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## Recent rarities and first nesting records for Ohio

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The effects *Homo sapiens* has on Ohio's birdlife grow more critical with each passing year. We can only guess or infer—via archaeological and paleontological research—or read in reports of the first explorers what Ohio's avifauna was like before we showed up to transform it. We do see that as our numbers have increased, so has our effect—almost entirely negative—on our native birds, even while our abilities to monitor their shrinking numbers and variety have grown more and more sophisticated.

There are tremendous changes. Ohio now supports one of the largest breeding populations of one species—the European starling—in North America. The clearing of forests invited birds of more open western lands to colonize Ohio pastures, but urbanization and “clean” agriculture have since largely withdrawn the welcome. Look at the history of barn owls here, or meadowlarks. We continue to introduce alien species like pheasants, as well as peregrine falcons and trumpeter swans and Canada geese with no known pedigrees as native breeders in the state. Introductions of a few entertaining species can deflect attention from far more profound losses among populations of native birds. In the community of birders at least, potentially misleading as well is too much importance lent to the proliferation, made possible mostly by greater numbers of observers with superior technologies, of records of rarities. The accompanying growth in the numbers of species on the state list can delude us into thinking that avian diversity is increasing, when the opposite may well be the case. Can rarities records teach us much, after all?

It's always a dicey matter making useful inferences based on just a few data. And of course by definition a few data are all you get with rarities. But it would be cowardly not to make a cautious try. **List A** below shows Ohio rare bird records over the last five years. These are derived from reports (nearly all peer-reviewed by the Ohio Bird Records Committee) of state review species; the author takes responsibility for a couple of speculative inclusions. Review species are rare enough, or difficult enough to identify, as to require acceptable documentation, and they constitute 121 of the 417 on the official state list, fully 29%. Of those 121, 34 have been recorded in Ohio once and once only, and their statistical significance is hence quite small. That 10 of those 34 have first Ohio records in the past five years may make this look like a golden age for rarities in Ohio. Perhaps: it at least signals an era in which increasing numbers of rarities are discovered, reported, and adequately documented.

This list covers 316 records of 59 species and three groups of records identified only as to genera. Asterisks precede the surprising eleven new species (with two more possible additions covered in this issue!) added to the Ohio list during this five-year period. With the exceptions of cackling goose (added via taxonomic promotion) and cave swallow (which swept through the region in an unprecedented mass movement), all these firsts are based on single records of single birds. Most are birds of the west; only three originated to our east: the tern, the collared-dove, and the nuthatch. These three, plus the whistling-duck, the violet-ear, and the swallow are also distinctly birds of the south. There are fairly straightforward reasons why this should be so, and why we should



continue to expect new additions to the list more likely to come from the west and/or south. There's a lot more species-rich North American territory to our west than to our east, and to our south than to our north. Prevailing winds come from the west, and the most violent storms bringing us waif species come mostly from the south.

#### List A: Ohio rarities records 2001-2005

\***Black-bellied whistling-duck**: one as yet undecided record, one bird  
**Fulvous whistling-duck**: one record, 9 birds  
**Ross's goose**: 22 records, 24 birds  
 \***Cackling goose**: 28 records, 77 birds  
 \***Garganey**: one record, one bird  
**King eider**: one record, one bird  
**Common eider**: two records, two birds  
**Western grebe**: one record, one bird  
**Northern gannet**: nine records, 10 birds  
**Brown pelican**: two records, two birds  
**Frigatebird, sp.**: one record, one bird  
**Tricolored heron**: five records, five birds  
**White ibis**: four records, four (?) birds  
**Glossy ibis**: 11 records, 30 birds  
**White-faced ibis**: seven records, 16 birds  
***Plegadis* ibis, sp.**: 16 records, 41 birds  
**Roseate spoonbill**: one record, four birds  
**Wood stork**: one record, one bird  
**Swallow-tailed kite**: one record, one bird  
**Mississippi kite**: one record, one bird  
**Swainson's hawk**: one record, one bird  
**Prairie falcon**: four records, perhaps three birds  
**Yellow rail**: six records, six birds  
**Black rail**: two records, two birds  
**Purple gallinule**: one record, one bird  
**Piping plover**: seven records, eight birds  
**Black-necked stilt**: seven records, nine birds  
**Ruff**: six records, six birds  
**Parasitic jaeger**: five records, six birds  
**Long-tailed jaeger**: two records, two birds  
**Black-headed gull**: eight records, nine birds  
**Mew gull**: four records, four birds  
**California gull**: nine records, nine birds  
**Least tern**: three records, three birds  
 \***Sooty tern**: one record, one bird  
 \***Eurasian collared-dove**: one record, one bird  
**White-winged dove**: two records, two birds  
 \***Green violet-ear**: one record, one bird  
 \***Anna's hummingbird**: one record, one bird  
 \***Calliope hummingbird**: one record, one bird  
**Rufous hummingbird**: 30 records, 30 birds  
***Selasphorus* sp. hummingbird**: 20 records, 20 birds

\***Red-naped sapsucker**: one record, one bird  
**Gray flycatcher**: one record, one bird  
**Say's phoebe**: two records, two birds  
**Vermilion flycatcher**: one record, one bird  
**Western kingbird**: one record, one bird  
**Scissor-tailed flycatcher**: two records, two birds  
**Loggerhead shrike**: 12 records, 14 birds  
**Black-billed magpie**: one record, two birds  
**Common raven**: one record, one/two birds  
 \***Cave swallow**: 11 records, 45+ birds in a single incursion  
 \***Brown-headed nuthatch**: one record, one bird  
**Townsend's solitaire**: two records, two birds  
**Varied thrush**: five records, five birds  
**Bohemian waxwing**: one record, one bird  
**Black-throated gray warbler**: three records, three birds  
**Kirtland's warbler**: 15 records, 16 birds  
**Swainson's warbler**: two records, two birds  
**Harris's sparrow**: four records, four birds  
**Smith's longspur**: one record, one bird

As a general rule, the Ohio Bird Records Committee regards as review species those that over the most recent decade average fewer than three accepted records per year, adding to these certain species that are especially difficult to distinguish from one another in the field. The most numerous taxon in this five-year list is the *Plegadis* ibises, with 46 individuals identified as to species and 41 as to genus only; this reflects the difficulty of separating glossy from white-faced ibises, but also their growing presence in Ohio as a result of recent range expansions. Next come 77 cackling geese, members of a recently recognized species whose status remains uncertain—hence the need to document occurrences in case more splits are made in *Branta* soon. Cave swallow follows next, with 45+ individuals, but all these were recorded in the course of a single 12-day invasion, related to recent range expansions by the southwestern population *P. f. pelodoma*. Thirty individuals over five years would normally take a species off the review list, but since a large proportion of 30 recorded rufous hummingbirds were identified only in the hand they, and the 20 *Selasphorus* hummingbirds not captured and firmly identified, remain. Only two other species have more than the 15 records that are usually the ceiling for occurrences of review species over five years. Ross's goose is demonstrably expanding its numbers, or at least its migratory presence in the east, but an apparent rise in the numbers of fusible hybrid Ross's x snow geese makes acceptable documentation all the more necessary. Sixteen Kirtland's warblers is flirting with the threshold for review status, and reflects in part continuing growth in its population; even if it surpasses the threshold regularly, it is likely to remain a review species because other warblers are still often hopefully misidentified as Kirtland's.

Every species on the list has its own story, but quite a few—black-bellied whistling-duck, Ross's goose, the *Plegadis* ibises, the kites, piping plover, black-necked stilt, white-winged dove, scissor-tailed flycatcher, common raven, cave swallow, and Kirtland's warbler—seem likelier to be recorded more often, either because of growing populations or range expansions. For example, seven records in these five years for black-necked stilt are as many as Peterjohn in *The Birds of Ohio* (2001) recognizes for Ohio in all previous years combined, and likely result from its spread in distribution. Cackling



goose is unlikely to qualify as a rarity here for long. Rufous hummingbirds are—and probably were—far more common than we'd thought 20 years ago, but it seems less likely other western hummer species will similarly overwhelm us with their numbers. The rest of the list includes species that seem likely to remain as rare as they have been, except for the loggerhead shrike. Once far too numerous to consider a review species, the shrike continues in steep decline, with four records in 2004 and none in 2005, though one record this spring has been reassuring. More hurricanes, and observers' awareness of waifs they can bring, may make sooty terns and other southern species appear again or anew. Some species—garganey and red-naped sapsucker come to mind—will likely join Ohio records of northern lapwing and smooth-billed ani and Baird's sparrow and Harris's hawk as once-in-a-lifetime bolts from the blue. Finally, some species, such as certain rarer gulls—California, or even black-headed—are now often enough found that observers have grown too casual about documenting them for the record, and may consequently be more frequent than the list reveals. The Eurasian collared-dove, which has spread so quickly across the western two-thirds of the continent, has been much slower to colonize Ohio and points north and east; whether it will become as common here is anyone's guess; two Ohio observations—a record for a season—are covered in this issue.

Which of these is likely to have become an Ohio review species as a result of human interference? Surprisingly few, probably about as many that would probably never have produced Ohio records had humans not interfered with them elsewhere. Many gannet colonies have been eradicated. Kites were once more common in Ohio than they are now, as were rails. Piping plovers, least terns, loggerhead shrikes, and common ravens are demonstrably less common here than they once were. As for the rest of the list, there's little evidence that the absence of humans in Ohio would have made them more likely to occur here. Human influences are far more likely to have caused diminished numbers of the commoner species, numbers that have, as yet, seldom fallen so far as to make rarities of them.

Over half of List A's rarities are closely associated with watery habitats, from large bodies of open water to wet meadows. If nothing else, this underlines the importance of Lake Erie and its shores and marshlands (where they remain) as venues for rarities in Ohio, as well as wetlands where they have been allowed to remain in the interior. Note how few recorded rarities favor woodland habitats, despite Ohio's increasingly restored forest cover; mature forests at our latitude are generally rather low in avian diversity at any rate. Drier open areas have not attracted their share of rarities here, either, perhaps because so many Ohio's habitats of this type, particularly in the west, are now agricultural fields where every inch of land is devoted to maximum crop production.

In honor of the inaugural year of Ohio's second breeding bird atlas, **List B** presents in chronological order the 41 first Ohio nesting records over the past 80 years. Note there are but four in the past two decades, one of them not entirely welcome. At least twenty-one of these nested here last year. Here there is a more even balance between birds from the west and those from the east. Still, it is striking that half the first-time nesters from the west are *Anas* and *Aythya* ducks, with records from the 1930s up in the western Lake Erie marshes, and one wonders if perhaps the less extensive dike systems of the day, combined with Dust Bowl conditions in the prairie potholes where these ducks normally nest, might have played a role, for none of these ducks has bred in higher numbers since.

Ohio has records of 208 breeding species, nearly half the state list. Ten have been recorded nesting on but a single occasion, all of which save yellow rail (1909) have been recorded recently enough to appear on the following list of 41 nesters. By contrast, also reflected here is the explosive growth over recent decades of certain species absent or

locally quite rare in occurrence formerly: Canada goose, mute swan, house finch, ring-billed and herring gulls, with our first starling nest recorded in 1920. Between the accidental and the ubiquitous are some nesters whose status is somewhat tenuous. Waders like the southern herons and egrets have a frail presence here; another species, the double-crested cormorant, with which they easily associate in the south, is said by some to threaten them here. Northern forest birds like kinglets, hermit thrushes, blue-headed vireo, and a few warblers do not seem newly threatened by the timber industry, which has as yet discovered no compelling market for mature hemlocks, but the hemlock woolly adelgid *Adelges tsugae* could also degrade the latter species' status in Ohio in a hurry. A few—western meadowlark, house finch—seem to be in decline as nesters recently, and for quite various reasons. There are a few currently rarer species whose trends may foreshadow more nesting records to come: Wilson's phalarope, blue grosbeak, black-necked stilt, maybe even clay-colored sparrow.

At least one scientist who has analyzed the effects of climate change on Ohio's avifauna has predicted (see <http://www.abcbirds.org/climatechange/Ohio.pdf>) the following species might more often include Ohio in their summering (he does not say "breeding") ranges in a warmer future: Say's phoebe, western kingbird, scissor-tailed flycatcher, painted bunting, and great-tailed grackle. While none of these species is alien to Ohio, and the kingbird already has an Ohio nesting record, there are other possible nesters new to the state that may be less far-fetched.

#### List B: first Ohio nesting records since 1926

- |                                                                     |                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Black-necked stilt</b> (2004, single instance, presumed nesting) | <b>Canada goose</b> (1953)                            |
| <b>Common merganser</b> (2001, see photo this issue)                | <b>Herring gull</b> (1945)                            |
| <b>Clay-colored sparrow</b> (1996, single instance)                 | <b>Blue grosbeak</b> (1942)                           |
| <b>Mute swan</b> (1987)                                             | <b>Great egret</b> (1940)                             |
| <b>Laughing gull</b> (1984, single instance)                        | <b>Yellow-headed blackbird</b> (1938)                 |
| <b>Snowy egret</b> (1983)                                           | <b>Lesser scaup</b> (1937)                            |
| <b>Wilson's phalarope</b> (1980)                                    | <b>Green-winged teal</b> (1937)                       |
| <b>Hermit thrush</b> (1979)                                         | <b>American wigeon</b> (1936)                         |
| <b>Gadwall</b> (1979)                                               | <b>Northern shoveler</b> (1936)                       |
| <b>Little blue heron</b> (1978)                                     | <b>Ruddy duck</b> (1935)                              |
| <b>House finch</b> (1976)                                           | <b>Western kingbird</b> (1933, single instance)       |
| <b>Red crossbill</b> (1976, single instance)                        | <b>Canada warbler</b> (1933)                          |
| <b>Cattle egret</b> (1973)                                          | <b>Mourning warbler</b> (1932)                        |
| <b>Bell's vireo</b> (1968)                                          | <b>Blackburnian warbler</b> (1932)                    |
| <b>Black rail</b> (1966, single instance, see note this issue)      | <b>Chuck-will's-widow</b> (1932)                      |
| <b>Ring-billed gull</b> (1966)                                      | <b>Olive-sided flycatcher</b> (1932, single instance) |
| <b>Purple gallinule</b> (1962, single instance)                     | <b>Nashville warbler</b> (1931)                       |
| <b>Golden-crowned kinglet</b> (1962)                                | <b>Western meadowlark</b> (1930)                      |
| <b>Redhead</b> (1961)                                               | <b>Black-throated blue warbler</b> (1928)             |
| <b>Red-breasted merganser</b> (1956, single instance)               | <b>Blue-headed vireo</b> (1928)                       |
|                                                                     | <b>Yellow-crowned night-heron</b> (1928)              |



**List C**, mercifully short, consists of former long-term nesters now seemingly extirpated as such. The kite, the prairie-chicken, and the raven disappeared as breeders long ago. Ravens show signs of re-occupying ancestral parts of their breeding range, and conceivably Ohio may host a few nesting pairs in years to come. The partridge, native to Eurasia, established itself for a few decades following introduction programs by game agencies early in the last century. Kites have reclaimed ancestral breeding territory to our south, and reintroduction projects have been suggested as close as Kentucky. Merlins, having survived organochlorine poisoning, are reclaiming their former nesting range continent-wide; recently, multiple birds overwintering in old urban cemeteries in Ohio raise hopes it may be restored to our breeding avifauna. No such hope remains for Bachman's sparrow, or for Bewick's wren, whose regional subspecies have all but vanished from the earth for undetermined reasons. The golden-winged warbler seems a victim of inexorable evolutionary forces, its numbers everywhere succumbing to genetic swamping from its near relative the blue-winged warbler, even though it participated in a mixed-species nest here as recently as two years ago. In addition, the yellow-crowned night-heron now hangs by the thread of two known nesting sites in the state (1-2 nests/year over the past decade); it could suddenly join List C.

**List C: apparently extirpated former regular nesters**

<b>Swallow-tailed kite</b>	<b>Greater prairie-chicken</b>
<b>Bachman's sparrow</b>	<b>Common raven</b>
<b>Bewick's wren</b>	<b>Merlin</b>
<b>Gray partridge</b>	<b>Golden-winged warbler</b>

Attempted reintroductions of the prairie-chicken, once abundant in places (sightings from the Toledo area in the 1830s reported thousands) have failed, as have introductions of viable populations of "replacement species" like ring-necked pheasant, gray partridge, and sharp-tailed grouse. It is not unimaginable that Ohio's native bobwhite, its population now largely sustained by releases, will follow the prairie-chicken into oblivion, or at least out of the game category. The loggerhead shrike may join this list soon; its last confirmed Ohio nesting took place in 2003 (as of this writing there it seems another nest has recently been found), and only Canada seems interested in restocking projects for less showy non-game species like this one.

The list of species recently discovered to have nested in Ohio is much longer than those that have apparently ceased to breed here, but this should not be cause for celebration. Many represent one-shot records, and most are rare as breeders, with little sign of increasing. Certainly the list of technically extirpated breeders would be longer had more attention been paid to occasionally nesting species in bygone days. Fewer than half the species in List B can be called regular nesters, and some of them have prospered all too well, at the expense of native nesters. All in all, there are just as many interesting conceivable reasons why certain species should be rare in Ohio as there are why others should be common, and keeping track of rare records helps by suggesting ways to understand them.



This impressive species narrowly escaped extirpation in Ohio following widespread deforestation 100+ years ago. Photo by Gary Meszaros in North Chagrin Reservoir on 18 April.