermals above the cliff edges. The broad-winged hawk is more often heard than seen in the Upper Falls area of Old Man's Cave.

Perched upon a northern outlier of cliff section plateau that barely escaped being steam-rolled by the glaciers, the Hocking Hills contain a gumbo mix of northern and southern features. There are few places in Ohio where Canada yew drapes sheer rock cliffs crowned by shortleaf pine, where the worm-eating's rattling trill alternates with the Canada warbler's lilting serenade.

And what of Worth's red crossbills? And what of his winter wren, purple finch, and ruby-crowned kinglet? These are just a few of the unsolved mysteries that await future inquiring observers in the deep, lush gorges of the Hocking Hills.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The 1998-99 Christmas Bird Counts

by Ned Keller

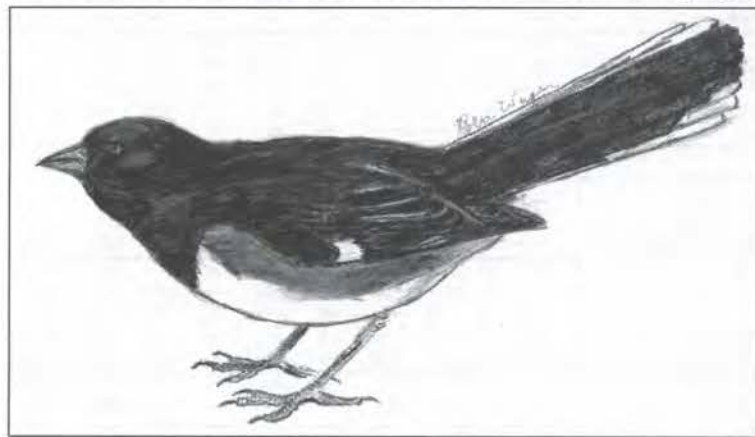
This year we present the results from 56 Christmas Count circles located entirely or partly within Ohio. At least two other counts, East Fork Lake and Greenville, were cancelled due to severe weather. Most of the results were reported directly to us, but a few were gleaned from reports published on the internet. Speaking of the internet, two web sites have interesting information about the Christmas Counts. Cornell University has the data from all 99 years of counts at <http://www.birdsource.com/cbc/index.html> and Patuxent Wildlife Research Center has a page from which you can generate maps of species abundance and population trends at <http://www.mbr.nbs.gov/bbs/cbc.html>.

We found 683,718 individuals of 151 species this year, plus two additional species, northern goshawk and Wilson's warbler, during count week. Both numbers were down from last year, when we saw 874,563 individuals of 153 species. Fourteen of this year's birds were represented by only a single individual: harlequin duck, white-winged scoter, oldsquaw, American avocet, greater yellowlegs, dunlin, pomarine jaeger, little gull, common tern, palm warbler, black-and-white warbler, a tanager not identified to species, vesper sparrow, and common redpoll.

As the above list and the charts indicate, there was an unusual variety of very late shorebirds and warblers. Conspicuously lacking this year, though, were winter finches. Besides the single common redpoll, there were only 29 pine siskins, and no evening grosbeaks or crossbills.

The Millersburg circle had by far the most species this year, with 91. The only other circles to reach 80 or above were Cuyahoga Falls and Cincinnati, with 83 each, and Portsmouth, with 80.

As always, we have printed all the reports as submitted to us (with the exception of a couple of obvious exotics), regardless of documentation. Records marked with an asterisk (*) in the charts were accompanied by written documentation. A plus sign (+) indicates that the bird was seen outside Ohio. Finally, the number in parentheses following the name of the count refers to the numbered circle on the accompanying map.



Eastern Towhee
by Ben Winger