

Further Afield

by Rob Harlan

The question was innocent enough. I don't know why it had such a big effect on me; but it did, and I'm glad. Although I don't recall the year, I must have been in my mid- to late teens, spending a September morning then, as I do now, scrutinizing the warbler flocks near the Nature Center of the Rocky River Metropark just west of Cleveland. The warblers seem to funnel through this area each fall, a fact which had provided me with plenty of opportunities over the years to study the "confusing fall warblers" even as a young birder. I had just finished sifting through a flock when an older gentleman, binoculars around his neck, came up to me. "Can you sort those out?" he asked hopefully. "I've never been any good with the fall warblers—give me spring plumage any day." I eagerly pointed out a few species to him, including the hooded skulking in the background, and took great care to separate the lone bay-breast from the little troupe of blackpolls and the Wilson's from the yellow. I may have even identified some correctly. Regardless, he seemed genuinely appreciative, and like any young person given the opportunity to help out an elder, I puffed up with pride. But then came the implied question: "I bet you can tell them all apart by their songs, too!" Instant deflation. I had reached the limit of my knowledge. I had to say "No."

But for some reason this question struck a chord in me. I now wanted to know the songs, something I'd never really considered before. I now *needed* to know the songs. With cold weather on the way, and with active birding ready to settle down to a long winter's nap, I knew what needed to be done. I can still recall the hours I spent, earphones seemingly permanently affixed to my head, as Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America* spun over and over on my trusty old turntable. I wanted to be ready for the next spring, and if I had to memorize every song on that record, so be it.

A May trip to the Magee Marsh Bird Trail would be the true test of my learning. On a good day at the Trail, sensory overload can really kick in, but I held my ground, attempting to identify as much as I could by sound rather than by sight. Some species came easily, while others proved only studies in frustration. Then, from well down the Trail, one song grabbed my attention, a song that cut through the chaos and spoke to me with crystal clarity. Simple but distinctive, it went "beeeee bzz bzz bzz." During the winter, this had been one I'd paid particular attention to, as it represented a species yet to make its way onto my life list. It was a golden-winged warbler, and I knew it! I *knew* it. And I also knew, from then on, that I was hooked.

When I think back over the twenty or so years that have passed, I can't help but appreciate how significant these events became for me. At the time I wanted only to prove to myself that I could learn the songs, and also, I must admit somewhat impishly, that I could identify the birds before others did (so sue me, I was a kid). I don't recall even once thinking about how learning bird songs could benefit summer birding. After all, birding was supposed to be done in the spring and in the fall, and, occasionally, in the winter. But summer birding? Nobody did *that* anymore.

Of course I was wrong. Many intrepid individuals had built up a wealth of summer birding data, but somehow I had managed to relegate this whole body of knowledge as something undertaken only by the names of the past, names in the historical record. Surely, science had already firmly established typical nesting patterns; migrations were where the real action was to be found. But a funny thing happened once I had learned the songs of the birds that pass through, or stay, in our area. June and July were no longer months to lie low, waiting for the fall warblers to reappear. Whereas the increasing foliage of spring had once hindered my attempts to see the late spring migrants, now I could appreciate how the foliage *protected* the birds, allowing them to sing their songs and get on with their responsibilities in relative safety. True, seeing them didn't get any easier, but even so I could identify them, only now by sound alone. A whole new world opened before me, one in which the birds were now *telling* me what they were. An amazingly beautiful and intricate realm of sound now permeated my birding experience. I liked what I heard.

Summer now took on new imperatives in my travels around the state. I learned what was to be expected and where, and, taking habitat into account, why. Birds I once thought rare now became almost expected, after their habitat requirements were deciphered and their distinctive vocalizations betrayed their theretofore hidden presence. I'm happy to say that summer birding remains a high priority for me to this day. And fortunately Ohio is particularly blessed with a wide variety of habitats, a prerequisite for attracting a similar variety of nesting species. While some habitats are present in abundance, others are as highly localized as the birds that utilize them. We may have to search them out, but the rarities are out there, and in the summer, when they are at their most vocal, they'll be waiting to tell us where they are. But only if we listen.

And so this summer, Sandy Wagner and I decided to search them out in earnest. We devised a plan to try to track down 200 species of birds within Ohio's borders in the 31-day period beginning with the Memorial Day weekend of May 26th (a traditional summer kickoff, if not the official start of the season) and ending on June 25th. Why 200 species? For one thing, it provided the proverbial nice round number. Second, it would give some indication of just how rich a month's worth of Ohio's summer birdlife could be; after all, to find 250 species in the state over an entire year is no easy task. To find 200 species in one-twelfth that time, especially in a season when birding is often thought to be at its slowest, was a very tempting challenge. We fine-tuned our ears, and were on our way.

I don't want to bore you with a lengthy travelogue here, but I will anyway. We decided to start out along Lake Erie on May 26th, hitting hotspots such as Lorain Harbor, Pipe Creek Wildlife Area, Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, primarily in hopes of picking up any lingering passerine and shorebird migrants. Birds that only pass through en route to northerly nesting areas would necessarily have to be found now; also, if we could find any scarce Ohio nesters now, during migration, it would save us the time needed to track them down later in the month. We focused on our goal by listing a common loon that flew over our van on the Sandusky Bay Bridge, a nice assortment of late waterfowl and

shorebirds at the recently-drained Pipe Creek, and a worthwhile selection of warblers and thrushes that sang and chipped on cue at Lorain and the Magee Bird Trail. Although they may not have been as visible as earlier in the month, many migrants remained, and we were happy to list them all. With optics and ears, we ended the first day with 102 species; a respectable total although at the time it seemed hardly earth-shattering. As it turned out, it was a better start than we thought, as many species were found only on this first day.

We kept on the run the next day, having scheduled the Oak Openings, the Findlay reservoirs, Big Island Wildlife Area, Buck Creek State Park, Columbus, and a taste of Hocking County on our itinerary. In the Oak Openings, we tracked down the local lark sparrows, the previously reported blue grosbeak, and the dementedly vociferous clay-colored sparrow, plus very unexpectedly turning up a calling king rail. Heading south, a Franklin's gull was waiting for us near Findlay, and the cantankerous Buck Creek Bell's vireo was augmented by a surprise sanderling lounging on the swimming beach. The Columbus yellow-crowned night-heron nest was a mandatory stop on our way to the Hocking County hills, where an apparent migrant western meadowlark sang five or six times from a grassy field just before darkness set in. After dark, the now annual chuck-will's-widow along Buena Vista Road announced its presence, saving us a trip to Adams County, a well-known "chuck" hangout, but too far south to fit our tight schedule.

On May 28th we focused on Hocking County's Clear Creek Valley, while setting aside enough time to tack on a few other brief stops on our way back to Cleveland. At Clear Creek, the joy of birding comes not with seeing the birds, but with hearing the voices of north and south blend together in delightful surroundings. We added many warblers there, plus hermit thrush, black vulture, and even a drumming ruffed grouse. At the end of our first three-day weekend, our total stood at 163 species. So far, so good.

The weekend of June 2-4 again saw us leaning west. On the morning of June 3rd we ran our Pittsfield Federal Breeding Bird Survey route through rural Lorain, Huron, and Ashland counties. The BBS forms the backbone of the US Fish & Wildlife Service's summer avian monitoring programs, and is worthy of everyone's attention. Although these routes aren't usually particularly productive for rarities, I still vividly recall the summer day in 1988 when route-runner Andy Fondrk called to tell me his crew had just discovered, of all things, a territorial black-throated sparrow in Geauga County! This was undoubtedly one of Ohio's all-time greatest rarities. On our route this time, we settled for an out-of-place purple finch. Upon finishing, we headed westward over to Ottawa NWR to assist in the afternoon session of the monthly bird census. This decision netted us American black duck, black tern, and sedge wren, among others.

On June 4th, we mopped up at Mallard Club Marsh, where American bittern and yellow-headed blackbird "ungk-a-chunked" and rasped their way, respectively, onto our list. By now, the phenomenon of diminishing returns was really setting in. Each trip could hope to produce only a few new species as our want-list slowly dwindled. A Blackburnian warbler at North Chagrin Metropark, golden-crowned kinglets and a

red-breasted nuthatch at Hinckley Metropark, a yellow-bellied sapsucker nest in Lake County (courtesy of "Sapsucker King" Tom Leiden), the trustworthy upland sand-piper along Stollaker Road in Ashtabula County, and a winter wren at Kendall Ledges in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (courtesy of "Kendall Ledges King" Dwight Chasar) all were added to the list one by one as the month progressed. A female greater scaup, my first ever in summer in Ohio, was cautiously identified (not by sound) at Pipe Creek on June 11th. A pine siskin was a serendipitous fly-by in Medina on June 17th, and provided a species we had not dared to hope for. But we counted it anyway.

By June 17th, our total stood at 199, just one species shy of our goal. We pored over our short list of needed species, and dickcissel seemed like a safe bet. On June 18th, three dickcissels at Big Island came through in the clutch, and so after 24 days of crisscrossing the state—and paying through the nose for gas in the process—we had finally reached 200. We slept the rest of the month.

But we still had some unfinished business to attend to this summer. As I have said before, if you want to truly appreciate the best that something has to offer, then you must also experience the worst. And when we speak of the worst, of course we can be referring only to Van Wert County, the county that has somehow managed to misspell its own name since 1820 (see <http://rickohio.com/mag/articles/vanwert.htm> for details). If you read my column in the Winter 2000-01 issue, you will recall that the *Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* determined that Van Wert County held the fewest probable and confirmed nesting species (76) of any Ohio county during the *Atlas* years of 1982-87. We wanted to find out why. We found out.

Ah, Van Wert County

The county too painful to bird

Where all the streams are channelized

Where no good field goes unplanted

And where vanished voices can no longer be heard

Habitat means everything in the summer. The better the quality and variety of habitats, the better the birding. Somewhere along the line, Van Wert County forgot this basic fact. Situated along the Ohio-Indiana border about two-fifths of the way down the state, Van Wert County is fortunately located quite a distance away from most other Ohio counties. But it is not only distant as the crow flies (if there were any crows to fly, that is), it also seems to fall a distant 88th in the availability of bird habitat. For birders, and probably for the birds, it's actually quite sobering.

We visited the area on July 1-2, and spent those two days traversing as many roads across the county as time would allow, investigating every likely habitat for birds we could find. The *Breeding Bird Atlas* reports 76 probable or confirmed nesters within the Van Wert County *Atlas* blocks, but we thought perhaps we might be able to reach 80—haughtily, even 90—species in the county, as we were unconstrained by the boundaries of the relatively small *Atlas* blocks. We found 68. Of these, we felt only 18 species (18 species!) were plentiful enough to be termed

common. Never fear, though, as we did have a few interesting species, including red-headed woodpecker, northern mockingbird, and dickcissel. Oh, and on July 2, I should mention that we had two American crows. Exactly two.

What sticks in my mind most vividly about our experience is the frustrating and alarming lack of variety of habitat. The landscape is as flat as a steamrolled pancake. Fallow fields and early successional habitats seem practically nonexistent, replaced (this year, at least) almost entirely with fields of soybeans, corn, and wheat. In some portions of the county's northwestern corner, trees are lacking, and you have an unobstructed view all the way to the horizon. Farming is *intensive* here. Virtually every stream we encountered was meticulously channelized, and wetlands appear a long-forgotten novelty. Even most woodlots are too small to be productive, although I'm happy to report that we did find a gem of a woodlot, complete with big timber, in the county's southwestern corner. Also in this corner, the St. Marÿs River provides some productive riparian habitat before escaping into Indiana, although even this refuge is now being degraded by all-terrain vehicles. What we saw was grim indeed.

Now I'm sure we missed some interesting tidbits of habitat, and no doubt we overlooked several bird species as well. But what could not be overlooked was how very depressing, how zealously manipulated, and how clinically antiseptic the treatment of the natural world felt to us here. Nature has been dominated, with everything laid out just so, and all the dusty corners swept scrupulously clean, as in one of those "Twilight Zone" episodes where everything in the quaint little town seems so very nice, perhaps surreally nice. Maybe things aren't as they seem, but the results of this manipulation are here for all to see. And they should be seen. I recommend a visit, if only to help us each appreciate more how good we have it elsewhere. My hat is off to the stout-hearted handful of Van Wert County environmentalists. I hope they can continue to fight the good fight, because it looks like it'll be a long one. Oh, and by the way, if you stop at the local diner during your visit, be sure to order the soy burger on wheat, with a side of corn chips. It'll be fresh.

In sum, I encourage everyone to sample Ohio's summer birding fare as often as possible. After all, such unlikely species as purple gallinule, laughing gull, and western kingbird have nested here in the past, believe it or not. I don't know what new species to expect next, or where it will be found, but at least I have a hunch where it *won't* be found.

*The earth must've been knocked off its axis
To inspire yours truly to verse
Or maybe too much Van Wert County
Is to blame as these verses get worse.*

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Confirmed Nesting Record of a Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus* at Clear Creek Metro Park, Hocking County, Ohio

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Hermit thrushes are regular spring and fall migrants in Ohio, and occasional winter residents, particularly in the southern part of the state (Peterjohn 2001). During the Breeding Bird Atlas years of 1982-1987, hermit thrushes were recorded from five blocks, with nesting confirmed only at two sites in northeastern Ohio. Based on the numbers recorded during the Atlas years, the statewide breeding population was thought to total no more than eight to 12 pairs (Peterjohn and Rice 1991). Metro Parks initiated annual Breeding Birds Surveys at Clear Creek Metro Park in 1994. Since that time, hermit thrushes have been noted nearly annually with between one and eight singing birds present.

On 22 June 2001, while observing an eastern phoebe nest, the author observed an adult hermit thrush on a log carrying food. After approximately 5-10 minutes of observation the nest was located. The habitat was a hemlock ravine with small sandstone cliffs characteristic of Hocking County, Ohio. Closer observation revealed a squarish nest composed almost entirely of moss, placed in the center of a wood fern *Dryopteris carthusiana* with one edge located on a cliff edge approximately 15 feet above the ground. The nest contained two nestlings estimated to be 10 days or so old. Each possessed well-developed primaries and scattered spots on the back and upper shoulder region. The distinctive rusty-brown rump patch was already noticeable.

The nest was observed and photographed on 23 June 2001. During this time, both adults regularly fed the nestlings. Food consisted largely of various adult and larval moths, and at least one large adult crane fly. Several times during this period, the nestlings stood on the edge of the nest and stretched their wings. A recheck of the nest on 24 June 2001 revealed the nestlings had fledged; two unhatched eggs remained in the nest.

Vocalizations among the adults were minimal, as only calls of one or two notes were made between the male and female. While other hermit thrushes were recorded singing in Clear Creek Valley this spring, several visits to the general nesting area of this pair had not revealed their presence until the adult with food was observed. During observations of the pair, another hermit thrush could be heard singing elsewhere in this same ravine.

A total of five hermit thrushes were located by Metro Parks staff within the Clear Creek Valley during the 2001 breeding season. On 12 July 2001, an immature hermit thrush was observed feeding along the Hemlock Trail. It would appear this represented another breeding pair, the male of which had been recorded singing during the spring. This site is in a ravine located approximately three miles from the documented nest site.

The occurrence of hermit thrushes as summer residents in the Hocking County region appears to be on the rise. In 1998, the author located a nearly-completed