

Further Afield

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[An earlier version of this column appeared in *The Ohio Cardinal* 27(2), otherwise known as the Winter 2003-04 issue. Much has changed on the Ohio birding scene since then, and knowing that many new subscribers have recently come aboard, it seems a good time to bring everyone up to date. In the account that follows, some of the names have been changed; the message, however, remains the same.]

Maybe you've wandered the same wistful trail. I've visited South Carolina's I'on Swamp, if only out of tribute. Scared up plenty of turkey hunters, but no Bachman's warblers. I've visited the sandy pastures of western Galveston Island, Texas, if only out of tribute. Saw wads of whimbrels and scads of cattle, but no Eskimo curlews. I've visited Bayou de View in Arkansas, Louisiana's Honey Island Swamp, and South Carolina's Congaree Swamp, if only out of tribute. Saw a pile of pileateds, but the ivory-billed elegantly eluded me. I've even made a pilgrimage to the Passenger Pigeon Memorial at the Cincinnati Zoo, and doffed my cap to Martha, the last of her kind, who lived in captivity all her life until succumbing at the Zoo in 1914. Doffed likewise at the plaque for Lady Jane and Incas, the world's last known pair of Carolina parakeets, who died at the same zoo in 1917 and 1918. I visited these sites—dreamily, I'll admit, but pragmatically expecting nothing—and saw exactly what I expected to see.

Sometimes it's altogether too easy to forget *why* you do what you do. As a former editor of *The Ohio Cardinal*, as a former Ohio compiler for *North American Birds* magazine, and as a multi-term member of the Ohio Bird Records Committee (OBRC), it has been (in part) my responsibility and privilege over the past 20+ years to monitor Ohio's birding records. It is a commitment and a challenge that I take very seriously—this gate-keeper's role. Truthfully, though, the task can seem endless, monotonous, and thankless. The financial rewards are nonexistent, or more precisely, negative. And frankly, the entire exercise can grow somewhat numbing—processing years of good birds into mere statistics. But then I think back on Bayou de View, or Galveston Island, or I'on Swamp, and immediately my focus sharpens, and my duty becomes all too clear.

Of course, bird populations and movements are never static, and their fluctuations always demand careful scrutiny. But for the most part, these movements are comfortably predictable, ebbing and flowing at about the same time, year after year, and in roughly the same numbers, given similar conditions. Various populations trend upward or downward, but usually they do so quite slowly. Sudden catastrophes such as the ravages of West Nile virus are a shock to the system. But the evanescence of slow, almost imperceptible change is particularly pernicious. This sort of metamorphosis does not descend upon us in a blinding flash—rather, it melts away our birds, slowly but surely, right before

our eyes. So slowly that we may not even notice that it's happening, until it's too late.

And so, we must monitor *all* of our birds, whether they be migrants or residents, nesters or winterers, game or non-game, or just a few hopelessly anomalous vagrants, desperate and lonely a long way from home. We monitor our birds wherever they may occur in the state, and whenever. It is gratifying to think that birds can benefit from our efforts—whether they dine at our feeders, or raise their young in a preserve that our donations helped to acquire. Even if we are unable to experience them personally, birds somehow give us pleasure wherever they may be. It's a good thing just to know that they are out there, running their birdy errands as best as they can. But it's a better thing to know that we are helping their cause in every way we can. We owe them more than our feeders, our dollars, and our refuges—we owe them our *attention*. Diligent attention.

A noble idea—but where to begin? Formally reporting one's bird observations may not seem especially glamorous, but it's always a worthwhile exercise, and one open to all contributors regardless of background. Our records, when distilled, help to establish our current understanding of bird abundance and distribution, while simultaneously serving as benchmarks for future research. Every season, many widely scattered observers collectively take a snapshot of each species' ups and downs, and uniformities, enabling us to preserve this image when the results are published in the permanent, printed historical record. This is the seasonal summary you'll find in every issue of the *Cardinal*; for three decades now, this summary has served as a fundamental *raison d'être*.

Although I'm sure many would disagree, I feel that the permanent preservation of the historical record on the printed page is inherently more desirable than preservation electronically. Online, the long-term availability of web pages and web sites is always a concern; also, text and graphics can be altered without any acknowledgement that such has taken place. It can also sometimes be hard to avoid a casual, ephemeral "anything goes" attitude on the Web; while this can be beneficial in many circumstances, breeziness does not serve the historical record, our benchmark for future researchers, especially well. Print media, however, are no match for electronic media when it comes to ease of storage and the ability to manipulate virtually unlimited amounts of data. Even so, my gut tells me to "get it on paper" whenever feasible. Call me old-fashioned. And a bit stubborn.

So what do compilers, editors, and record keepers expect in the reports they receive? Although there are several different layers of reporting opportunities available (local, state, regional, national, and international in scope), all compilers desire each record to include at least these five basic bits of information: the species, the number of individuals observed, the date of the observation, the site of the observation, and the name of the observer. Any other information, such as the age and plumage of the bird, corroborating observers, etc., is also welcomed. Photographs are always desirable, especially for verification of rarities, but even then photos are not a requirement. Compilers have an easier job when contributors submit their reports in the current American Ornithologists' Union checklist order; although helpful, this is not essential.

For printed media, space is always at a premium, and editors have

choices to make. Compilers simply cannot print everything that is reported to them, and they must carefully choose what they publish based on many factors, of which relative rarity is only one. Rarity can take many forms—a species can be rare throughout the year, or perhaps be unusual only in a portion of the state, or only at a particular time of year. Also, compilers typically seek records of unusually high or low numbers of individuals for a given site or date. All of these factors, and many more, must be considered when making each print/don't print decision. It's also necessary to keep in mind that the likelihood of any particular record being printed diminishes as the geographic scale of the publication grows wider; as the area grows, so does the number of records competing against each other, with only the most noteworthy records acquiring the limited (and valuable) publication space.

As relatively permanent documents, print publications bear the responsibility of serving as the historical record—and therefore they must provide the type of information that future researchers might need to make educated assessments in their day. With this responsibility, editors of print journals occasionally (and understandably) request or require reassurances regarding unusual records. For the rarest of rarities, the OBRC should be involved.

Briefly, the Ohio Bird Records Committee functions as a peer-review panel of experienced Ohio birders, and has served as the *de facto* “court of last resort” for Ohio avian rarities since its inception in 1991. As such, it maintains the official Ohio state bird list. Its individual members evaluate records to the best of their abilities, and collectively the Committee endorses the records it deems reliable for placement in the historical record. The Committee examines records of species that appear on its Review List (<http://www.ohiobirds.org/records/reviewlist.php>); these are all notably rare species, whose presence in Ohio should always be substantiated with formal written documentation and supported with photos or sound recordings whenever possible. Although OBRC documentation forms are quite useful, especially in suggesting the type of information that Committee members might find beneficial, they are certainly not mandatory. Check one out for yourself at <http://www.ohiobirds.org/records/docform.pdf>. OBRC secretary Tom Kemp (1507 Napoleon Road, Bowling Green, OH 43402, or e-mail at andigena@aol.com) is your man on the scene here; you may contact him directly with your questions and documentations, or you may also reach the Committee via *Ohio Cardinal* editor Bill Whan (you can find his addresses inside the front cover of every issue). Since its formation, over 40 Ohioans have served terms of office in this mostly anonymous job. No ivory towers, political fiefdoms, or deep science here, just fellow birders trying to do their part-- fellow birders who appreciate your support.

Potential reporters are well served to familiarize themselves with their local, and if possible, statewide birdlife before submitting a report. Record keepers are more likely to accept an observation of a rarity when the observer's overall report indicates a familiarity with what is normally to be expected in their area. For instance, a report of an out-of-range Carolina Chickadee in the Oak Openings with no additional comment may be nothing more than a typo, but it may also indicate a lack of familiarity with chickadee ranges in Ohio. If this hypothetical observer was indeed unfamiliar with Ohio chickadee ranges, then it seems very likely that he or she did not make the necessary effort to distinguish between the purported Carolina and the vastly more likely Black-

capped Chickadee. Whenever an observer provides a well-rounded seasonal report, including sightings of expected species alongside any rarities, compilers gain a better grasp of the observer's experience. Compilers appreciate observers who conscientiously acknowledge a *lack* of experience. Always be conservative when submitting a report; if in doubt, leave it out. Our responsibility as reporters and as compilers is to provide the most trustworthy and accurate record for future researchers.

Any good faith exchange of information is always appreciated and worth the effort, regardless of whether any particular record ultimately sees publication. For instance, I once received a report of a pterodactyl. Really. Doubting that this report was made in good faith, I chose not to publish it. It's true that I may have buried the scientific breakthrough of the year, but I still have a high degree of confidence in my decision. Besides, a pterodactyl isn't even a bird.

As mentioned earlier, there are several different layers of reporting opportunities available for print publications. The first reporting opportunity is the local level. In the northeastern quadrant of Ohio, for instance, there are two excellent local print journals, each covering a different group of counties. The stately *Cleveland Bird Calendar* has dutifully recorded changes in bird populations there since 1905. In this tradition, I'm sure editor Fred Dinkelbach (6320 Greenwood Parkway, Apt. 406, Sagamore Hills, OH 44067, or e-mail at seasonalreports@kirtlandbirdclub.org) would appreciate any reports you can offer from the Cleveland region. Just to the south of the *Bird Calendar's* area, *The Bobolink* has covered the birds of east-central Ohio since 1997 in a scholarly yet entertaining fashion. Although the *Bobolink's* editors change seasonally, Su Snyder has offered to see that your reports reach the proper desk. You can reach Su at 1120 Hudson Drive, Wooster, OH 44691, or e-mail her at bird348@sssnet.com.

The next layer of reporting is the statewide layer. In Ohio, the seasonal reports in *The Ohio Cardinal* have filled that role for the past 30 years. For nearly 10 years of that span, editor Bill Whan has done yeoman's duty as compiler and author of the seasonal reports. He may be uncomfortable in printing these accolades about himself, but let's see if he leaves them in; they are well-deserved, and his efforts should be much appreciated by all. His postal and e-mail addresses appear on the inside cover of every issue of this journal, but here they are again: Bill Whan, 223 E. Tulane Rd., Columbus, OH 43202; e-mail billwhan@columbus.rr.com.

If by chance you don't usually read through the seasonal reports section of the *Cardinal*, take a glance at the report in this issue. If you find yourself carefully scanning through it for records that you had submitted, then you've already done your job. But if you find yourself thinking, “Hey, I had way more Green-winged Teal than what this dope lists as the high count,” or “Here it says that Least Bitterns were reported in six counties, but this chump doesn't even mention the bird in Medina County that every single person on our field trip saw this past May,” then chances are those reports weren't submitted at all. If you find that you can improve upon the published accounts, it has now become your job to do just that. Don't assume someone else will report, even if the birds you saw were also seen by others, or were seen at a frequently-birded location, such as the Magee Marsh Bird Trail. It's so easy *not* to report. Most birders don't. Everyone should. Did you feel that? That is called responsibility, and it has just

fallen on you.

On a regional and national scale, *North American Birds* magazine, once published by the National Audubon Society, but now overseen by the American Birding Association, is the quarterly journal of record. The United States is broken down into a variety of regions, based on political and physiographic boundaries. All of Ohio now falls in the unfortunately-named "Eastern Highlands and Upper Ohio River Valley Region," along with all of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Up until a few years ago, Ohio was divided between the "Middlewestern Prairie Region" and the "Appalachian Region," but now we are all cozied up in a single region. One of the Regional Editors for our region is none other than Victor W. Fazio, III. I suspect Vic would be happy with any reports you can provide him (hold the pterodactyls, please). His address is 18722 Newell St., Floor 2, Shaker Hts., OH 44122; e-mail at bcvireo@sbcglobal.net. Based on information gleaned from throughout the region, *NAB* editors then choose the "noteworthy" of the noteworthy, and prepare their report for publication. Given space constraints and the three-state-wide reporting area, seeing your records published in *North American Birds* certainly qualifies as a red-letter day.

Don't overlook other Ohio-based reporting options. The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas II (<http://www.ohiobirds.org/obba2/>), which is already heading into its third year of data collection, covers the entire state and could certainly use your help. It has produced many fascinating rarity reports, all the while reinforcing our understanding of our expected nesters. But if birding in the summer doesn't appeal, then perhaps the Ohio Winter Bird Atlas (http://www.bsbo.org/winter_bird_atlas/winter_bird_atlas.htm) might be a good way to combat the winter blahs.

Several informal online reporting options are also available. For observations anywhere in Ohio, your first reporting stop will probably be the *ohio-birds Email List*, sponsored by the Ohio Ornithological Society, at <http://www.ohiobirds.org/publications/emailist.php>. In southwestern Ohio, you might wish to contribute to Ned Keller's *Cincinnati Bird Sightings Log* at <http://www.cincinnatibirds.com/goodbird/sighting/php>. In northwestern Ohio, you should consider the Toledo Area Rare Bird Alert at http://www.rarebird.org/forum/forum_topics.asp?FID=1. Keep in mind that these informal online reporting options are essentially unedited; the information they proffer, while timely and usually helpful, should be considered transient and tentative rather than a part of the permanent historical record. If you report to electronic mailing lists or forums, such as the above, *don't stop there*. Also be sure to send a report to the appropriate print publications. This will help guarantee that your reports are formally evaluated by experienced compilers.

It's a nifty thing to see your name in black and white, credited with an unusual bird sighting. But reporting solely in hopes of seeing your name in print misses the point. I used to think that I had won a small victory whenever one of my sightings was printed. After considering the woodpecker, the curlew, the pigeon, and the rest, I now believe that the mere act of submitting a report is a small victory in itself, one worth repeating season after season. But the victories don't belong to us-- they belong to our birds, and to our future. However you choose to contribute— whether by submitting a detailed bird-by-bird seasonal report, or a filled-in checklist, or one bird at a time-- do it well, and do it now.

A Fall Migration Study of Northern Saw-whet Owls in Ross County, Ohio: Preliminary Results and Historical Perspective

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Northern saw-whet owls *Aegolius acadicus* are tiny denizens of our northern forests. Cannings (1993) reports that breeding birds reach highest densities in coniferous forests, though they use many woodlands and may be found in mixed forests with a well-developed mid-canopy. Starting in April, females lay five to six eggs in cavities. Natural cavities, including those excavated by woodpeckers, mainly northern flickers *Colaptes auratus* and pileated woodpeckers *Dryocopus pileatus*, are used, as are nest boxes. The male provides food, predominantly woodland mice *Peromyscus* sp. for the female and the nestlings until the female leaves the fledged young in the male's care (Cannings 1993).

While there are published reports of nesting in 24 Ohio counties, Peterjohn (2001) observes that most reports of summering birds date from before 1940. Wheaton (1882) claimed they were "not uncommon residents" in northern Ohio and were resident or winter visitors in other parts of the state. In northern Ohio, some regarded them as more abundant than the eastern screech-owl *Megascops asio*, whose color morphs were then referred to as red and mottled owls (Read 1853). Since 1940, there have been reports of nesting attempts in 1946, 1964, 1982, and 1995 in Lake and Cuyahoga counties and in Toledo in 1966 (Peterjohn 2001). By contrast, the ongoing second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas has to date documented one observed, 66 possible, 137 probable, and six confirmed nesting attempts.

Taverner and Swales (1911) reported that the northern saw-whet, or Acadian owl as it was called at the time, was regarded as a resident on its breeding grounds by Wilson (1814) and later by Coues (1874), and as an "irregular wanderer" in fall and winter by Fisher (1893). However, Swales had found the remains of two saw-whets on Point Pelee in October 1908, where it had previously not been documented, and reported that Saunders found the result of other depredations upon this species in the same location. In October of 1910, 12 saw-whets were found at the Point in thickets of eastern redcedar *Juniperus virginiana*, and they concluded that long-eared owls *Asio otus*, present in numbers and hunting the same thickets, were responsible for the depredations. Taverner and Swales also describe a report from a fishing-boat captain aboard the steamer Helena on Lake Huron on 10 October 1903 that reported "a large migration of small owls," many of which alit upon the vessel.

W.E. Saunders (1907) gives a haunting description of a snowstorm on 10 October 1906 that dumped over a foot of snow near the southeast corner of



A variety of measurements are recorded for each owl captured at Buzzard's Roost including bill length (Photo by Kelly Williams-Sieg).