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223 E. Tulane Rd.
Columbus, OH 43202
danielel@iwaynet.net

Birding Scioto Trail State Forest by Robert Royse

Scioto Trail State Forest covers 9,390 acres in Ross County. An additional 250 acres surrounded by the forest are designated as Scioto Trail State Park, with two small lakes and camping and picnic facilities. Located just south of Chillicothe, it is a convenient drive south from Columbus down US Rt. 23. In the DeLorme *Ohio Atlas and Gazetteer* it can be located on page 78 at C2. A paved road through the Forest's main valley, Stony Creek Road, is shown as a solid red line in the *Atlas*, and the well-maintained gravel roads along the surrounding ridges are shown in dotted lines. Detailed maps for the area are recommended, and are obtainable in a kiosk near the entry from Rt. 23. First-time visitors, however, are advised to request a map from the Ohio Division of Forestry first¹, since that kiosk is often empty. The location of Scioto Trail SF in the heart of the largest bend of the Scioto River (a significant migratory corridor), as well as at the northern edge of unglaciated Ohio, make it an ideal area for birders to explore its many resident and migrating species.

The summer nesting status of many species deserves further exploration, large numbers of fall migrant passerines undoubtedly pass silently through the still fully leafed forest, and winter birding would likely yield pleasant surprises. But it is during springtime when Scioto Trail takes on special interest to birders. The gradual awakening of spring in Ohio's forests with color and song is the highlight of many a birder's year, and that is what I will concentrate on here. It all starts in early April. The ridges in the forest will seem largely empty, but resident species such as the many pileated woodpeckers are at their most conspicuous at this time. By the end of the first week of April the first warblers (aside from wintering yellow-rumps) begin to arrive at Scioto Trail, and yellow-throated and pine warblers and Louisiana waterthrushes are the likely candidates. Eastern phoebes and the first of what will soon be hundreds of blue-gray gnatcatchers begin showing up at that time as well. The variety increases throughout the month, with most nesting species putting in an appearance by the first of May.

Annual fluctuations of arrival dates due to weather patterns are part of Ohio spring birding, and Scioto Trail is no exception, so predictions of exact dates for spring movements are usually inaccurate, and will not be attempted here. Eager birders with more time to spare during April might find a greater variety of species by heading to Shawnee State Forest, a 45-minute drive south along Rt. 23. At nearly 60,000 acres, Shawnee is Ohio's largest state forest, and is usually five or so days ahead of Scioto Trail's passerine arrivals. By the second week of May, however, Scioto Trail stands on its own as one of Ohio's prime birding locations. Then, species staying to nest will be actively singing on territory throughout much of the day, and large troupes or single scattered migrants are possible anywhere. After mid-May the leaves fill out and birding becomes more frustrating.

The Ridges The first landmark upon entering the Scioto Trail area from US Rt. 23 on Stony Creek Road (SR 372) is a fire tower with a small parking area. The pines surrounding it often hold the first migrant pine warblers of the spring amidst groups of golden-crowned kinglets. Staff at the State Forest headquarters here keep feeders stocked during most of April, luring in species such as tufted titmouse,

¹ Available online at <http://www.hcs.ohio-state.edu/ODNR/Forests/forestmaps/sciototrailmap1.jpeg>.

Carolina chickadee, northern cardinal, eastern towhee and large numbers of dark-eyed juncos. As the spring progresses, chipping sparrows gradually replace the juncos. Surrounding trees and brushy tangles deserve exploration. Additional species likely to be seen or heard here in early May include ubiquitous blue-gray gnatcatchers, Carolina wrens, red-eyed, blue-headed, and yellow-throated vireos, black-throated green, cerulean, black-and-white, and hooded warblers, American redstarts, and ovenbirds. Both scarlet and summer tanagers are possible, but the scarlets hold about a ten-to-one advantage at Scioto Trail. The long list of migrants encountered in thickets near the fire tower includes Philadelphia vireo and orange-crowned warbler.

After the fire tower, the first area deserving further exploration is the North Ridge Road, labeled as Road 2 on the Scioto Trail map. This road branches to the left beyond the fire tower. Of the three ridge roads (the others are Hatfield Road and the South Ridge Road), the North Ridge seems to feature more migrants and earlier territorial birds on average. Road 2 soon becomes one-way. About a quarter mile in is a trailhead for one of the bridle trails. This is often a reliable spot for the first arriving yellow-throated vireos, scarlet tanagers, and cerulean, black-and-white, and hooded warblers in April, and it is always worth checking. During May you will probably have already encountered these species in numbers by this point, though. Kentucky warblers, also common in this area, are less likely than the other nesting warblers until after the first of May. Migrating birds that can be abundant in the forest ridges in May include species such as Tennessee, bay-breasted, blackpoll, and Blackburnian warblers. From a distance, it is always surprising how much the song of the Blackburnian can resemble the cerulean's. Blue-gray gnatcatchers, ovenbirds, and red-eyed vireos seem to be everywhere. After a mile or so, the North Ridge Road branches, and a one-way road (Road 3) heads down the ridge to the state park. At the time of this writing, a sign for "Local Traffic Only" is posted for continuing on Road 2, but the road is maintained to its very end several miles later. Drive the entire length of Road 2, then reverse course at the end where the bridge crossing to Stony Creek Road is closed. Along this stretch worm-eating warblers are likely to be heard—and one can hope see—along the ridges. Scattered openings are always good spots to stop to check for species such as white-eyed vireos, blue-winged warblers, yellow-breasted chats, summer tanagers, indigo buntings, eastern towhees, and both yellow-billed and black-billed cuckoos. Ruffed grouse, though uncommon, is always a possibility, especially early in the morning. Since the area is a natural route for so many migrants, species surprising for a forest, such as swamp sparrow and palm warbler, have been found along the North Ridge. Migrant prairie warblers are possible in April in any open area, especially where conifer saplings exist; during years when suitable habitat is available, some may possibly remain to nest, but nowhere are they predictable in May.

Birding the ridges at Scioto Trail is largely a matter of proceeding slowly and stopping at regular intervals. Look, listen, and stop if anything catches your ear or eye. In early May you will be stopping a lot! Do not let seemingly bad weather deter your efforts. A light drizzle can often be the most productive weather for finding groups of migrants pausing on the ridges before they continue north along the Scioto River. The South Ridge Road (Road 6) and Hatfield Road (Road 5) are also worth your birding time, as the habitats of all three ridges are similar. Red-shouldered and broad-winged hawks are possible anywhere. Pine warblers probably nest in the pines

on the South Ridge Road. Migrant pine warblers are frequently found in April throughout the Scioto Trail area, even in flocks with other species in deciduous trees, but by the second week of May only residents remain, when the South Ridge alone is worth checking for that species. To cover all three ridges thoroughly along with the valley, plan on spending a whole day. When birding for passerines in spring, one usually encounters a lull of activity in mid-afternoon before singing resumes again full-throttle around 4 pm.

The Valley The low-lying area of Scioto Trail offers a different birding experience. Much of it is within the Scioto Trail State Park. If the bridge from North Ridge Road (Road 2) to Stony Creek Road (Road 1) remains closed, turn around and retrace your steps (keeping eyes and ears alert for anything you may have missed) and head down the otherwise unnamed Road 3. This quickly descends into the valley, where it crosses a small stream (where eastern phoebes usually will be found) and emerges into an opening. Here a small parking lot at the border of the state park is always worth a stop throughout the spring season. A long list of species can be found in the brushy tangles or woodland edges here. Once past the camping area, take a glance at the small Caldwell Lake, though it is generally not too productive aside from a variety of swallows, a few mallards, and occasional pied-billed grebes and ring-necked ducks. The next parking area is usually very productive for birding. A yellow-throated warbler will almost certainly be singing in the sycamores above you. By mid-April, Louisiana waterthrushes can usually be located here along the creek. The whole area from here to the intersection with Stony Creek Road (Road 1) is worth a careful search for migrants. Purple finches have been seen in this area during several recent springs.

Along Stony Creek Road, several areas are worth investigating. The road down from the fire tower to the west descends through some nice hemlock habitat to the Stewart Lake area of the Scioto Trail State Park. Small parking areas are present on both the north and south sides of the road, so use them and have a look around. While northern parulas can show up as migrants just about anywhere, this is the reliable spot to find nesters. Just listen for them. Other conspicuous breeders in this area include eastern phoebes, chipping sparrows, yellow-throated warblers, American redstarts, and Louisiana waterthrushes. Hiking a bit into the wooded area north of the road should turn up some migrants, and possibly more nesting species such as cerulean and Kentucky warblers, eastern wood-pewees, and wood thrushes. As May progresses, you can add Acadian flycatcher to the list as well.

Further east on Stony Creek Road, past the intersection with Road 5 (which continues up the ridge to the Hatfield Road) and Road 3, you pass some private residences before reaching the bridge at the North Ridge Road. The area near the bridge, and the bridle trail's crossing another quarter mile further east, offer the best birding along Stony Creek. Nesting birds include eastern phoebes, white-eyed vireo, house and Carolina wrens, blue-gray gnatcatchers, blue-winged and yellow-throated warblers, American redstarts, Louisiana waterthrushes, common yellowthroats, yellow-breasted chat, indigo buntings, song sparrows, and eastern towhees. In April, many hardy wintering species or early migrants such as winter wrens, hermit thrushes, brown thrashers, and fox and white-throated sparrows will likely be encountered. This area is a good place to find the first yellow-throated warblers and blue-gray gnatcatchers during the first week of April, with American redstarts often appearing by the third week of the month. Birders from further north are often

surprised to see how early redstarts appear on territory here; only a bit further north in Columbus they are not common until well into May. In April, barred owls are sometimes heard calling at mid-day. Mourning and Canada warblers are among migrants routinely found among Stony Creek's thickets in May.

A day of slow methodical birding at Scioto Trail State Forest during early May ranks among the most exhilarating birding experiences to be found anywhere. Period. With easy access from both the Columbus and Dayton areas, Scioto Trail deserves to be part of the annual ritual for central Ohio birders. Those from northern Ohio might gain a fuller understanding of the state's avifauna by coming down to check it out. Out-of-state visitors who come only to catch the scene at Magee in May should seriously consider first spending a day at Scioto Trail, and also another day for a complementary list of species at one of Ohio's reclaimed strip-mine wildlife areas.

A Sample List Here is a list of species found on 10 May 1999. This example offers a good idea of what can be found on a decent day at Scioto Trail SF in May. Not included are some of the permanent residents such as downy, hairy, red-bellied, and pileated woodpeckers, blue jay, American crow, Carolina wren, white-breasted nuthatch, Carolina chickadee, and tufted titmouse or common nesting residents of the area such as red-tailed hawk, turkey vulture, northern flicker, house wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, eastern bluebird, American robin, northern cardinal, eastern towhee, chipping sparrow, and American goldfinch.

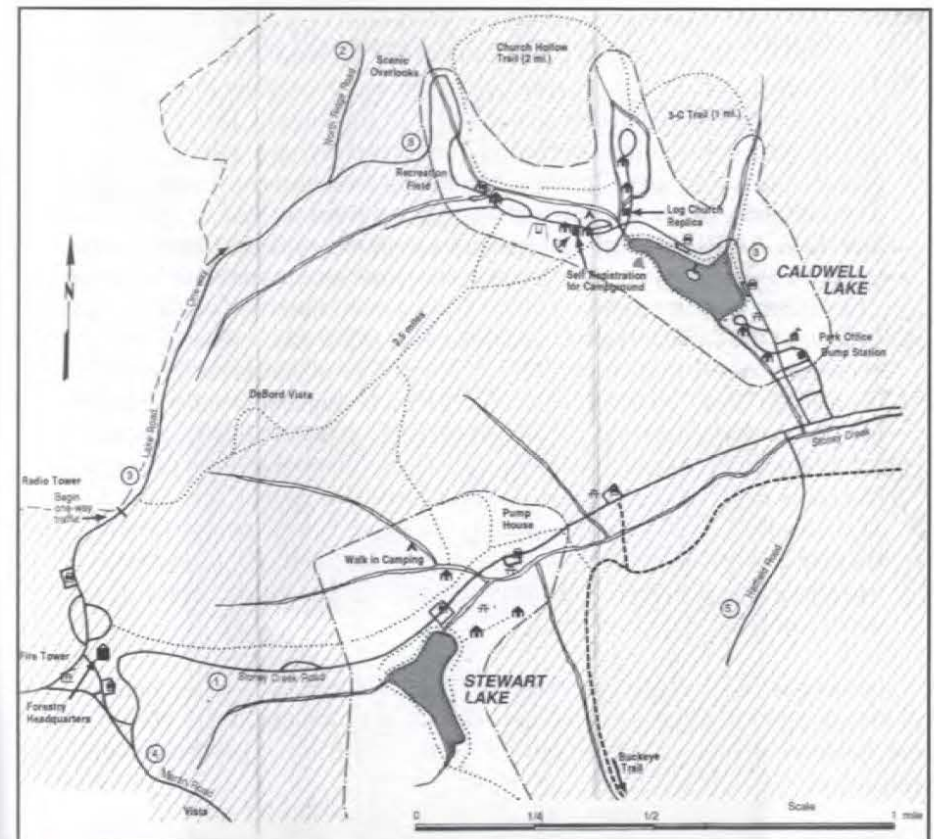
1 Broad-winged hawk	8 Yellow-rumped warblers
1 Yellow-billed cuckoo	4 Black-throated green warblers
1 Red-headed woodpecker	21 Blackburnian warblers
37 Eastern wood-pewees	19 Yellow-throated warblers
7 Acadian flycatchers	36 Bay-breasted warblers
5 Eastern phoebes	18 Blackpoll warblers
3 Great crested flycatchers	48 Cerulean warblers
1 Ruby-crowned kinglet	7 Black-and-white warblers
several gray catbirds	27 American redstarts
20 Swainson's thrushes	15 Worm-eating warblers
77 Wood thrushes	85 Ovenbirds
many Blue-gray gnatcatchers	4 Louisiana waterthrushes
10 White-eyed vireos	18 Kentucky warblers
23 Yellow-throated vireos	4 Common yellowthroats
1 Warbling vireo	57 Hooded warblers
1 Philadelphia vireo	5 Yellow-breasted chats
218 Red-eyed vireos	7 Summer tanagers
12 Blue-winged warblers	64 Scarlet tanagers
1 Golden-winged warbler	10 Rose-breasted grosbeaks
89 Tennessee warblers	80 Indigo buntings
2 Nashville warblers	many Eastern towhees
5 Northern parulas	2 White-throated sparrows
4 Yellow warblers	several Baltimore orioles
8 Chestnut-sided warblers	

Although I birded from 0830 h to 1730 h, most migrants were found before noon. I was surprised that I didn't find either Cape May or magnolia warblers, and

all eight chestnut-sided warblers were found within a 10-minute period. I also noted that since I usually find a similar number of ceruleans and hoodeds, I probably missed some ceruleans. The hoodeds sang all day and the ceruleans stopped between about 1300 h and 1600 h. No pine warblers? I probably passed by their haunts on the South Ridge at the time without hearing any.

If heading south down Rt. 23 towards Scioto Trail, other good birding areas along the way and worthy of your time are Stage's Pond State Nature Preserve in Pickaway County just north of Circleville and the Charlie's Pond/Pickaway County Airport loop (following Radcliffe, Westfall, and Jefferson Roads on page 68 at D2 in the *Ohio Atlas*).

1446 Cliff Ct., Apt A
Columbus, OH 43204
royse@sprynet.com



Map of the State Park area of Scioto Trail State Forest, Ross Co., as referred to in the preceding article. Reproduced from the Scioto Trail State Park Map published by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.