

The Camp Dennison Gravel Pits

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There are many Ohio birding destinations as widely known for their natural or scenic beauty as for their excellent birding opportunities. But then again several hot spots are, well, let's say less than pristine. For the most part birders are realists, and our zeal to find birds knows no bounds. Non-birders are always surprised to learn that in our quest we often frequent any number of unnatural or man-made sites, which may include garbage dumps, landfills, sewage lagoons, development sites, and airports. And let's not forget gravel pits.

Cincinnati birders have known about the Camp Dennison gravel pits for four decades. Recently this site has become more widely familiar due to the abundance of waterfowl seasonally present each year and because of the rare species often found. The Camp Dennison gravel pits are arguably the best site in the Cincinnati area to find late fall and wintering waterfowl and waterbirds. By reviewing past Christmas Bird Count results, I have found the Camp Dennison pits have consistently attracted a greater diversity and number of waterfowl during the CBC season than any other local area site, including more likely-looking locations such as East Fork and Hueston Woods State Parks and the Ohio River. In fact, this site can rival many of the better-known waterfowl locations around the state.

Why waterfowl sometimes find gravel pits so appealing is a matter of speculation. And what makes this one more attractive than the many others nearby is a matter of debate. A couple of reasons seem fairly obvious. A couple of the pools are fairly deep, and some water remains open during all but the most severe winters. Many birds often remain through December and January. In fact, certain species seem to peak at these seasons. The distinction between the end of fall migration and the beginning of spring's is fuzzy here. The Camp Dennison gravel pits lie within the Cincinnati CBC circle. This count is always held on the Sunday after Christmas, and there are always plenty of waterfowl and other waterbirds, particularly American coots, still present here. Other local bird sighting records reflect good numbers of waterfowl found at Camp Dennison throughout the month of January. Only during the very coldest winters will we see most of the waterfowl, coots, and grebes move on. Another reason these birds appear here in large numbers may be the relative security the site has offered in past years. When the pits were actively mined, a no-trespassing rule was strictly enforced, so the birds were seldom disturbed, at least by casual visitors. Hunting has never been allowed here as far as I am aware. After the site was abandoned as a mining venue, it remained posted. For the most part area birders respected the rule, and we contented ourselves with viewing the birds from the perimeter of the property, easily enough done with a scope. The birds literally had the place to themselves. Unfortunately this may all change in the near future.

Most readers will already know this, but in the interest of clarity let me

define the term "gravel pit." There are a few subtle differences among this term and "borrow pit" and "quarry." A gravel pit is a tract of land, most often lying along a river or stream, excavated for the purpose of extracting gravel. A quarry, on the other hand, denotes a site dedicated to the extraction of larger rock, such as granite, limestone, or slate. Quarries are open pits, generally steeper-sided than gravel pits and if I understand correctly, waters in them are often shallow. A borrow pit is an area where soil or other material has been excavated, and "borrowed" for use at another site. The latter pits can commonly be seen along expressways, where the excavated material was used in the construction of the highway or to create nearby embankments for exit ramps. In southwestern Ohio, especially along the Little Miami and Great Miami Rivers, gravel pits predominate and there are literally hundreds of them, both active and inactive. Most of them hold water, but a few are dry.

Gravel pits, borrow pits, and quarries are well known to most Ohio birders and for good reason. These man-made lakes can be magnets for migrating and resident waterfowl and waterbirds. In some cases, the sparse and scrubby herbaceous vegetation that grows in the loose sandy and rocky soils around these pits attracts a variety of other interesting species as well. For instance, blue grosbeaks have had an affinity with gravel pits here in southwestern Ohio for at least the past twenty-five years. At times, any of these sites may attract birds and should be checked often. But some most definitely attract birds more consistently than others. The Camp Dennison gravel pits are a classic example of the latter.

The Camp Dennison gravel pits consist of slightly more than 350 acres of land and water. They are bounded on the east by SR 126, and to the north and west by the Little Miami River. Immediately to the south lies the small village of Camp Dennison. About half the acreage is water, with three large lakes and seven smaller ponds. The new landlords recently removed dikes separating the three large lakes and they are all now interconnected. The few trees present consist mostly of cottonwoods, willows, and locusts, with sycamores and maples predominant along the river. Herbaceous vegetation was once fairly sparse due to the sandy and rocky soil, but the municipality of Indian Hill has replanted large areas with a variety of plants and the area is looking more verdant. Shrubs, predominantly honeysuckle, dominate the higher ground around the perimeter.

Camp Dennison is a small, quiet village of about 600 people located on the eastern outskirts of greater Cincinnati. It lies in extreme eastern Hamilton County, along the west bank of the scenic Little Miami River, which here forms the border of Hamilton and Clermont counties. Just to the west is the affluent village of Indian Hill, to the north Miamiville, another small community, and to the south the historic village of Milford. State Route 126 is the main drag, and runs north/south right through the center of Camp Dennison. Even though this quaint and historic little village could best be described as suburban or even semi-rural, it lies near the center of one of Ohio's most populated areas and is located within the I-275 beltway encircling the greater Cincinnati area.

Originally named Germany when first settled in 1795, the name was changed in 1861 to Camp Dennison in honor of the U.S. Army training post located here during the Civil War. The camp was in turn named for William Dennison, Ohio's governor at the beginning of the war. There are several historical buildings and markers memorializing those times, but few outsiders

are aware of them. With the war's end, residents changed the town's name to Grand Valley, but the railroad refused to acknowledge the change on their schedules and continued to call the local station Camp Dennison, and so it has remained since 1861. Today the railroad is gone and the old railroad bed is part of the Loveland-Madeira bike/hike trail.

In 1946 the Ohio Gravel Company began operations in Camp Dennison. Later the gravel pits were acquired by Martin Marietta Aggregates, which continued the gravel-mining operation until the late 1990s, whereupon they ceased operations. For the next several years the Camp Dennison gravel pits remained inactive, and there was much speculation about their fate. After all, people said, they are just gravel pits, and in these days of rapid loss of critical habitats such as wetlands and forests, it is difficult to justify a conservation campaign to preserve an artificial water-filled crater. Around this time a developer proposed a 600-house development on the site, and the future of this waterfowl refuge seemed bleak.

In 2002 the village of Indian Hill stepped in and managed to purchase the site for \$7 million, ostensibly to protect their water supply--a city well field is less than half a mile away--and to create a recreation facility for Indian Hill residents. Indian Hill has ambitious recreational plans for the site, which they renamed "Grand Valley," in honor of an earlier appellation. In March and April of 2003, delegates of the Cincinnati Bird Club attended Indian Hill City Council meetings and were allowed to voice concerns about the effects the new ownership might have on the diverse and numerous avian species that use the pits. While not making any promises, the village of Indian Hill is on record as having set a goal to strike a balance between recreational usages and the wildland and natural character of the area. One hopes they will be able to succeed, but only time will tell. One point of controversy is that Indian Hill has elected to keep the property private, restricting access to Indian Hill and Camp Dennison residents (with others who pay Indian Hill for water supplies), approximately 6400 people. I believe the initial plan was to restrict even this group by allowing a limited number of visitors per day. On the one hand this seems a good plan, as it would keep the disturbance to birds at a minimum. If it were open to the general public, even a tiny fraction of the greater Cincinnati population of 1.8 million people could potentially overwhelm this relatively small site. On the other hand, even a few people, depending on their activities, could stress the waterfowl. Non-motorized boating and off-leash dog walking are permitted at this time, two activities that don't bode well for waterfowl. Still, cold weather will limit this type of usage during peak waterfowl times. Changes are definitely taking place. In 2006 a \$2.7 million winter sports complex was built on four acres in the northwest corner of the property. In the meantime, non-resident birders are still watching the birds from the periphery with spotting scopes.

Some readers may remember the late Worth Randle, one of Ohio's birding pioneers and finest naturalists. Randle co-authored the 1953 *Birds of Southwestern Ohio* with Emerson Kemsies. In that work he made no mention of the Camp Dennison gravel pits in his list of local birding sites, but by the mid-1970s he had become a regular visitor to the pits, and virtually put it on the local birding map. Randle was a meticulous note taker, but after his death many of his early records were lost. We do however have many of his later records from about 1984 on. For many years he had an arrangement with managers of the

then-active gravel pits whereby he was granted access to the pits on Mondays. He often visited the site on Monday mornings during the late '70s and '80s and was more than willing to invite along any birders who cared to show up. Around 1991 Martin Marietta's policy changed, and from then on even Randle was denied access.

Worth had a unique distinction as one of the few birders who visited the interior of the gravel pits throughout the year. Because of this, he had numerous records of shorebirds and other warm-season species that area birders have been unable to add to during the ensuing years. It's one thing to look at waterfowl on open water at 200-400 yards during the colder months, but it's a whole other ballgame trying to see shorebirds at such distances with views obscured by warm-season foliage. Nonetheless, the shorebird records we do have, albeit dominated by Randle's data during the '80s, are impressive. Twenty-five species of shorebirds have been recorded at the Camp Dennison gravel pits, including rarities such as ruff (one, on 5/26/91), American avocet (twice, two on 7/14/04 and three on 8/25/07), willet (twice, two on 7/4/83 and one on 7/28/91), ruddy turnstone (one, on 5/29/85), buff-breasted sandpiper (one bird three times during August 1983, '84, and '85) and Wilson's phalarope (one, on 8/12/84). Western sandpipers were recorded on six occasions, all by Randle, with a high of six twice. He recorded 150 lesser yellowlegs on 5/5/85, 140 semipalmated sandpipers on 5/19/85, and 14 white-rumped sandpipers from 5/31/85 through 6/1/85, which gives an idea of what the relative abundance of shorebirds may have been. We have virtually no Camp Dennison shorebird records for the period between 1991 until 2004, when birders have seldom been granted permission to enter the property.

Rarities during these warmer seasons are by no means restricted to shorebirds. Randle found two purple gallinules on 10/1/89 and a pair of nesting common moorhens on 5/28/89, although I believe the nest failed. Other records include: snowy egret (one, on 4/19/03), little blue heron (five times, two on 7/10/88), yellow-crowned night-heron (three, on 7/4/83), and least tern (one, on 8/19/90).

Another example of lost records from Camp Dennison concerns blue grosbeaks. Worth told me personally that he found blue grosbeaks almost annually at Camp Dennison. Incidentally, grosbeaks are found with some regularity in other gravel pits throughout the greater Cincinnati area. But that's another story. We have Randle's written records from Camp D from 1984 through 1987, when he recorded blue grosbeaks in each of those four years. He had pairs during three of them, two hatch-year birds in '84, and three males in '86. Recently, Jeff Brown, part of a Cincinnati Zoo group conducting censuses for Indian Hill at Camp Dennison since the summer of '06, found a blue grosbeak in the pits on 7/23/06 and two males this year on 7/18. Bob Foppe, who has some limited access to the pits, reported three male blue grosbeaks this year, and the general consensus is that at least three pairs probably bred there this summer. You don't have to have too much of an imagination to think that blue grosbeaks were probably summer residents during many of those unexamined years. It's a pity that for the past 15 years or so birders have been denied access to this productive site.

The case for waterfowl and waterbirds at Camp D has been an altogether different story over those same years. While we still have some

of Randle's records, area birders have been able to census waterfowl and waterbirds regularly, and our records are much more comprehensive for these species. Even though access continues to be denied to birders, it is much easier to see those species while viewing the pits from outside on public property. In this way, the Camp Dennison pits make a vital contribution to the annual Cincinnati Christmas Bird Count. The diversity of waterfowl and waterbirds found here each year keeps ours among Ohio's leading counts in terms of total species, and has even allowed us to lead the state several times. While quite a few area birders regularly bird Camp D during this time of year, few have done so as often as Bob Foppe. Bob's regular visits to Camp Dennison have provided us with a clearer picture of migrant and wintering birds there and a better idea of their relative abundance.

Before continuing and with all due respect, just a caveat for northern Ohio birders. This is southwestern Ohio, not Lake Erie. Waterfowl occur in this extreme southern part of the state in considerably smaller numbers than on the Great Lakes. Also consider this is a relatively small bit of water, probably around 150 acres. That said, there have been 32 species of waterfowl (Anseriformes) recorded at Camp Dennison, not including a well-documented whooper swan (one, on 1/23/00), which was presumed to be an escaped bird (some didn't want it presumed). Waterfowl rarities recorded at Camp D have included: greater white-fronted goose (five, on 3/1/03), snow goose (three records, 20 on 1/20/07), cackling goose (twice, with five on 1/22/05), tundra swan (three times, with 18 on 12/3/02), trumpeter swan (one, Jan. 10-22, 2000), Eurasian wigeon (one, on 2/1/07), greater scaup (at least twenty records but 15 on 11/23/02), harlequin duck (one, on 11/27/05), long-tailed duck (one, 1/26-2/3/07), surf scoter (twice, six on 12/4/93 and one on 3/22/07), white-winged scoter (twice, one on 5/1/00 and three on 2/10/04). In addition a couple of rare grebes have been found: eared grebe (one, on 11/18/06) and red-necked grebe (as many as two birds were seen from 1/4-19/03).

The real story lies with the more common species. Twenty species of ducks, pied-billed grebes and American coots are fairly common to abundant annual visitors at Camp Dennison, beginning around late October and continuing through the end of March. There may be smaller numbers of some species during mid-January in the coldest winters, but during normal to mild winters one would hardly notice a change. Consider the high numbers and the dates recorded for the more common species. Canada goose (1600 twice, 12/21/05 & 2/11/07), wood duck (20, on 8/18/85), Gadwall (178, on 2/1/07), American wigeon (80, on 1/9/00), American black duck (50, on 3/3/03), mallard (500, on 12/21/05), blue-winged teal (101, on 9/2/84), northern shoveler (77, on 12/28/03), northern pintail (37, on 2/28/07), green-winged teal (58, on 10/10/05), canvasback (65, on 3/5/07), redhead (200, on 3/11/84), ring-necked duck (600, on 12/26/04), lesser scaup (400, on 12/6/84), bufflehead (75, on 12/28/03), common goldeneye (six twice, 3/16/03 & 1/13/85), hooded merganser (170, on 1/9/06), common merganser (47, on 1/24/05), red-breasted merganser (58, on 3/18/04), ruddy duck (70, on 12/12/03), pied-billed grebe (94, on 12/28/03) and American coot (2200, on 10/30/06). With the exception of wood duck, blue-winged teal and red-breasted merganser, the other species can be regularly expected, some in good numbers, through the winter from late December through the beginning of February.

For the past five years, the Cincinnati CBC has never taken place earlier than 12/26 and was as late as 12/30 twice. On those five counts, Camp Dennison averaged 1179 individuals and 16.4 species of ducks and geese. American coots and pied-billed grebes averaged 688 individuals combined. That's a total average of 18.4 species and 1867 individual birds on a 150-acre body of water in the winter. The individual species averages for that five-count period are: Canada goose 378, gadwall 56, American wigeon 44, American black duck 9, mallard 111, northern shoveler 34, northern pintail 1, green-winged teal 8, canvasback 9, redhead 8, ring-necked duck 370, greater scaup 1, lesser scaup 11, bufflehead 48, common goldeneye 1, hooded merganser 66, ruddy duck 24, pied-billed grebe 41, and American coot 647.

Other winter species include bald eagle, an annual visitor since 2002. And there are always a few of the common gull species around during appropriate seasons. The Camp Dennison gravel pits are viewed primarily as a waterbird spot, but songbirds, raptors, and other species are also present in good numbers. Sparrows are common in all the appropriate seasons. American tree sparrow (2000 on 12/12/82) can be abundant in winter. Rare winter visitors have included a Brewer's blackbird in the company of rusty blackbirds on 12/26/04. Merlins made appearances in March and October 2004. American pipits occasionally show up and 150 were recorded on 10/25/84. Northern harriers are seen from time to time. Horned larks appear during the winter months, and Lapland longspurs and snow buntings, while rare, are occasionally found at that season. Common permanent residents include: great blue heron, red-tailed, red-shouldered and Cooper's hawks, black vulture (75, on 3/1/03), belted kingfisher, and eastern bluebirds.

Some of the representative summer residents include: green heron, yellow-billed cuckoo, most of the swallows, willow flycatcher, eastern phoebe, eastern kingbird, warbling vireo, yellow-throated warbler, common yellowthroat, prothonotary warbler (occasional), yellow-breasted chat, indigo bunting, and orchard and Baltimore orioles. A black-billed cuckoo was confirmed breeding at Camp Dennison this past summer. Migrant songbirds would not be expected in great numbers in the pits themselves, but they should occur, along with many common summer and winter residents, in the adjacent wooded riparian corridor along the Little Miami River. Migrant warblers can occur in the pits, as did 175 palm warblers on 9/6/85.

The Camp Dennison gravel pits are an exceptional birding area. General birder access to the interior of the gravel pits is not likely to happen in the near future, if ever, so it's possible that many of the area's avian secrets may remain locked. I believe the village of Indian Hill has plans for a nature center. If so, staff personnel will possibly note their observations, as might resident birders and the occasional survey groups. So we will probably learn more than we have during the 15 years it was totally off limits. It will be interesting to see what will happen if a really rare bird shows up. Will exceptions be made? Something similar to that occurred recently when blue grosbeaks and the three American avocets seen on 8/25/07 were reported publicly via the Internet on our local sightings log. As it happened, the avocets were visible from SR 126. If it had been a little stint, I think we would have been out of luck.

Birders can still view the gravel pits from the periphery, either along Rt. 126 or the Camp Dennison Nature Trail, which can be accessed off of Ulrich

Ave in Camp Dennison. There are several wide pullouts along SR 126 where you can safely park. The roadside is public property, and I have heard of no complaints about anyone taking a few steps further to improve their view. There is a business with an adjacent parking lot located at the north end of the pits offering an excellent view of the northern section of the gravel pits. They don't seem to mind if you park there briefly when they're closed on weekends or after hours, but of course that can change.

The Camp Dennison gravel pits can be located in the Ohio Atlas on page 75, 4-C. To get there from the intersection of I-71 and I-275, take I-275 east. Go about five miles and take exit # 54, Wards Corner Rd. Turn right (south) onto Wards Corner Rd. and go about 1.5 miles until it meets SR 126. Turn left (east) onto SR 126 and go about ¼ of a mile to the stop sign. Follow the sign for SR 126 and turn right (south). Continue south on SR 126 and cross the bridge over the Little Miami. The Camp Dennison gravel pits will be on your left for the next mile. This truly is a great birding site and you won't be disappointed. Just be sure you bring a scope.

Acknowledgements

The bird records cited are from numerous individuals and sources that have been compiled by Ned Keller and others and organized in a database by Ned that can be found on his website, Birding in Cincinnati, <http://www.cincinnatibirds.com/> The direct link for the Birding in Cincinnati database is: <http://cincinnatibirds.com/database/index.php> . The author benefited from personal communications with David Styer, Robert Foppe, and the late Worth Randle.

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A History of Camp Dennison:

<http://home.fuse.net/campdennison/camphistory.htm>

The Village of Indian Hill:

<http://www.ci.indian-hill.oh.us/>

The Cincinnati Enquirer:

http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/05/13/loc_bronson13.html

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Top photo: Denise Lane heard hissing coming from this grain bin in an abandoned Columbiana County barn. Middle photo: Bob Lane photographed this turkey vulture chick in the bin on 21 June. Bottom photo: On 21 July, the chick grumpily submits to another photo by Bob Lane; fully fledged by 28 July, it remained in the bin at the cop