

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON OHIO BIRD RECORDS

By Bill Whan

Bird records in Ohio begin with ancient traces. This oldest evidence is not easy to interpret today. In archaeological studies of human habitations, we have found remains of birds which our predecessors discarded in middens, or utilized in various ways. We have also developed interesting but less firm notions of prehistoric occurrences of birds by studying the artistic or ritual use of bird images by earlier human societies. These prehistoric records are fascinating, but we have little assurance that they reflect the local presence of specific bird species rather than trophies from voyages or trade, or even if in some cases they are representations born of hazy remembrances or even entirely imagined.

Our prehistoric records, valuable and fascinating as they are, understandably suffer from inadequacies. Most of the recovered data involve discarded skeletal remains of birds found in excavations; it is conceivable that these remains represented birds collected elsewhere, of course. Some pictorial and sculptural representations of birds in preserved artifacts are often suggestive of the local presence of certain species in life. It also seems likely, for example, that prehistoric Ohioans used the feathers of a number of species in many ways—fletching arrows, applying colors, making fans and toys, decorating clothing, etc.—but identifiable physical evidence of this sort of material is usually missing, even though artistic representations of feather ornaments exist. Specimen evidence of some important rarities on the Ohio list—Ivory-billed Woodpecker, Trumpeter Swan, Whooping Crane, even Common Raven (yes, no Ohio specimen is known to remain of this once-common bird)—consists entirely of scattered prehistoric remains, though we have more recent photographic evidence of the raven at least.

We can more easily recognize and accept bird reports from the modern era. In Ohio, we have a few offhand reports from early visitors such as the French voyageurs, Daniel Boone and his ilk, and later from settlers' tales. Some reports seem unreliable, as many immigrants gave local birds the names of similar European species. Eventually, enthusiasts with free time and learning began to record their observations for one another in a careful and systematic manner, the best of them based on the work of early pioneers like Wilson (d. 1813), who made careful illustrations of birds

shot in the field. It was no accident that many of these reporters were physicians. They were trained and inquisitive observers, knowledgeable about anatomy, dissection, scientific methods, and precise technical language; in those early days they also passed a lot of quiet time outdoors as they made rural visits to see human patients and their animals.

The modern era of organized bird records began with the mustering of careful enthusiasts by the establishment of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1883. The AOU acted quickly to standardize the nomenclature and recognize the validity of a large body of knowledge about the continent's birds. Soon thereafter, in many detailed works its leaders offered guidance to lay bird observers that led to more stable and reliable reports of observations and many verified specimens, which in turn enabled the development of authoritative checklists of American birdlife.

Ohio's founding member of the AOU was John Maynard Wheaton, a Columbus physician who during his short life of 46 years found time to study and collect birds, assemble records from Ohio, and in 1860 to publish a list of Ohio's birds. He then in 1882 produced a 441-page compendium of what was known about 320 bird species found in the state by that time. His *Report on the Birds of Ohio* greatly enlarged upon important early lists by Dr. Jared Kirtland, whose 27-page work of 1838 constituted the first realistic attempt at a complete list of Ohio's birds, naming 223 species. Like Wheaton, Kirtland had collected many bird specimens, establishing a museum in Cleveland in 1858. But with time, circumstances exposed too many of the specimens to insect infestations and other perils, and only a portion remain. A half-century later, Wheaton's collection of over a thousand round (i.e., "stuffed") skins had a luckier career, and may be found pretty much intact—though lacking important dates and places of collection—at the OSU Museum and the Ohio Historical Society.

From ornithology's earliest days the recognized record of a bird species has been the specimen—the carefully preserved round skin of a bird (minus soft parts such as eyes, muscles, viscera, etc.)—accompanied by precise details attached by the preparator which included at least species, sex, date and location of collection, and the name of the collector. In the early days such specimens were stored in the private cabinets of enthusiasts. With the establishment of stable in-

situations, such as museums, libraries, and large private collections, they were curated with more care and became widely available to investigators as well as recorded in print. In the present day, five or six million bird specimens are thus curated in North America, though inevitably many others have been lost, and remain at best only as written accounts.

The scope of these collections has critically depended on the ease with which bird specimens could be acquired. Many species were, during the early days in which many specimens were collected, easy to find, but others—the rarest or most interesting—were to be found only seldom, or in remote areas difficult to access. For some, only monetary value (such as prevailed in the egg trade) could lead collectors to brave difficult or even dangerous conditions to secure them. Lethal collection was banned long ago except by properly licensed scientists, as has the practice of selling bird remains or even possessing them. Yes, if you're still sweeping your hearth with a heron wing, you are technically subject to prosecution, as you are if your daughter puts a blue jay feather in her headband, or even keeps a fragment of a robin's egg.

Some birds' habitats presented special problems for collectors of days gone by. Species of woodlands and fields were, once found, easy enough to obtain. Birds seen far off in wide-open spaces, especially over water, could be far more challenging targets for verification. Nineteenth-century Ohio records of most bird species are overall well represented by specimens collected, except in the case of those most often found over wide watery expanses of lakes and marshes. Kirtland preserved less than conclusive evidence for many bird species of Lake Erie. (Not that he didn't try; in 1857 he wrote about an unfamiliar young jaeger said to have been captured while attacking barnyard fowl, and his plan to confirm its specific identity by feeding it in captivity until it molted juvenile plumage.) Decades later Wheaton and his contemporaries were not able to provide persuasive specimen evidence of certain water-loving species they felt certain were to be found on the Lake and inland expanses of water.

Until well after the twentieth century began, optical instruments like telescopes and binoculars were clumsy and usually inadequate to the task of accurately identifying distant birds in the field. Photography was even more delayed in its capacity to clarify the identities of such subjects. Certain species were often seen in circumstances that made them impossible to collect or identify with confidence using the instruments available. From the Lake Erie shore, the identification of birds on

or over the offshore waves was even more challenging, as birds hard enough to bring down were even harder to retrieve later.

Such conditions resulted in anomalous results. Certain species—some terns are good examples—were not well studied in Ohio during the early days. Terns were most often seen at a distance over terrain challenging to traverse, often too far away to shoot even when stationary. Even when killed they could often be retrieved only by luck after an arduous search—by human or canine—in vast muddy marshes, and identified specimens for comparison were few. Hence, Ohio's older tern records are largely a mess, with numerous old sight reports, even from experts, of species like Gull-billed and Roseate terns that lack specimens or even detailed descriptions and cannot today be verified or duplicated. These tern species remain missing from the official Ohio list today, despite iffy nineteenth-century reports from respected authorities.

Marshes were daunting, but the open waters of Lake Erie posed more dangerous challenges. Storms and icy conditions may have brought the most interesting birds tantalizingly within sight, but shooting and retrieving them to make conclusive identifications of specimens was far more difficult than on a placid wetland or reservoir, as distant views in wind and tossing waves were often the rule, and real danger was often involved in getting close looks or retrieving specimens. Such threats had the anomalous result that many Lake Erie species—such as King and Common eiders, all three scoters, Long-tailed Jaeger, Sabine's Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake—were first collected in the rather tranquil inland waters of Buckeye Lake, finds which profited from the likes of Milton Trautman with shotgun and skiff. This happened despite the fact that in actuality they were far more likely present along the Lake Erie shore, where local citizens with shotguns and rowboats were hardly in short supply. Oceanic rarities such as Leach's Storm-Petrel and Atlantic Puffin have been found only grounded inland in Ohio, a Long-billed Murrelet was on the placid surface of a *Seneca* reservoir, and several Black-capped Petrels have been along the Cincinnati waterfront, but never confirmed on the Lake itself. Ohio's first five records of the Magnificent Frigatebird, another salt-water species, came from locations well inland, starting with a *Fairfield* specimen. Our only Sooty Tern record, a pelagic bird admittedly driven by hurricane winds up the Mississippi valley, came from far inland in *Clermont*.

Authorities have even differed in their reliance on documented specimens. Peterjohn did not ac-

cept the first Ohio specimen of the 1880 Magnificent Frigatebird because it had not survived to the present day, even though the precise and very public location of the conspicuous mounted specimen was for many years a doctor's office in *Fairfield* prior to the establishment of a stable museum environment. And curator Milton Trautman altered to Greater Yellowlegs the tag ID of a Florida specimen, identified when received in the OSU Museum collection as a Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*). This change was later recognized as an error, and Florida authorities recently examined the specimen and accepted it as Florida's first example of the greenshank.

Not so long ago, many experts, most prominently Trautman, considered it permissible to include a species in the official state list only if there existed "at least one specimen (or parts thereof) deposited in some accredited institution." Elsewhere in his introduction to his *Annotated List of the Birds of Ohio* (1968, p. 238), he made these additional remarks:

Bird observation in the past has been largely a professional and/or intellectual pursuit. Today a competitive element is becoming increasingly active, which entails considerable effort by individuals, or by groups, to obtain records, by sight only, of the most unusual species or the greatest numbers of individuals.

He went on to lament the development of rivalry among less-than-expert bird observers to report large numbers or unusual species, especially when their records might be "published in semi-scientific or scientific journals," thus becoming a permanent part of ornithological literature. He went on to say of accidental species actually collected here that "[t]he vast majority... are juveniles less than one year old, and many are in such obscure juvenile plumage that it would be most difficult or even impossible to identify them in the field." He concludes that "in order to avoid mistakes only museum specimens with proper data would qualify a species for inclusion in the list." He admits only one exception, Bell's Vireo, documentation of which at the time included recordings made by a fellow professor of the songs of two individuals and deposited at the Ohio State University Museum (Trautman, p. 316).

Since Trautman's time, the composition of our state lists has ceased to be an activity conducted strictly by academic ornithologists. The rivalries, extravagances, and wishful thinking which Trautman cited persist, but the editors

of publications and the acceptance in Ohio, as in every other state and province, of the deliberations of a state records committee have prevailed. As for specimens, sight records aided by technologies like today's sound recordings and digital photographs have made the killing of birds—especially rarities—unnecessary. While Trautman's misgivings remain valid, these technologies have helped to make lethal methods of verification, in a well-studied area such as Ohio, extremely rare.

For some of us, it is intriguing to speculate which species might be added to the state list in times to come. Certainly a newly introduced exotic species might join the European Starling and the House Sparrow in our avifauna; the Monk Parakeet once seemed to pose enough of a threat that Ohio state law was written to forbid the possession of free-flying birds (Ohio Revised Code 901:5-42-01[A-2]). Warming temperatures may bring new southern species here accidentally via violent storms, as they have formerly Large-billed and Royal terns, Purple Gallinules (which bred), Anhingas, Frigatebirds, Reddish Egrets, and Roseate Spoonbills. Droughts in the west may, as with a recent Cassin's Sparrow, or long ago a Harris's Hawk, drive new species east, as other factors may have for Long-billed Murrelet, Heermann's Gull, Brambling, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Townsend's Warbler, Mountain Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, Painted Redstart, Western Kingbird (which have also bred here), and various odd hummingbirds. It was likely fierce Atlantic storms that brought us oddities like Leach's Storm-Petrel, Black-capped Petrel, Northern Lapwing, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Ancient Murrelet, Ivory Gull, Eurasian Woodcock, and Atlantic Puffin. Unusual winter conditions may bring northern species occasionally to Ohio, as they probably have given us Boreal, Hawk, and Great Gray owls, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Northern Wheatear, Bohemian Waxwing, and Pine Grosbeak. Perhaps only dramatic weather events like hurricanes are forecastable enough to alert observers to some of these possibilities, but the persistent climatic patterns that might govern the arrival of new breeding species are becoming apparent. New species resulting from taxonomic splits seem quite unlikely, as contrasting conditions usually characterize the habitats populated by such new species, and Ohio probably does not possess sufficient variations in these factors.

With new technologies, it seems the time has passed when rarities are routinely collected for the archives. Dr. Trautman and colleagues carefully collected two adult Western Kingbirds and

all three nestlings from a nest in **Lucas** in 1933, a nesting site that apparently still represents their easternmost ever in the US. It is likely that a similar occurrence—lethal collection of adults and young—will seem even less acceptable in the future than now. Trautman eventually came to be widely criticized for the practice in his day, even as he collected seemingly valuable specimens. Some of his friends, before returning from a birding trip out west, apparently picked up a dead magpie and tossed it in his driveway one night in 1964; he duly repaired the battered corpse and deposited it in the OSU Museum as an Ohio specimen. Stories were told of his standing day-long at the Ohio-Michigan border for a chance to shoot a rarity that could qualify as a species seen in this state. When in 1974 Ohio's second Red-cockaded Woodpecker was found in a state park, members of the Columbus Audubon Society mustered an informal on-site surveillance by volunteers for its safety lest Trautman try to shoot it for the Museum collection. As it was, Ohio's first record of this species was already sleeping in a drawer at the Museum, having been collected in Columbus, on the site now occupied by Scioto Audubon Metro Park, in 1872. Trautman too has passed away, along with any compelling necessity to verify a new species for Ohio only by collecting it. The onus for adding to that list now falls on observers who benefit so much from advanced technologies to thoroughly document verifications.

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