Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

November 2010

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW
WILLIAM BOFINGER

Editors: Jack Smith and Harry Spencer
Photographer: John Koscinski
Webmistress: Arlene Lengyel

Program

Tuesday, December 7, 2010, 7:00 p.m.

Note location: Sandy Ridge Reservation

Edward H. Burtt, Jr.

Professor of Zoology, Ohio Wesleyan University

Evolution of Color in Birds:

Some Unusual Ideas That Explain

Jed Burtt has been on the OWU faculty for 32 years and teaches a variety of courses. He is noted for his research on avian feathers, including the function and evolution of avian coloration. He also is writing a book on the life of Alexander Wilson, father of American ornithology. Among his many other commitments is being chair of the National Audubon-Ohio committee on Important Bird Areas and president of the American Ornithologists' Union. More information about him can be found at http://bio.owu.edu/ehburtt.html.

Christmas Bird Counts

Saturday, December 18, Elyria

Wednesday, December 29, Wellington

For further information see www.blackriveraudubon.org

or call 440-322-0820

Board Meeting, Everyone welcome!

Tuesday, November 30, 6:30 p.m.

304 West Ave, Elyria

Distinguished Speakers Series

Co-sponsored by Black River Audubon and Lorain County Metro Parks

Saturday, January 15, 2011, 2:00 p.m.

Carlisle Visitor Center (big room)

Stephen Kress

Vice-President for Bird Conservation, National Audubon Society

Manager of the Audubon Maine Coast Seabird Sanctuaries

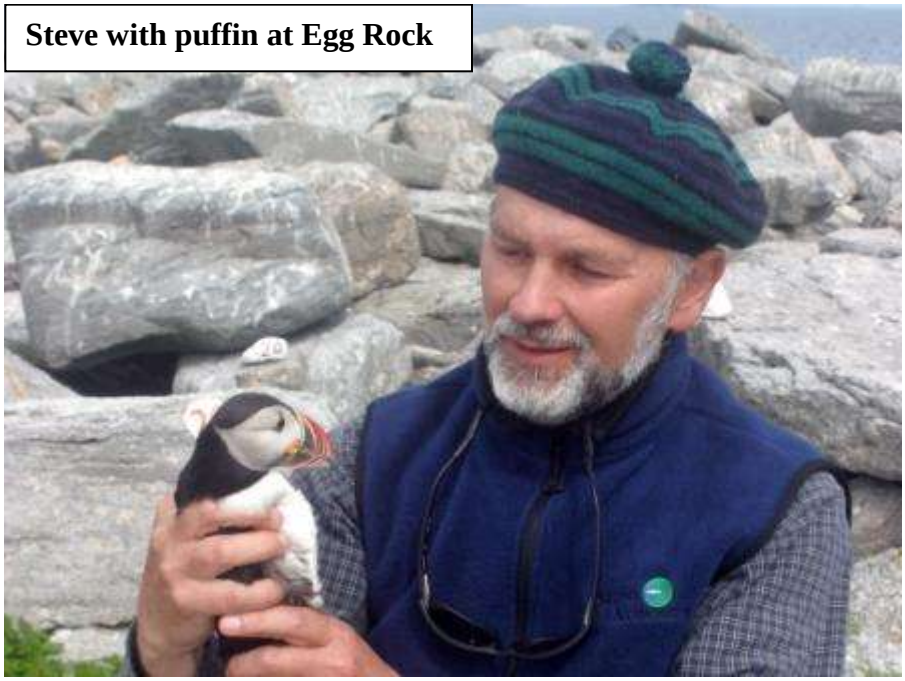
Director of Ornithology Programs, Audubon Hog Island Camp

Research Fellow, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology

RESTORING ENDANGERED SEABIRDS: LESSONS FROM PUFFINS AND TERNS

Humans have devastated seabird colonies in many parts of the world by excessive hunting for food and feathers and by introducing mammals such as cats and rats to otherwise secure nesting islands.

Steve with puffin at Egg Rock



Worldwide, 23% of all seabird species are now globally threatened as marine pollution, coastal development, and sea level rise from global warming are growing concerns. Although seabird nesting islands seem safe due to their remoteness, they are intimately connected to human activities. For example, Maine seabird nesting islands are affected by large populations of herring and great black-backed gulls that benefit from garbage and fisheries waste practices hundreds of miles from nesting islands. As scavenging large gulls increase, they deter smaller, migratory seabirds, such as puffins and terns from nesting on many of their historic nesting islands. And ironically, other wildlife restoration success stories such as the recovery of bald eagles and peregrine falcons now threaten rare Maine seabirds such as great cormorants and roseate terns.

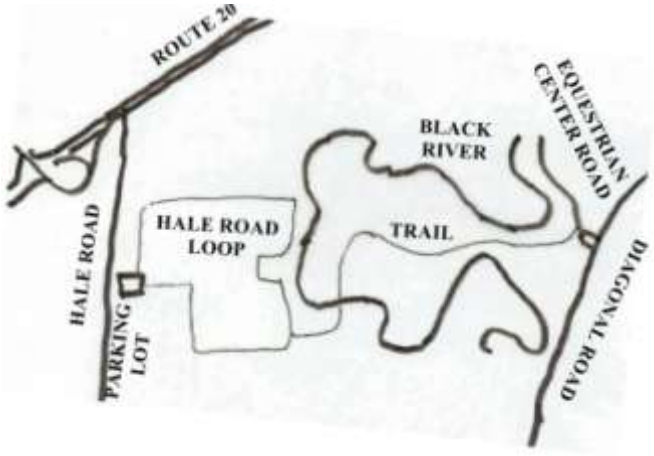
Dr. Kress will review how techniques developed on Maine islands have led to the restoration of puffins and terns to historic nesting islands in the Gulf of Maine. He will also discuss how techniques developed in Maine are helping seabirds worldwide. His lecture includes reviews of several case studies in seabird restoration including restoration of common murres in California to an historic nesting island near San Francisco, relocation of a Caspian tern colony in the Columbia River estuary to reduce predation on salmon smelt, and efforts to save the endangered Bermuda petrel from rising oceans and increased frequency of hurricanes.

Field Trip: October 16, 2010

Hale Road Loop, Carlisle Reservation

By **Harry Spencer**

My wife, Peg, says that when I describe the Hale Road Loop Trail, I always append the statement: My favorite birding trail.



The Hale Road Loop appeals to me for several reasons; the most important is that the trail passes through several different habitats: wetlands, riparian, and brushy, so the variety of species of birds reflects the variety of habitats. Also the trail is only a few miles from my home, and perhaps it is the driest trail in the Carlisle Reservation after a strong rainstorm.

Ken Austin, our Field Trip coordinator, readily agreed that Hale Road Loop Trail should be the site of our October Field Trip, and James D. Martin, Director of Lorain County Metro Parks, known to us as Dan Martin, noticed our announcement and suggested that we use the parking lot on Hale Road as the starting point. He offered to have the normally closed gate opened for our use. We found the extensive parking lot to be an appropriate starting point.

At the bridge over the Black River we stopped for a group picture. During that pause, Dan Martin called Tammy, his wife, to inform us that the trail, bridge, and wetlands had been paid for completely with mitigation money. (Mitigation money is that which some developer paid for the privilege of destroying a wetland as a consequence of some construction.) No tax money was expended in the construction of the Hale Road Wetland project.

Remarkably we identified 41 species during our 2-hour, 45-minute hike. Nan Miller recorded our identifications on our eBird website available at ebird.org (Username: blackriveras; password: birders. Click on My eBird). The birds and their numbers identified were: Canada goose 45, wood duck 5, mallard 8, pied-billed grebe 1, great blue heron 1, turkey vulture 16, killdeer 1, ring-billed gull 2, mourning dove 1, belted kingfisher 1, red-bellied woodpecker 3,

Downy woodpecker 3, northern flicker 1, eastern phoebe 2, blue jay 5, American crow 6, black-capped chickadee 10, tufted titmouse 5, white-breasted nuthatch 4, brown creeper 3, golden-crowned kinglet 1,

Ruby-crowned kinglet 1, eastern bluebird 15, American robin 3, cedar waxwing 2, yellow-rumped warbler 35, eastern towhee 1, American tree sparrow 1, song sparrow 5, Lincoln's sparrow 1,

Swamp sparrow 7, white-throated sparrow 10, white-crowned sparrow 8, dark-eyed junco 1, northern cardinal 5, red-winged blackbird 30, eastern meadowlark 1, common grackle 5, brown-headed cowbird 5, house finch 2, and American goldfinch 5.

A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

It was a beautiful quiet morning in Tobago – sunny with a blue sky, and I was walking up a country road. Even though there was no traffic, I stayed close to the side as I neared the top of a hill. About ten miles in the distance was a beautiful village along the ocean shore. Suddenly a loud squawking noise arose from a bush near my elbow. Because it was such a quiet day, the squawking scared the living daylights out of me.

A large bird appeared on top of the bush, and the noise indicated another bird deep within the bush. What a racket! The top bird was about the size of a pheasant, mostly grayish-brown in color, slender with a small somewhat crested head, a long neck, and a long tail.

The sudden noise and appearance of a rufous-vented chachalaca were pleasant surprises. Whether I surprised the birds or they were about to have a fight, I do not know.

A Couple of Winter Visitors

By **Jack Smith**

In this issue of WINGTIPS we feature two of our reliable winter visitors, American tree sparrow (*Spizella arborea*) and long-eared owl (*Asio otus*). A photo of the first species is on the first page and a photo of the second is displayed below. The rough maps show geographical locations of the summer, winter, and all-year residential areas of these two species.

American tree sparrow: Both the common and scientific names of the tree sparrow are misnomers because the birds spend most of their time in open areas and not among trees. Probably early pioneers to this continent named the bird after a look-alike, the Eurasian tree sparrow.

American tree sparrows arrive usually in October or November and depart in April or May. The birds may be identified by the spot in the middle of the gray breast and the yellow lower mandible, which are clearly shown in the first-page photo. The birds prefer meadows and fields where they find their principal food, grass and weed seeds. One rough calculation indicated that tree sparrows in Iowa consumed 875 tons of seeds each year. When the ground is snow covered, a lucky birder may observe a tree sparrow dislodging weed seeds using its wings only. With little energy the bird can retrieve the seeds scattered on the snowy surface.

In the spring time, the increasing length of day stimulates reproductive hormonal activity of this little bird and initiates migration. In Ohio, we seldom hear the male's sweet, musical song except just prior to the start of migration. The birds fly at night 2000 or 3000 miles to a region north of the timberline and south of open tundra. There they find stunted shrubbery of the Arctic North.

The females select nest sites and build nests for about seven days, while the males defend their territories against rivals. Nests are on or near the ground, cup shaped, made of twigs and grasses, and lined with fine grass and often with ptarmigan feathers. Pairing is accompanied by song and other activity.

Each female lays 4 to 6 pale bluish or greenish eggs with brown spots concentrated on the larger ends. She is the sole incubator until the eggs hatch in 11 to 13 days. Both parents feed insects and small invertebrates high in protein. In 8 to 10 days the chicks, sometimes encouraged by parents, leave the nest. In 14 or 15 additional days the young birds fly. For another couple of weeks, the parents continue to feed the young birds. With such a short season in the northern arctic area, only one brood is produced per year unless the first nesting fails.

The population of tree sparrows seems to be stable except in some wintering areas where numbers have declined. Overall, no evidence points toward a decreasing population.

Long-eared owls: This owl generally roosts during the day in a grove of coniferous trees, generally avoiding an unbroken forest for one near some open fields. The owls hunt for small mammals such as moles, field mice and occasional birds. While hunting the long-eared owls fly low over the ground and locate prey by ear and capture it with talons. The prey is killed by a bite to the back of the skull and swallowed whole, if it is small enough.

Novice bird watchers often have difficulty spotting this owl roosting during the day. The birds hold very still and are camouflaged by their brown mottled feathers. They position themselves close to the

trunk of the tree and assume a tall stature. Their camouflage makes them appear as part of the tree.

My secret when I walk through the woods is to look down rather than up. I look for the whitewash and the fresh coal-black, glistening owl pellets found at the base of the perching tree.

Long-eared owls are well equipped with both great eyesight and keen hearing. Even in total darkness they can find any small animal making noise. Similar to other owls, a long-eared owl has asymmetrical ear openings, the left opening higher than the right. Sound waves reach one ear a minute fraction of a second before the other. This enables the owl to have three-dimensional hearing, which it uses to pounce on prey with pinpoint precision, even in total darkness.

In comparison with other native owl species, the long-eared owl is a medium size owl, 13 to 16 inches in length with a wing span of 36 to 42 inches. It weighs only about nine ounces.

In recent years, long-eared owls have been regularly observed at Caley Reservation. In some years Black River Audubon members have journeyed to Killdeer Plains and identified long-eared, short-eared, and saw-whet owls. In our area, long-eared owls have been observed as early as October and as late as April. Because the number of owls identified is relatively small, the species is often categorized as an occasional winter resident. Because of its secretive nature, its seldom-heard winter-call, and the difficulty for birders to locate the birds, the species may be a more common winter resident than is commonly believed.

In the warmer spring and summer months, long-eared owls migrate to areas very similar to those of winter habitats, usually a grove of coniferous trees adjacent to open fields and meadows.

In courtship the males feed the females, and together they preen each other's feathers. They make no nest-site of their own, preferring to adopt an abandoned nest of a large bird such as raven or crow. The nests are usually 10 to 50 feet above the ground, and a monogamous pair may use one nest-site for several years. Females lay 2 to 5 white eggs spaced generally at two day intervals. Incubation, however, begins immediately after the first egg is laid, so the first offspring to hatch has a head start over other siblings. As the female incubates her eggs, her mate brings her food. In 26 to 28 days the eggs hatch, after which the female continuously broods the

young as the male furnishes food. Within about three weeks the young owls begin to climb out of the nest and within five weeks they begin short flights. Until the young are about ten or eleven-weeks old the adults feed the young, after which both parents and young disperse from the nesting area.

Both surveys and migration counts suggest that the overall population of long-eared owls is in decline. Loss of habitat could be the cause of this decline.

References: *Birdzilla.com*; *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman; *The Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn; *Flickr from Yahoo*, American Tree Sparrow; *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K Terres; *Bird Web – Seattle Audubon Society and Sea Duck Joint Venture*