

# WINGTIPS



GREAT BLUE HERON photo by Debbie Parker

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APRIL 2018

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## **April 2018 Program**

Tuesday, April 3, 2018, 7 p.m.  
Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center

### **Jen Brumfield, Cleveland Metroparks Naturalist Birding Israel**



Jen Brumfield, noted local birder and artist extraordinaire, will present her program “Birding Israel” on April 3, at 7pm at the Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center, 12882 Diagonal Road, LaGrange.

Dive into the heart of the Middle East with naturalist Jen Brumfield for a journey to one of the world’s greatest migration flyways. From extraordinary bee-eaters to flamingos, the Red Sea to the militarized desert, join Jen on an extraordinary look into one of the greatest bird watching countries of the world.

Jen Brumfield ... is a bird illustrator, an outdoor educator/artist for the Cleveland Metroparks, and birding tour guide. She eagerly combines her passions for extreme birding, field studies, outdoor education, and detailed scientific illustration into a truly “wild” career. She will share her birding experiences in Israel and also answer audience questions.

This program is free to the public. For more information on programs, volunteering or becoming a member visit [www.blackriveraudubon.org](http://www.blackriveraudubon.org) and don’t forget to LIKE us on Facebook.

**April Field Trip**  
**Cuyahoga Valley National Park**  
Saturday, April 21, 2018, 9:30 a.m.  
Meet at Station Rd. Bridge/Brecksville Station  
Dan & Diana Stacho to lead

**February Field Trip Report**  
**Castalia Pond, Pickerel Creek, etc.**

By **Paul Sherwood**

The Black River Audubon Society met at Castalia Pond for the annual field trip to that site at 9 am on February 17. Nine people showed up to view waterfowl and other birds in the area. At the pond we were able to see 166 Canada geese, 1 graylag goose, 11 northern shovelers, 4 gadwall, 4 American wigeon, 23 mallards, 2 American black ducks, 7 redheads, 2 ring-necked ducks, 1 lesser scaup, 1 common goldeneye, 5 common mergansers, 1 great blue heron, 1 American coot and 2 belted kingfishers.

We then drove to Medusa Marsh, outside of Bayview, Ohio, to check for open water. In a small opening in the ice, we found 7 trumpeter swans, 21 gadwall, 3 American wigeon, 15 mallards, 9 bald eagles (2 adults, 7 immatures), 2 ring-billed gulls, and 1 common grackle.

From Medusa we went to the Cold Creek Trout Club in Sandusky. There we found 2 common mergansers, 2 pied-billed grebes, 2 black-crowned night herons (1 adult, 1 immature), 5 ring-billed gulls, 2 brown creepers.

At this point, all but two of us were left. The two remaining members struck out for Black Swamp Bird Observatory to look for the recently spotted yellow-headed blackbirds. The blackbirds were no shows but we did manage to find the northern shrike on the Magee causeway.

In all, a successful trip with good looks at most of the species seen.

**BRAS Awarded Audubon Burke Plants for Birds Grant**

Just after New Year's, National Audubon announced the Burke Grant program which is dedicated to funding select programs meant to provide Plants for Birds in this Year of the Bird. On Friday, February 23, BRAS conservation director Andy Lance was notified that National approved our grant proposal!

The funds granted will be used to plant bird and butterfly-friendly trees, shrubs, and foliage at Elyria's Black River Audubon Society Park on West Bridge Street above the west branch of the Black River, near downtown.

Plans are currently being made for a planting day and ceremony in conjunction with Lorain County Pride Day, Saturday, May 19.

Congratulations should go to Andy and BRAS board member Kate Pilacky who put together the successful proposal. National Audubon received 89 applications from 33 states and funded just 28 of them.

Look for further details regarding the Pride Day event in the May Wingtips. And also read Harriet Alger's article below about our other major environmental project – the Lorain County Community College meadow restoration and the celebration of it on Earth Day this year.

## **BRAS and LCCC to Celebrate Partnership Agreement**

**By Harriet Alger**



On April 20<sup>th</sup> Audubon and LCCC representatives will meet in the campus Meadow Preserve to celebrate a new partnership agreement, one that recognizes the 21-acre preserve as an important resource for the college ecological curriculum and serves as an example to the community of the need for conservation of meadow environments.

In 1999, Jack Smith, President and founding member of the Black River Audubon Society, and Joe Strong, board treasurer, observed that bobolinks, which were on Ohio's Audubon Watchlist, appeared every spring in the northeast corner of Lorain County Community College's campus. They realized that if the area was not mowed until September, ground nesting species like bobolinks, meadowlarks, and Savannah sparrows would be likely to mate and breed in the meadow. They also saw that LCCC was blessed with a small wooded trail adjacent to the meadow with about 80 species of trees, plants, bushes and early spring wildflowers.

Jack and Joe met with LCCC President Dr. Roy Church to suggest preserving and developing these areas to stimulate more public interest in

conservation and to serve as resources for college courses. The meeting resulted in an agreement that the meadow would not be mowed during nesting season from April to September except for a trail for marathon runners. President Church also agreed that these areas would be known as the Black River Audubon Society/LCCC Meadow Preserve and Flora Interpretive Trail, with college permission required for any additions or changes. The Stocker Foundation provided matching funds for a display case in the meadow and a fence and guide boxes for the trail.

Healthy colonies of bobolinks and meadowlarks and small families of Savannah sparrows began to nest in the grassland meadow in increasing numbers each year. Endangered butterflies and bees also flourished, attracting neighborhood walkers from the retirement center on the northern boundary. Boxes were provided for cavity nesters allowing them to benefit from insects, seeds and other food in the meadow and providing plenty of space in which to fly. Tree swallows and bluebirds occupied those boxes. Recently, a large kestrel box has become the successful nesting site of another beautiful species in decline. Many other bird species nest and/or feed in the meadow and in the trees along the eastern boundary. Migrant birds also find respite and food before continuing their journey.

Students from Ruby Beil's ecology classes aided Jack, Joe, Dick Lee, Wayne Shipman, and botanist Dorothy Hagerling in maintaining the trail, display case, and nesting boxes as the preserves developed. Recently, Penny and Fritz Brandau, Larry Wilson, and volunteers from the bluebird and kestrel conservation programs have assumed responsibility for the nesting boxes. Andy Lance has recruited ecology students to help with the meadow and trail.

Unfortunately, an invasive species of shrubs began appearing a few years ago in areas that could not be mowed in the fall because of extremely wet weather. They gradually spread into nesting areas of meadowlarks and bobolinks and then throughout more and more of the meadow. Tim Gadomski of the college plant grounds staff identified them as gray dogwood, native but a serious problem, almost impossible to control or to eradicate when they begin spreading into areas where they are not wanted. Meadow nesting birds need grasses. Other birds and wildlife need a healthy source of food from a diversity of plants in a meadow.

Representing the BRAS Board, I met with college representatives to address the problem. Kate Pilacky, of the Oberlin Office of the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, helped with research and advice. Keith Moran, of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History identified

contractors capable of permanent eradication treatment, not harmful to wildlife, and the reseeded of affected areas. A contractor was chosen; invaded areas have been treated, reseeded, and are beginning to recover. Kate and Andy have also been providing seeds and plants in recovery areas. As a result, meadowlarks returned to nest last year. Savannah sparrows were seen again. We hope that bobolinks will return this year, along with more signs of a renewed and thriving meadow.

Before his retirement, President Church approved a new partnership contract between LCCC and BRAS to provide better collaboration and communication in the future. On April 20<sup>th</sup> we will gather at the new display sign as you enter the meadow to celebrate the new partnership agreement and the work that has been done. All are welcome to join us!

## **A Birder's Diary: Cattails and Red-winged Blackbirds**

By **Carol Leininger**



Cattails are common near lakes, ponds, marshes, and ditches. Their flowers are microscopic. Male flowers are greenish-yellow and appear near the top of the plant. The female flower is lower, brown, and, depending on the observer, look like the tails of cats, or even corn dogs!

After pollen falls from the male flower onto the lower female flower, a seed is formed with a fluffy plume to blow it about in the wind for dispersal.

Native Americans and early settlers would often choose to live near water and cattails for a variety of reasons. In fall and winter, starchy rhizomes can be peeled and cooked like potatoes or dried and pounded into flour. In spring and early summer, young shoots were eaten raw or cooked. The cattail-like female flower was eaten like an ear of corn. Pollen from the male flowers was also used as flour. Leaves are not edible but can be woven into chair seats, baskets, and other items. The fluffy, white fruit was often used to stuff pillows and as replacement for down in sleeping bags.

Damselflies and dragonflies are often found among the cattails. Adults lay their eggs on the surface of the water. The naiads, or nymphs, are aquatic but crawl out of the water onto a plant for its final molt.

Red-winged blackbirds' favorite nesting site is in cattails, largely due to the prevalence of these insects. The females spend much of the breeding season feeding on the eggs and larvae of damselflies and dragonflies. This is a popular food for the nestlings as well as the adult birds, making cattail patches the perfect environment. Next time you see a red-winged blackbird perched along the road, check to see where the nearest cattails are. (See Cathy Priebe's story on red-wings on the next page.)

## GREAT BLUE HERON/GREY HERON

*Ardea herodias/Ardea cinerea*

By **Barbara Baudot**



Hérons are ancient birds—*Ardea* have been in existence for 7 million years, appearing during the late Miocene period, stalking prey in their aquatic habitats. Three closely related species of large herons, the great blue heron, the grey heron, and the cocoi heron [South America], evolved into a super species that today spans the globe.

The stately blue heron traverses the New World and is the largest of this group of related species. It breeds as far north as Alaska and the southern Canadian provinces in the summer months. In winter, its range extends south to Mexico and South America. Old World grey herons have an extensive range throughout the Palearctic eco-zone of Europe, Asia, and parts of Africa. These herons are year round residents in most of their range, but the more northern residents tend to migrate southwards in autumn.

Great blue herons are very similar in appearance to grey herons, which are only slightly smaller and lack the buff-brown colors that the slate-grey great blue heron has on its neck, epaulets and thighs. The grey heron is a lighter grey over all with black patches on shoulders and sides of abdomen. To the ordinary eye, however, it is really difficult to distinguish them.

Both species are sexually monomorphic, occupy watery habitats, and share feeding, breeding rituals, nesting, and overall behaviors. Both species reside beside interior wetlands and tidal flats. They feast on fish, other aquatic creatures, insects and small mammals. Their flat stick nests, bound together by water weeds, are often found in heronries in trees well



above their aquatic surroundings. Both parents are engaged in nest building and caring for their hatchlings for about two months. In Audubon's words, "The male and the female sit alternately, receiving food from each other, their mutual affection being as great as it is towards their young, which they provide for so abundantly."

They mate for a season, then resume their solitary lives stalking prey. The male may return to the same nest and entice a new mate in subsequent seasons.

There are many myths and tales about these two herons. The great blue heron is held in high esteem by different Native American tribes. The Hitchiti tribe recounts a story of the Heron and the Hummingbird in which the heron's determination and foxiness is legendary. In ancient Egypt, the bird deity Bennu, associated with the sun, creation, and rebirth, was depicted as a grey heron in New Kingdom artwork-bringing dawn, spring, and regeneration of life. It is also symbolic of prosperity. In ancient Rome, the grey heron was a bird of divination that gave prophecies by their calls. Japanese paintings portray the noble and graceful appearance of grey herons. In China, grey herons represent strength, patience, long life, and balance. Some depictions symbolize the thought "may your path always be upward." In Africa, the heron is thought to communicate with the gods. And, in Christianity, the heron is a role model as a most satisfied, patient, and content bird.

**References:** Wikipedia articles on Great Blue Heron and Grey Heron; symbolic-meanings.com/2007/10/08/symbolism-of-the-heron; Audubon.org/field-guide/birds/great-blue-heron; heronconservation.org/herons-of-the-world/heron-taxonomy-and-evolution.

## RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS

*Agelaius phoeniceus*

By Cathy Priebe



While taking a summer drive out in the rural areas of Ohio, it never fails to amaze me how many red-winged blackbirds one can see perched on fence posts, tall grass, cattails, and wires. Its call is usually heard before it is seen and is very welcome after a long, hard winter. It has been said that the redwing has replaced the American



robin as the harbinger of spring after it was determined that many robins do not migrate far or even leave for the winter.

However, even more recent findings have discovered that these tenacious blackbirds don't always migrate very far from their nesting grounds, and their early return may not always be a prediction of spring's arrival. In fact, on Feb. 11, 2018 there were three adult males at my mom's feeder in Wellington.

The red-winged blackbird is a very vocal and showy individual, especially during mating season while defending its territory. Its preferred habitat is near marshy areas, wetlands, ponds or scrubby fields. It has also slowly moved in to more suburban settings, frequenting feeders along with other common backyard birds. They are not picky eaters; cracked corn and seed mixes supplement their diets until insects finally appear with warmer temperatures.

The shiny, black male has brightly colored red and yellow trimmed epaulettes that flash while in flight or during courtship or territorial displays. The female has very little resemblance to the male, often described as a large sparrow, with brown streaking on the under parts and mottled brown on top along with a pale eyebrow.

Both sexes have been found to have more than one mate during a breeding season. Studies have shown that one male can have up to 15 females nesting in his territory, although he may not always be the father of all the young.

I observed just how important territories were to these marshland birds while hiking in a local wetland area. A loud ruckus caught my attention as I turned to see an adult male redwing pecking and squawking at something at the base of a cattail. Upon approaching, I flushed the aggressive bird away only to discover a beat up, partially drowned red-winged blackbird male hanging on for dear life at the base of the cattail. Wow, sometimes nature is not very pretty.

Back to the harbinger of spring...five years ago during a cold January winter, local expert bird guides Larry Rosche and Judy Semroc led a hike to Lime Lakes in New Franklin Township, Summit County (Ohio) to observe how many roosting blackbirds were still in the area. Fearing that there would be reduced numbers of birds for this time of year, and with the cold temps, the group did not expect to see many birds at this traditional winter roosting site.

"At 4:45 pm the first red-winged blackbirds showed up and then a few more and then all hell broke loose!" Rosche exclaimed. Preliminary guesstimates were between 300,000 to 500,000 blackbirds with 50% of

them being red-winged blackbirds, according to Rosche. Approximately 45 % were common grackles and the rest were cowbirds and starlings.

So even though they are usually not very far away, I still feel lucky to see a few of these noisy and colorful blackbirds at my feeders in late February or early March. And it is equally gratifying to finally (especially after a long winter) see them setting up their territories along the back roads and wetlands in early April. It usually means to me that spring and warmer weather are just around the corner!

**References:** *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac; *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* by Donald and Lillian Stokes; *Birds of the Cleveland Region* by Larry Rosche and archived field trip results courtesy of Larry Rosche.

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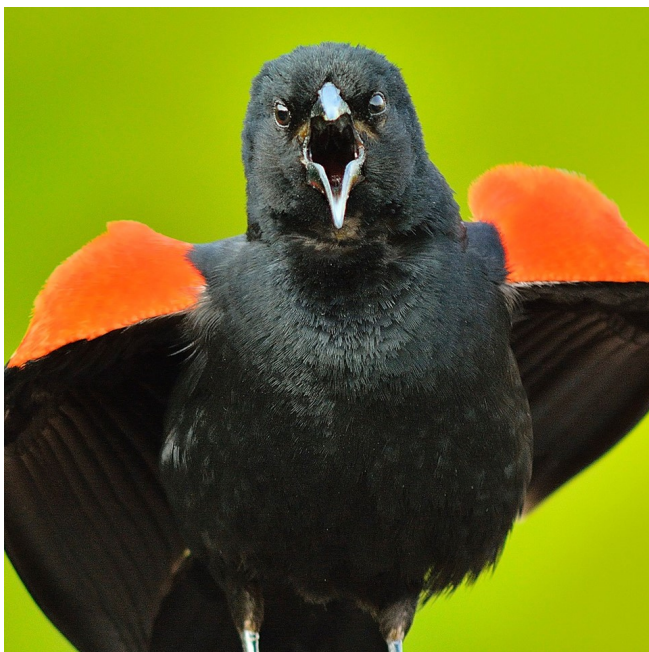
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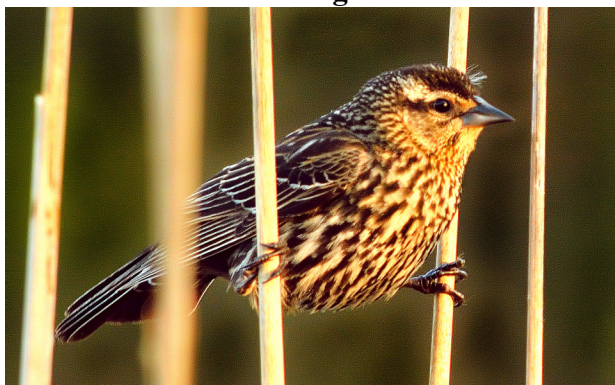
***They're Back!***

### **Male Red-Winged Blackbird**

**(Both photos on this page courtesy of Dr. Tom Mahl)**

Since many robins stay in the immediate area throughout the winter, the feisty red-winged blackbird is the true harbinger of spring. You can read two articles concerning them in this month's *Wingtips*. Tom Mahl's photos on this page capture a male and female behind the Perry F. Johnson Wetland Center at Sandy Ridge Metro Park. Tom was very close and used a telephoto lens creating blurred green backgrounds, or 'bokeh's' from the surrounding foliage. The female red-winged photo below shows the striking difference between the sexes.

### **Female Red-Winged Blackbird**





GREY HERON photo by Barbara Baudot

## **BLACK RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY**

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