

BIRDS OF OHIO IN DAYS OF OLDE

By Laura Peskin

One who studies birds in an historical fashion may be surprised to see the variability in common birds in most given regions over a century's time. Of course this variability is tied to large-scale human settlement. Before the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent, mature forests were more extensive. Eighteenth and 19th Century farming practices temporarily expanded the ranges and populations of birds that thrive in grasslands. Modern land-use practices including more intensive farming, development of former farm sites, draining of wetlands, and damming of waterways have often harmed wildlife. Northeast Ohio has been immersed in these destructive practices for the past 50 years. Not surprisingly the native bird population is at a low in diversity. The main bright spot for birds and other wildlife in Northeast Ohio today is the protection now in place for scarce habitats. This protection is related to renewed interest in healthy waterways. The deep ravines of the Chagrin, Cuyahoga, and Grand Rivers with their boreal hemlock micro-environments now have more layers of protection. The National Park system, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, local metroparks, area land conservancies, and other bodies play an important role in preserving these fragile environments.

The recent recovery of the wild turkey in Northeast Ohio is largely due to the health of the National Park and surrounding Cuyahoga Valley, where one can nowadays count on seeing turkeys on many of the wooded trails. To a lesser extent this is true in area metroparks as well. The resurrection of the species in our region stems from successful reintroduction efforts. Parkland habitat maintenance has been supplemented by excellent management practices at north-central Ohio game areas such as Killbuck Marsh in Wayne and Holmes Counties.¹

Ben Franklin wanted to make the Wild Turkey our national bird. Ohioans perhaps would have concurred. There were perhaps more turkeys in Ohio than any other state. All of that had changed by 1900; the turkey was probably extirpated in Ohio by that date. The striking gobblers just could not co-exist with forest clearing and escalating hunting.

Northeast Ohio has been experiencing a net loss of all sorts of meaningful green space for over 60 years and will continue this trend into the foreseeable future. Even with the human population losses and outmigration of the recent recession, sprawl is still a significant factor; particularly since rural land is ample and affordable. We have just seen that there have been

success stories of native wildlife surviving and thriving because of carefully planned habitat set-asides. Populations of turkeys, cranes, and other birds have rebounded. Unfortunately for others the conservation efforts of the last 40 years, though extensive, will be viewed as too little, too late. Such is the case with the Piping Plover.

With their snowy white underparts and contrasting black rings around the neck and forehead, Piping Plovers remind one of devout members of an ascetic religious order. The birds are in fact totally devoted to open beaches and mind very much sharing them with bathers and all-terrain vehicles. A hundred years ago the Piping Plover was nearly hunted into extinction but the 1918 Migratory Bird Act put an end to this menace. The population recovered only to be threatened by a geographically expanding human presence a few short decades later. Loss of beaches to development has limited nesting sites for this sensitive species as well.

Piping Plovers are endangered throughout their entire range, which spans the Great Plains to the Atlantic Ocean. There are only 70 nesting pairs in the entire Great Lakes area. The largest concentration is on the northern side of Lake Michigan. At one time there was a sizable nesting population on the Canadian side of Lake Erie with breeders on all the large Ohio beaches of the lake as well. The Cleveland area's last nesting Piping Plovers were reported in 1933. Ohio's last nest was spotted in 1942. Residual populations of Piping Plovers in other states have shown some stabilization in the past 30 years thanks to partial beach closings. People who have birded on the East Coast will have seen areas now cordoned off for nests.

Many of the birds that Ohio effectively lost are wetlands species. Wetlands are still in short supply in Northeast Ohio but conservation efforts and creation of new wetlands in parks and preserves has paid off in maintaining the remaining wetland bird population and attracting formerly regular species. It also helps greatly when scarce wetland species are given special protection. Such is the case with the showy Sandhill Crane, a poster-child of species of concern. Now one can reliably view cranes in Holmes and Wayne Counties. A few nest in wet meadows or farmers' fields in these counties.²

The wetlands along western Lake Erie have received increased protection in recent decades. Ducks and other waterfowl take advantage of the string of nature preserves and wildlife refuges which line Lake Erie from Huron west to Toledo, a thick concentration being in the Oak Harbor area.

Cleveland Nesters in 1950 that no longer or scarcely nest here now due to insufficient wetlands.³

Species	Notes
Pied Billed Grebe	common nester 1950
American Bittern	infrequent nester 1950; in addition to general wet habitat loss, development near habitat, other factors contributed to decline ⁴
Least Bittern	occasional nester, 1950; encroachment of invasive reed grass on native cattail marshes could have been factor in decline
Am. Black Duck	regular nester 1950; competition with increasing Mallard population also has impacted.
Northern Harrier	common year-round 1950
Red-shouldered Hawk	"our most common large hawk" (Wms., 1950, 41) There are still a few nests in Northeast Ohio but not Cuy. Cnty.
Virginia Rail	locally common nester, 1950
Common Gallinule	Occasionally birders before 1950 reported nestings; may not have been accurately counted; bird also called by name of gallinule
Marsh Wren	locally common nester, 1950
Prothonotary Warbler	uncommon nester in 1950; perhaps they are less common today though these outgoing birds can be easily spotted in their requisite habitat – decaying trees in standing water
Northern Waterthrush	uncommon nester in 1950; a few nest today in tamarack bogs in Portage County and in Ashtabula County; their population was decimated pre-WWII with the destruction of at least 2 bogs in Ashtabula County and at least 3 Portage County wetlands. ⁵
Swamp Sparrow	common nester in 1950; uncommon nester today.

It is notable that four of the birds in the above table of former Cleveland-area wetland nesters are birds of shallow-water habitats, of cattails and rushes, of marshes and fens. These are the Least Bittern, Virginia Rail, the gallinule and the Marsh Wren. A.B. Williams' *The Birds of the Cleveland Region* (1950) used to liberally mention Aurora Pond, Solon Bog and Pymatuning Bog as favorite haunts of birds and birders alike. The latter two wetlands have altogether ceased to exist. Aurora Pond, due to water raising and an accidental fire (1930s) has partially undergone succession to a buttonbush and alder swamp. With these wetlands and others have gone the four mentioned birds. Another cause of their decline has been the salt-tolerant reed grass (genus *Phragmites*) which in recently years has literally taken over marshes, squeezing out the native cattails. Reed grass is by far the dominant vegetation at Mentor Marsh, one of the region's largest wetlands of its type. Marsh birds that were adaptable and still easily found in the region are Red-winged Blackbirds, Mallards and Song Sparrows.

While many of the wetland birds that early settlers saw have disappeared from today's suburban Northeast Ohio, large quantities of the few adaptable wetlands birds have replaced them. One such bird that prior to 1955 very rarely nested in Northeast Ohio is the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*). The fact that there is at least one Canada goose in Cuyahoga County or nearby for every man, woman and child in Cleveland can be explained by the Ohio Division of Wildlife's actually introducing the geese to rural parts of the region in the 1950s and 1960s. Never was it projected that urban

wildlife observers in due time would consider the goose synonymous with birds to be found on large lawns, birds to be found at shopping malls and birds to be found in open spaces everywhere.

The Ohio Division of Wildlife in the late 1950s was busy establishing a network of wildlife refuges mainly for the interest of hunters. There was no question that these refuges would be stocked with lively species to entertain sportsmen. In that regard few species matched the appeal of the Canada goose. One hunter stated admiringly,

[I]t is so wary, so sagacious, and so difficult to outwit that its pursuit has always fascinated the keen sportsman and taxed his skill and ingenuity more than any other gamebird.⁶

With this upbeat view of the Canada goose in mind, the Division of Wildlife introduced the birds at Magee Marsh on western Lake Erie in 1953 and at Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area in Trumbull County in the 1960s. Pennsylvania game authorities in the same era introduced Canada geese to various parts of that state including the northwestern portion less than 100 miles from Cleveland.

Hunters both in the field and in government bureaucracy did not consider impacts on cities; Ohio goose introduction efforts follow this pattern. Other aspects of the introduction program proved to have no benefit to hunters either. Introduction efforts with injured geese, wing-clipped birds and the subspecies *B. canadensis interior* did not lead to any self-sustaining Canada goose population at Ohio game reserves. On the other hand

introduction of the “giant” subspecies of the goose (*B. canadensis maximus*), which was not fussy where it bred, branded the introduction program a success. The ability of this subspecies to greatly tolerate humans, to nest in man-built structures and even readily nest in captivity proved a boon to the game area stocking program. Again many game managers never considered where the birds might go outside hunting season and whether they would become nuisances in population centers. Others may have known what they were getting into, but expressed enthusiasm none-the-less because of the economic and sporting benefits of hunting. A writer in the latter camp stated, “The Canada Goose is a prized and valuable resource that must not be relegated to a semi-domestic situation.”⁷

It is indeed a semi-domestic situation that *B. canadensis maximus* exploits today. Like robins, the geese are equal at home in wilderness, golf courses or parking lots. Unlike robins, the geese - and their droppings - are much larger leading to their epithetical nickname “garbage trucks on wings.” Unlike robins, goose families with young in tow harass bicyclers and passers-by. (The only time the present writer was almost attacked by a robin was when one engaged in porch nesting.) Since the geese do little substantive harm, one supposes that the many residents who are endeared to the proud handsome strutters even as their numbers reach the millions are justified in their view. Scientists have not found that goose droppings are a significant source of bacteria in area waterways.

To a less dramatic extent than the Canada Goose, the adaptable Mallard has gone from a localized nester a century ago to the most common nesting duck today. Like the Canada Goose, the Mallard is very flexible in habits; it is able to take up residence in most bodies of water in urban and rural areas. Its ability to find food in barren suburbs is supplemented by backyard feeding. Though not considered a “feeder bird,” Mallards think nothing of spending a day on a suburban lawn where someone has scattered birdseed in anticipation of their approach. Mallards visit the occasional feeder as well, particularly if near a pond.

Gulls are also adaptable waterfowl. Their ability to obtain food from landfills, refuse bins and open areas with food waste has led to a dramatic explosion of their population around Cleveland in the last 50 years. In 1960 it was estimated that there were fewer than 60,000 adult gulls breeding in Ohio. Today there could be about one Ohio breeding Ring-billed Gull for every person in the Cleveland area. While only about five percent of these gulls breed in urban areas such as Cleveland, the breeders could number around a quarter of a million birds; the non-urban Ohio breeders spend much of their time in the Cleveland area during the colder months.

To accommodate shifting to more anthropogenic food sources, nesting colony substrate has also evolved. Gulls are highly colonial nesters. Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, the two most common species in Northeast Ohio, build their nests on the almost bare ground. These nests would be vulnerable to predation by mammals if not for their placement on offshore islands such as those in western Lake Erie. As these gulls' large presence in Ohio only goes back a half a century, it is

believed that gulls established the western Lake Erie colonies in order to take advantage of the abundant urban food sources in northeast Ohio. A more recent and anthropogenic-driven nesting adaptation has been a shift to rooftop nesting. For Herring Gulls, such artificial nesting colonies have grown as large as natural ones, each accommodating hundreds of birds. The more numerous Ring-billed Gulls have rooftop nesting colonies in Cleveland also numbering in the hundreds of nests.

Researchers Dwyer, Belant, and their team, in a 1994 helicopter survey, counted 13 rooftop gull nesting colonies in Northeast Ohio; these included over 5,000 breeding birds. The Herring and Ring-billed Gull colonies showed striking differences. On average the study found the Ringed-billed's rooftop colonies further away from the lake than those of the Herring Gulls. (Ring-billed Gulls are the “shopping mall” gulls that often forage far from the lake.) One Ring-billed Gull rooftop colony with 437 nests was 15 miles inland. The two gull species also differed in what type of roof materials they were willing to nest on. While chiefly nesting on gravel roofs, Herring Gulls in the population survey also nested on metal ones.

Other research has attempted to document problems caused by rooftop-nesting gulls. A quick perusal of the literature will reveal that transitions to urban anthropogenic nesting is occurring in several species of gulls worldwide from Wales to British Columbia to the Great Lakes. While bird feces corroding expensive roofing material or defacing cars is a nuisance-category problem, of more serious concern is nesting material and food waste clogging building drainage systems. Maintenance staff at buildings hosting nesting colonies have reported that frequent cleanings of the drainage systems are necessary.

The only way to contain a roof-nesting gull problem in cities is to control the gull population. This is humanely accomplished by egg removal. Some researchers have suggested anesthetizing or otherwise killing the rooftop nesting birds. This seems like a drastic measure without a problem that is deeper than a mere economic one.

In summary the birds that Clevelanders are most familiar with today – Ring-billed Gulls, Mallards, and Canada Geese – would not top the list of birds familiar to people in Northeast Ohio 100 years ago. These bird observers may have mentioned Pied-billed Grebes, Northern Harriers (then called Marsh Hawks), Red-shouldered Hawks, and a good diversity of other species. The loss of wetlands has contributed to the decline of these once-common nesters. Large numbers of a few adaptable species have proliferated in their stead.

Two hundred years ago in Northeast Ohio, the primeval forest largely still covered the land. The southern Great Lakes were battlegrounds in the country's second war with the British; the age of settlement was just dawning. Wild Turkeys, Cerulean Warblers, and countless other deep forest species must have been a familiar site to the migrants from states further east who came to the region for its abundant land. These settlers cleared the turkey's habitat for their farms and hunted the gobbler for their dinner plates. With these practices the turkeys were gone in less than 100 years and remained absent for almost another century. Recent successful

turkey re-establishment efforts have shown that without considerable hunting, turkeys can thrive in the largely unforested Northeast Ohio today. As author pauses to momentarily anticipate Northeast Ohio's avian future, it sees a possible enlarged population of semi-domestic Wild Turkeys on the horizon. The segment of the current area turkey population that descends from game-

farm releases is comfortable around humans and suburban yards. When people feed them, these individuals stick around residential neighborhoods. The greatest conflict that could come out of this reconciliation of humans and turkeys is aggressive behavior from tom turkeys that mistakenly view particular people, both male and female, as mating rivals.

Notes

¹ Helon, David. Summer Home Range, Habitat ... of River Otters in the Killbuck Watershed. Master's thesis. Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries Resources. West Virginia University, Morgantown. 2006. 14-15.

² At least one study suggests that the Wayne County wetlands such as Killbuck Marsh are at their carrying capacity limit for crane nests. Expansion of nests in Ohio will depend on overall wetland health. See Downs, 2004. i-xx.

³ Rosche, Larry. *Birds of the Cleveland Region*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Natural History (CMNH), 2004; Williams, Arthur B., ed. *Birds of the Cleveland Region*. Cleveland: CMNH, 1950; Peterjohn, Bruce and Daniel Rice. *The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas*. Columbus: OH Dept. of Natural Resources, 1991.

⁴ Ward, MP et al. ... Causes of Long-term Declines of Wetland-dependent Birds in an Urbanizing Landscape. *Biodiversity And Conservation* 19:11 (2010) 3287 suggests development near wetlands when wetland acreage is not affected may still degrade quality of wetland. Rehm, E. and G. Baldassarre, Influence of Interspersion on Marsh Bird Abundance in NY ... *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* 119:4 (2007) 648 suggest American bitterns among other birds are sensitive to fine measures of wetland quality.

⁵ The bogs lost in Ashtabula County were Pymatuning and Orwell-Bloomfield; the wetlands lost in Portage County were Solon Bog and the marshes at Aurora Pond. Both of these losses occurred when Aurora Pond was enlarged in 1925; the water level was raised 1.5 feet. The creation of Geauga Lake as an amusement park wiped out much of the bog and fen community around Aurora Pond. See Aldrich, 359, 362.

⁶ Bent, AC. 1925, source unknown, quoted in Fazio, Victor. "Commentary on Avian introductions to Ohio with emphasis on the origin of the 'Giant' Canada Goose and its parallels with the Ohio Trumpeter Swan Program." *Ohio Birder Resources* website. 2004. Accessed 10/16/2011 at <http://aves.net/publications/ohbirds-introductionsII.htm>.

⁷ Robbins, S.D. *Wisconsin Birdlife*. Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991, page not noted, quoted in Fazio, ibid.

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