

The Future??

Now's when I wish I had a time machine that could foresee the future. After I had finished writing this column, I learned that *The Ohio Cardinal* will, after almost 30 years, be changing hands from publisher Ed Pierce to The Ohio Ornithological Society. Ed has been an incredible force, mostly behind the scenes, in Ohio birding for several decades now, and I want to personally thank him for all he's done (often at his own expense) to see that this journal might exist, and continue to publish information on Ohio's birds. Ed's a good friend, and a generous man.

It's been over 20 years now since my first article was published in the *Cardinal*, and not too many years after that, Ed and then-current editor Tom Kemp encouraged me to try my hand as the new editor. This was a task I did proudly, if not always gracefully, back in the days of ultra-tight shoestring budgets, 40 MG hard drives, 286 MHz processors, and nine-pin dot-matrix printers, all now the stuff of computer museums or thrift store bargain bins. I'm glad that we've been able to graduate to the product you now hold in your hands.

And for the past nine years, with the blessings of editor Bill Whan and publisher Ed Pierce, it has been my privilege to write this indulgent little column for a sophisticated audience of Ohio birders. I know it has been a treat for me; I hope it has been of value to you.

The Ohio Cardinal represents "citizen science" at its purest. Long-term collections of data are beyond calculable value for tomorrow's birders and researchers, and for tomorrow's birds as well. I don't know what the future holds for the *Cardinal*, but I earnestly hope that it will continue to function as it has for three decades now—to bring birders together in a forum where they can share information on Ohio bird observations in a long-term hard-copy format, accessible to all.

I'll risk sounding preachy here, but as forward-thinking birders, we should expect—better yet, we should *demand*—as complete and accurate a record of Ohio bird observations as possible. We need an ever-growing number of active and skilled field birders who report their observations from around the state. We need dedicated and knowledgeable editors, who are given enough room to properly address these observations in the permanent historical record. We need a strong, fair, and accessible peer-review panel (the Ohio Bird Records Committee neatly fills the bill) to help adjudicate exceptional records, to provide a balanced approach, and to help avoid the dangers that can occur when an individual attempts to act as the ultimate authority. We must not give our combined expertise short shrift; this would be a terrible disservice to the future, especially in our rapidly changing world.

Thanks, and hoping to see you in the field...

Birdin' the Pits

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It is generally agreed that diminishing habitats are the major threat to bird populations. The gradual but steady losses of wetlands, grasslands, and mature forest garner the most attention, and rightfully so. Many species that depend on these imperiled habitats are in steep decline. Urbanization has taken its toll, and the constant expansion of urban areas into the rural countryside claims many thousands of acres annually.

Fortunately, many species have apparently been able to adapt to these changes to the natural environment and can be found in all sorts of altered habitats. Urban birders learn to recognize these habitats and the birds potentially attracted to them. Airports, garbage dumps, golf courses, residential back yards, urban parks, cemeteries, dams and impoundments, sewage lagoons, cropland, railroad right of ways, and power transmission line cuts are just a few examples of manmade or altered habitats that attract birds, and of course the birders looking for them.

Maybe the most interesting of these types of man-made habitats are gravel pits. Similar sites include quarries, borrow pits, and—to some degree—retention basins and settling ponds. With the exception of a few well-known sites, the vast majority of these pits generally go unrecognized, overlooked, and under-birded. Some of these sites may be better than others, but they all attract birds on some level and certain sites can be downright outstanding in terms of the sheer numbers and diversity of species they attract. Some are productive enough that they have become local hot spots and attract more observers than more pristine natural areas nearby. Here in southwestern Ohio (Hamilton, Butler, Warren, Clermont, Brown, Clinton, Greene, Preble and Montgomery counties), the Camp Dennison and Newtown gravel pits in Hamilton County and the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pit just north of Spring Valley WA are well known and regularly birded. In the Greater Cincinnati area the Oxbow, a wetland located along the Indiana/Ohio state line, offers a couple of examples of productive borrow pits. Without suggesting that these manmade pits are preferable to the natural landscapes they replaced, they provide surprisingly productive staging areas and habitats for a number of resident and migratory species. In these days of rapid habitat loss, gravel pits and similar sites deserve recognition. And while one seldom hears the words "natural beauty" and "gravel pits" used in the same sentence, a solid case could be made that many of these sites are greatly beneficial to birds and a host of other wildlife.

Gravel pits, quarries, and borrow pits can be found scattered throughout Ohio and the entire Midwest. In southwestern Ohio, however, literally hundreds of gravel pits, both active and abandoned, are concentrated along the banks of the Ohio, Little Miami, Great Miami, and Whitewater Rivers and their larger feeder streams. Few are birded with any regularity. Many are privately owned and trespassing is forbidden. Some are concealed and off of the beaten track, and even birders are unaware of their presence. Apparently owners' fears of liability and lawsuits effectively make many abandoned gravel pits and quarries

veritable wildlife refuges. Still, many can be wholly or partially scanned from roadsides or other vantage points. Aerial maps available on the Internet provide an excellent resource for locating these sites.

As an interesting innovation, the Hamilton County Park District has recently acquired several abandoned gravel pits in western Hamilton County along the Whitewater River, which are now open to the public for fishing and nature viewing. During the two years these particular sites have been open a number of great finds have already been recorded and include blue grosbeaks (breeding), Bell's vireo (probably breeding) and grasshopper sparrows (breeding), species rare or uncommon in Hamilton County.

The concept of reclaiming open pit mines into wildlife and recreation areas is not a new one, and has been practiced in Europe for decades. On a similar but larger scale is the reclaiming of coal-producing strip mines in many places in Indiana, Kentucky, and eastern Ohio over the past twenty years. The American Electric Power Company, in conjunction with ODNR, has turned large areas of reclaimed strip mines into State wildlife areas. The AEP recreation lands near The Wilds and the Crown City State Wildlife area are two prominent examples. While it may seem strange to garner support to "preserve" a gravel pit, the concept may become a reality some day if habitat loss elsewhere continues at its current pace.

While there are differences between gravel pits, quarries, and borrow pits, the habitats they provide share many similarities. All are generally fairly sizable tracts, ranging between ten to several hundred acres. Sometimes several large pits are adjacent to or in close proximity to one another. Most pits hold at least some permanent water, although some are virtually dry. Many are completely filled with water, featuring large lakes. Some such lakes are fairly shallow, but others can be quite deep, remaining open through all but the most severe winters, as is the case with the Camp Dennison gravel pits. Sometimes sand bars and peninsulas, remnants from previous mining operations, jut out into the ponds. Pits by their very nature are wide-open habitats, often with only a few scattered trees such as cottonwoods, locusts, and willows around the perimeters, although wooded riparian corridors or woodlands may persist nearby. These areas generally have well-drained, loose, sandy or rocky soils, and slopes on perimeters of the pits are often sparsely vegetated with a wide variety of grasses, forbs, and other scrubby and brushy vegetation in various stages of succession. Active pits usually have considerably less herbaceous growth than do abandoned pits due to the continuous mining operations and ongoing alterations to the pit. One might think the disturbances associated with active mining in these pits would result in fewer birds being present. In some cases this might be true, but it's not necessarily the rule. For example, the Camp Dennison gravel pits have been well known for concentrations and diversity of waterfowl and other species even during the peak of their active days.

There are a few subtle differences between gravel pits, borrow pits, and quarries, and a few definitions are probably in order. A gravel pit is a piece of land, most often lying along a river or stream, excavated for extracting gravel, sand, or crushed stone. These products, collectively referred to as aggregates, are used in construction. These mining operations are big business, and hard to miss by anyone exploring the rivers of southwestern Ohio. A quarry, on the other hand, denotes a site dedicated to the extraction of larger rock, such as blocks or slabs of granite, limestone, or slate. These open pits are generally steeper-sided than gravel pits and, if I understand correctly, often shallower. Such sites

are more common in central northern and eastern Ohio, where local geology favors such materials. A borrow pit is an area where soil or other material has been excavated, or "borrowed," for use at another site. These types of pits are commonly seen along expressways throughout Ohio, where borrowed soil was used in the construction of the highway or to create nearby embankments for exit ramps. Retention basins are usually found in commercial or residential areas and often resemble gravel pits, but are intended to control runoff and flooding in nearby areas. Settling ponds also have some physical similarities to gravel pits and retention basins. These impoundments are created to dispose of dredged materials taken from nearby bodies of water. Silt and water are pumped into these impoundments and allowed to settle, at times creating a permanent pond unless it is eventually filled.

Almost all these varieties of pits attract a diverse array of species throughout the year. Most of my personal experience comes from southwestern Ohio, where gravel pits are predominant, but if the prospect of making new discoveries excites readers to explore, any of these sites near where you bird should be checked, often year-long. Waterfowl, loons, grebes, and coots can be common during migration and throughout the winter if the water stays open. Other waterbirds such as gulls, terns, and cormorants are regular visitors to gravel pits during appropriate seasons, as are eagles and ospreys. American white pelicans, while rare, are more likely, but you may recall that among the few Ohio records of brown pelican, one spent a week during early May 2004 at the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pits, and others appeared at borrow pits in Hancock County in 1991 and Franklin County in 1996.

Steep-sided gravel pits and quarries usually do not offer much of the shallow-water habitat preferred by long-legged waders and shorebirds. But every pit is different. Some gravel pits have excellent shallow-water habitats and quite a few actually have mudflats, exposed sandbars and even emergent vegetation such as cattail beds. During late summer and early fall droughts, lower water tables may expose considerable shoreline. When and where these conditions occur, expect migrant shorebirds, herons and egrets, bitterns, rails, and moorhens.

Another declining habitat that sometimes seems to get overlooked in discussions concerning land preservation is successional habitat. Here I refer to those transitional habitats that occur over a long period of time when an open habitat such as grassland, pasture, old-field or other open area slowly reverts back to a woodland habitat. When these open areas are left uncut or untended shrubs, red cedars (in southern Ohio), and other woody growth slowly invades. Eventually young trees will begin to take a foothold, and as they mature over many years a canopy eventually forms and shades out many of the pioneering plants. This natural process is referred to as succession. These successional habitats are commonly found in dry gravel pits and around the periphery of water-filled ones.

Early succession (when an open area is still mostly grass and forbs with only a few scattered shrubs and cedars) and advanced succession (when cedars, brush, and dense tangles become dominant) habitats host an interesting array of avian species. Successional habitats were once more common in Ohio, especially in rural areas. They have become distinctly uncommon as many such areas, like abandoned farms, have reverted back to woodland or been eliminated due to modern farming practices, urban sprawl, and commercial development. Most gravel pits, particularly abandoned ones, are excellent places to find

such habitats and the birds associated with them. I have no evidence, only my perception, but it seems to me the successional process occurs at a slower rate, and is more delayed, in gravel pits. This could possibly be due to the sandy, loose, or more rocky and less fertile soils found in gravel pits.

Typical breeding species and/or year round residents that either nest or forage in and around the gravel pits in southwestern Ohio include a noteworthy group of species, many of which are on Ohio's and the Audubon Society's list of threatened or species of special concern lists. This list includes Canada goose, wood duck, mallard, northern bobwhite, great blue heron, green heron, Cooper's hawk, red-shouldered hawk, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, killdeer, spotted sandpiper, American woodcock, mourning dove, black-billed cuckoo, yellow-billed cuckoo, great horned owl, ruby-throated hummingbird, belted kingfisher, northern flicker, willow flycatcher, eastern phoebe, eastern kingbird, white-eyed vireo, yellow-throated vireo, warbling vireo, horned lark, purple martin, tree swallow, northern rough-winged swallow, bank swallow, cliff swallow, barn swallow, house wren, eastern bluebird, American robin, gray catbird, northern mockingbird, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, blue-winged warbler, northern parula, yellow warbler, yellow-throated warbler, prairie warbler, prothonotary warbler, common yellowthroat, yellow-breasted chat, summer tanager, eastern towhee, field sparrow, savannah sparrow (UC), grasshopper sparrow (UC), song sparrow, northern cardinal, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting, red-winged blackbird, eastern meadowlark, brown-headed cowbird, orchard oriole, Baltimore oriole, house finch, and American goldfinch.

During the winter and migrations all of Ohio's sparrows may be found, as can American pipits, horned larks, and rusty blackbirds. Occasionally Lapland longspurs and snow buntings are also seen. Most of Ohio's migrant warblers pass through the denser vegetation in and around gravel pits, and palm and yellow-rumped warblers can be abundant. As gravel pits are almost always located along rivers and streams, any species associated with wooded riparian corridors is always a probability when birding in and around these places.

The possibilities of what potentially breeds in gravel pits are exciting to say the least. We just don't know. But the odds tell us that we are missing quite a bit. As mentioned before, there are hundreds of gravel pits in southwestern Ohio alone, and only a few are 100% totally accessible to birders. As for the chance of getting permission to access active gravel pits, one probably has a better chance to win the lottery. Most, if not all abandoned pits are posted. To acquire permission to enter one, one would first have to know whom to ask. Of course you could always take your chances and take a fairly quick peek, but who needs that type of stressful birding? Someone with a good set of ears and the skills to recognize bird songs could probably make some interesting finds, but most birders don't make the effort. Of these hundreds of pits, I know of fewer than 10 that are regularly birded. I'm fairly certain there are more than a hundred gravel pits in southwestern Ohio alone that are never birded at all. Many gravel pits that do get looked at are usually situated near a highway, but many of those pits get only the occasional quick scope scan during migration or on a Christmas Bird Count, but they probably never see a birder during the breeding season. So, you may be asking, what's the big deal? One answer to that question is that of the few gravel pits birders do bother to check during the breeding season, all seem to have at least one pair of blue grosbeaks present. I am certain that a thorough survey of this region's gravel pits during the summer months would discover additional considerable populations of blue grosbeaks.

Blue grosbeaks are not city birds, and they have a decided preference for rural areas. Typical blue grosbeak habitat in the eastern U.S. consists of brushy successional areas, hedgerows, and thickets along fencerows and roadsides, grassland with scattered shrubs, old fields, forest edge, transmission-line corridors, open slashings left after logging, groves, stream edges, and in the deep south multi-age pine forests. And apparently gravel pits can be added to that list. I suppose that shouldn't be too much of a surprise, as gravel pits share a lot of similarities with these other habitats. But it doesn't explain the decided preference for gravel pits that blue grosbeaks exhibit in southwestern Ohio. Here they can now be almost expected in a gravel pit, but are generally absent over wide areas of their supposedly more traditional habitats as described above.

Blue grosbeaks are predominantly a bird of the southern United States and while widespread throughout their breeding range are generally scarce or uncommon over much of it. It was apparent during the 1960s that blue grosbeak populations were undergoing a gradual northward range expansion. They are relative newcomers to Ohio. Ohio's first confirmed breeding record was from June 1940 in Adams County, and the Cincinnati area's first breeding record was in July 1974. During the ensuing years Ohio's blue grosbeak populations were for the most part restricted to southern and southeastern Ohio. Adams County seemed to be their stronghold, though by the 1990s other sites in southeastern Ohio, such as Crown City WA (interestingly a reclaimed strip mine) in Gallia County, were hosting considerable populations of blue grosbeaks. During this period grosbeaks remained rare but regular summer residents in southwestern Ohio, but were considerably more common in some not too distant locations in northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana. During the 1990s and through 2005 most Greater Cincinnati area blue grosbeak records came from northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana. Southwestern Ohio records were decidedly scarce.

During the 30-year period from 1975 through 2005, a considerable portion of our records came from gravel pits. During that time five different local gravel pits have produced 32 summering blue grosbeak records in the Greater Cincinnati area. Many other area records came from sites that mimicked gravel pits to a considerable extent, such as major new highway construction projects and the alternately grass and riprap-covered slopes along the dams at East Fork State Park and Brookville Reservoir. All of these sites exhibited certain characteristics in common with gravel pits: wide-open habitats, with rocky and disturbed earth adjacent to grassy and weedy areas.

Anyone even casually reviewing local southwestern Ohio blue grosbeak records will notice the tremendous increase in their local populations over the past few years. The Cincinnati Birding Database shows blue grosbeaks breeding, or presumed breeding, at 15 separate locations in southwestern Ohio over the past two years. Many of these sites had multiple pairs. By comparison, in 2000 there was only one breeding pair reported over the same area. Of these 15 summering blue grosbeak sites, 11 were from either gravel pits (7) or borrow pits and retention ponds (4). Of the four other sites, three featured habitat similar to gravel pits. One of those was from the Fernald plant site that had been recently disassembled, leaving much scrubby vegetation and broken surface roads in its wake, and another was along a major highway construction site, an extension to Blue Rock Rd. Two pairs of lark sparrows also nested here in 2007. The third was along the dam and spillway at East Fork State Park. Only one site exhibited classic blue grosbeak habitat of weedy fields bordered by brush and hedgerows, and that was at Valley View Preserve along the East Fork of the Little Miami in Milford, Ohio. Remember, there are hundreds of

these types of pits in southwestern Ohio alone, and less than 5% get any birding coverage. If we are finding blue grosbeaks in most of the pits that do get birding coverage, then how many are there in the hundreds of pits that don't?

Two other rare Ohio species have shown an affiliation to gravel pits in southwestern Ohio. Lark sparrows, an accidental species in Ohio away from Oak Openings, have been reported breeding or presumed breeding at three southwestern Ohio locations since 1980. On two occasions they were discovered in gravel pits. In 1987 a pair nested in the Mt. Nebo gravel pit near Shawnee Lookout Park in Hamilton County. A pair was seen there again in 1990 but was not confirmed breeding. In late May and early June of 2004 a lark sparrow was present at the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pit and seen by many birders who came to see the brown pelican. The third site, as mentioned before, was along a newly constructed section of Blue Rock Rd. in Hamilton County, a site that exhibited many of the characteristics of gravel pits. In central Ohio in 2007, a lark sparrow was confirmed breeding in an abandoned quarry near Columbus. The habitat the Oak Opening colony of lark sparrows uses consists of sandy soils and open weedy fields with scattered trees. Some gravel pits make a pretty good imitation of that type of habitat.

As I noted before, a territorial male Bell's vireo was found in an accessible Hamilton County gravel pit in 2006 and may have bred there. A probable breeding Bell's vireo was found in 1995 in a gravel pit along the Great Miami River at West Carrollton. Granted that is only two sites, but consider there are only six locations that have summering Bell's vireo records in southwestern Ohio. That's a 33% average for gravel pits. Without a doubt the typical habitats found in and around gravel pit are perfectly suited for this species.

Apparently blue grosbeaks have a special affinity with gravel pits and the like, and more thorough surveys of these areas during the summer months would most definitely discover additional, and maybe even considerable, populations. And don't be too surprised if a few lark sparrows and Bell's vireos show up as well. Gravel pits have great birding potential, and with three more years to go on the OBBA II we should have ample opportunity to get many of these great sites covered. But whatever the season, gravel pits assuredly will produce great birding.

Eurasian Collared-doves in Ohio: The Background

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The Eurasian collared-dove *Streptopelia decaocto* has made history in lands far beyond its likely origins in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Its present range in North America is already as extensive as that for the rock pigeon *Columba livia*, and it has occupied its adopted territory far more quickly. This species entered Florida by way of the Bahamas in the 1980s and had conquered North America by the summer of 2007, when single birds and possibly pairs were documented in several locations in Alaska. Coincidentally, Ohio experienced its first substantial influx of these doves in 2007, with reports of multiple birds in Williams, Darke, Preble, Butler, and Mercer counties. Prior to that we had only two accepted records, one of two birds shot by a hunter in Crawford County 1 September 2001 (specimen), and one visiting a Licking County feeder 15 April-28 May 2006 (photos). Other individuals previously reported had not been seen or described well enough to distinguish them from look-alikes. During this spring's invasion, these doves were observed copulating on several occasions, and on 27 September were observed in northern Preble County with a juvenile, suggestive of successful local nesting. Such is the Eurasian collared-dove's story in Ohio to date. It is likely only the beginning of a familiar tale.

History and taxonomy of the *Streptopelia* doves

As a group, the doves and pigeons (family Columbidae) present unique problems for observers. Few wild birds have been as adaptable to the human presence, as amenable to domestication, or as unlikely—even in large numbers—to threaten populations of other species. But their very adaptability and tendency to associate with humans has led to hybridization in the wild, intentional crossbreeding in captivity, and consequently rapid range expansions across the globe. The result has often been confusion: about the identities of certain populations, the local status of others, and any stable notion of their distribution overall.

Some columbids, it is true, have not adapted to us. The range of the passenger pigeon *Ectopistes migratorius* in North America shrank as rapidly as ours expanded, and the extinction of this, at one time perhaps the most populous bird species in existence, followed after little more than two centuries of extensive contact with European settlers. Most of the ~300 species of doves and pigeons remain relatively modest in numbers and restricted in range. Others, however, have associated with dense human populations—as pets, as game, and as familiar neighbors—to a degree unknown in other bird families, and their history as captives among us dates back over two thousand years. Their dependence on humans has led to a number of odd versions of typical evolutionary progressions in the wild, as these birds seemingly dispersed far