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Migrant Birds Swarm at Little Cedar Point

by E. S. Thomas & Louis W. Campbell

*The Toledo Naturalists' Association's Yearbook for 1975
republished part of a weekly column in the Columbus Dispatch
of 6/4/1939 by E. S. Thomas, then curator of the Ohio State
Museum, appending remarks from Louis W. Campbell. It
appears again here with permission from the TNA.*

It was in many respects the biggest bird day in my career—and that covers 31 years' study of migrating birds. It was a dazzling exciting slightly bewildering day. Just imagine birds by the hundreds, birds everywhere, a dozen pairs of twinkling wings in every tree and shrub, sprightly song bursting our every few moments, hundreds and hundreds of birds!

I had often heard of the great swarms of migrating birds which occasionally mass themselves at places on the shore of Lake Erie in May, preparatory to their flight across the lake. But in a dozen or more May trips up to the lake, I had failed to find any more migrants than would occur in central Ohio on favorable days.

And, although the evidence was from unimpeachable authority, I had come almost to believe that the stories were myths. But, finally, I have seen it with my own eyes. You may believe me: bird migrants do on occasion swarm along the lake shore in absolutely unbelievable numbers, in numbers that are never seen in inland districts.

Upon the invitation of Louis W. Campbell, authority on the birds of northwestern Ohio, and Mrs. Campbell, we drove to Toledo one Saturday and started immediately for Little Cedar Point, a sand spit extending out into the lake, some 10 miles east of Toledo.

The sand spit is surrounded on all sides by extensive marshes, while the lake shore and the lane which leads to the point are bordered with trees and shrubbery. There, thus are presented opportunities for seeing marsh birds, birds of the sand beaches and birds which frequent trees and shrubbery.

There was an abundance of birds at the point that afternoon, but not to be compared with numbers which we were to find on the following day. The feature of the afternoon was the number of Lincoln's sparrows and of gray-cheeked thrushes.

Both species are ordinarily considered rare, and you can imagine our pleasure at finding them actually common on this afternoon. Both birds are normally very shy and difficult to approach, but here they were crowded into such close quarters that we were able to get incomparable views of them time and again.

Out on the sand-spit, there were sanderlings and turnstones and some charming, little suede-gray piping plovers—one of the very rarest of our Ohio nesting birds, and the first which I had seen in Ohio for five years or more.

At the very tip of the point there was a large flock of herring and ring-billed gulls, with some hundred pairs of common terns, which had established a nesting colony. Several dozen tern's nests had already been scooped out in the sand, and a few even had complete clutches of three eggs.

There was a gorgeous scarlet tanager which we saw, shimmering in the sunlight, at 30 feet, along the road. There were gaudy Baltimore orioles, canary and black goldfinches and a flock of the rare brown-streaked pine siskins

clustered close at hand around a little mud puddle in the road.

But we could not have dreamed of the host of birds which we were to find swarming in the vegetation at the point. Our first intimation of it came when we began seeing large numbers of olive-backed [Swainson's] thrushes in the willows along the lane. The gray-cheeks which were so plentiful the afternoon before had disappeared, and here were scores and scores of olive-backs.

There were also in the horde of birds which flitted ahead of the car a number of stately beautiful white-crowned sparrows, Wilson's warblers, and a few Lincoln's sparrows, though only a fraction of those we had seen the day before. It was obvious that there had been a tremendous turnover during the night.

And then, as we approached the wooded border of the lake, we were suddenly plunged into a mass of seething, flitting, signing, feeding birds. Every bush had its quota.

I would hesitate to estimate the numbers of salmon and black redstarts, magnolia warblers, Wilson's warblers. We carefully estimated that there may have been as many as 500 olive-backed thrushes in this restricted area! I counted 46 fleeing ahead of the car at a distance of about 200 yards.

One of our rarer warblers is the mourning warbler, a lovely creature with vivid olive-green back, clear slate-blue throat, ornamented with a gorget of black with bright yellow underparts. We usually feel fortunate indeed, to find half a dozen of them in a spring's migration.

On this day alone, we saw no less than 10 of them. Since they are shy little creatures, which skulk in the dense herbage of the forest floor, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there were 50 of them in the few acres of woodland at the base of the point.

We estimate that we saw about 10 of the even rarer Connecticut warblers, though we did not definitely identify all of them.

There were chestnut-sided warblers, bay-breasted warblers, blackpoll warblers, ovenbirds, Canada and black-throated blue warblers in fair numbers. We saw several of the rare Philadelphia vireos. There were purple finches and rose-breasted grosbeaks.

And everywhere we were seeing redstarts, golden Wilson's warblers, with their jaunty black caps; gold, black and white magnolia warblers; and especially olive-backed thrushes.

As we started out on to the sand spit, which extends a half a mile out into the lake, we could see that there was a storm brewing out over the water, ostensibly headed in our direction. There was a strong, 25-mile gale blowing off the lake, and flashes of lightning zig-zagged down from the black thunderheads.

A flock of 18 migrant blue jays hovered timidly around the bordering woods, unable to make up their minds (figuratively) to cross the lake. A similar flock of crows, Campbell said, had loitered around the point for a week.

Five kingbirds, perched in the branches of a single fallen willow tree, made a sight that was both unusual and impressive.

For several minutes, I watched a nighthawk vainly trying to migrate out to the tip of the point against the gale. Foot by foot, it would fight against the wind, only to be buffeted up into the air and backwards, losing all ground which it had gained.

And then came a flight of hummingbirds. One, another, three in a group, two more—a total of seven, one after another, sped past like tiny winged bullets. Straight out over the sand they flashed and out into the teeth of the gale; out over the water into the menacing storm, until their bodies were lost in the distance.

Where the nighthawk had failed, they braved the wind with ease and not one of them hesitated for a fraction of a second in its lunge over the breakers toward an unseen destination. One felt like cheering or doing something equally foolish.

We had to leave in the middle of the afternoon and how we hated to go! Our list for the portion of the day totaled 123 species of birds, by far the largest one-day list I have ever assembled. If we had been out at the crack of dawn and had worked until dark, we could easily have topped 150 species; 160 would have been by no means impossible.

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Lou Campbell's comments (1975): The Cedar Point Marsh is shaped like a triangle, with its point marking the dividing line between Lake Erie and Maumee Bay. At the time the above article was written the marsh was fringed with trees on the lake and bay sides. A mile-long forest one-half mile wide stretched across the base, and the road leading to the clubhouse was lined with willows and cottonwoods. Between the Cedar Point Hunting Club headquarters and Little Cedar Point was about one-half mile of woods. The time was only a few years after Lake Erie had reached an all-time low water level. Shore lines were stabilized, and the sand bar was over 1000 feet long.

One of the area bird-migration lanes in spring follows the Lake Erie shore to Maumee Bay and crosses into Michigan. Little Cedar Point was a jumping-off place and birds following wooded shore lines and the marsh border accumulated at the tip of the triangle of marsh. Because the wooded edges of the marsh were natural bird highways, concentrations also occurred in autumn. Insect migrants such as dragonflies, bumblebees, and monarch butterflies were often prominent in spring.

Today Little Cedar Point attracts only a small fraction of the migrants formerly found there. In 1961 clearings of the swamp forest across the inner border of the marsh was begun, and it is now virtually all farmland. The lake and bay reaches are badly eroded by recent all-time high Lake Erie levels. A long stretch near the Toledo and Oregon pumping stations is completely washed away. The fringe of trees on the Maumee Bay side is interrupted and about one-third as wide as it was formerly. The greatest change has taken place at the point itself. It is only a few hundred feet long and at least one-half mile south of where it was in the 1930s, with a corresponding reduction in the wooded areas formerly lying between the clubhouse and the sand bar.

If the U.S. Department of the Interior had not spent a million dollars (obtained from hunters, by the way) to protect the outer dikes, the Cedar Point Marshes would now be a large bay and a part of Lake Erie. Ultimately a low water cycle will return, and birds will again follow shorelines and gather at Little Cedar Point. But never in the numbers that they once did.