

Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

FEBRUARY 2016



AMERICAN BITTERN photo by Todd Eiben

Editors: Jim Jablonski, Cathy Priebe, Harry Spencer

Webmistress: Arlene Lengyel

Photographer Emeritus: John Koscinski

Program

Ken Gober

Cleveland Metroparks and Rocky River Nature Center Naturalist, retired

History, Folklore, and Science of Aurora-Borealis

February 2, 2016, 7:00 p.m.

Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center



The Aurora Borealis has been in the news frequently and now the science, history and folklore behind this ever-fascinating phenomenon will be presented to Black River Audubon on February 2. Naturalist Ken Grober, who admits to enjoying “all things Alaska” invites us to experience “the allure” of that state in the winter through his presentation on the Northern Lights.

Ken worked with the Cleveland Metroparks as a naturalist and nature center manager for 31 years before retiring but continued in the field for six more year as a part-time naturalist for the Rocky River Nature Center.

He is also a founding member of the National Association for Interpretation, a professional organization for park naturalists and professionals. Among his numerous honors, Ken received the Distinguished Professional Interpreter award from the National Association for Interpretation.

Birding is also a love of Ken’s as he coordinates and keeps records for the longest-running series of organized birdwalks throughout northeast Ohio. A true outdoorsman, he enjoys wilderness canoeing and camping, birdwatching, nature photography and videography. The Black River Audubon Society has a great program in store for all of us on February 2!

Field Trip

Castalia Pond, Pickerel Creek, etc.

Saturday, February 20, 2016, 9:00 a.m.

Meet at Castalia Pond, Paul Sherwood will lead

Winter Birding Tour:

“Country Cruisin”

Wednesday, February 24, 2016, 8:30-4:30 p.m.

Guided van trip to search for raptors and other birds; organized by Lorain County Metro Parks

Pre-register by February 22

Call 440-327-3626 to register or do it on-line at www.metroparks.cc

Cost is \$5.00 ‘at the door’

Elyria Christmas Bird Count

December 19, 2015

By Marty Ackermann



Although it had been an unusually warm fall and early winter, more seasonal weather appeared for the Elyria/Lorain CBC on December 19, providing a cloudy day with moderate winds and a high temperature in the low 30s. Twenty-eight people, mainly in groups, covered 36 miles on foot and 330 miles by car in the six areas comprising the count circle. The results totaled 71 species and 10,515 individual birds

The species and number of each are: cackling goose 2, Canada goose 1248, tundra swan 10, gadwall 4, American black duck 4, mallard 396, green-winged teal 29, northern shoveler 18, canvasback 1, lesser scaup 1, ring-necked duck 2, bufflehead 24, hooded merganser 99, red-breasted merganser 2191, common merganser 9, ruddy duck 71, double-crested cormorant 4, common loon 1, horned grebe 4, pied-billed grebe 1, great blue heron 3, killdeer 7, Bonaparte's gull 312, ring-billed gull 2343, herring gull 77, great black-backed gull 5, Franklin's gull 1, American coot 54, bald eagle 6, northern harrier 2, Cooper's hawk 5, red-shouldered hawk 3, red-tailed hawk 18, peregrine falcon 1, American kestrel 3, barred owl 1, snowy owl 1, short-eared owl 2, rock pigeon 172, mourning dove 53, belted kingfisher 3, red-headed woodpecker 1, red-bellied woodpecker 36, downy woodpecker 54, hairy woodpecker 8, pileated woodpecker 2, northern flicker 4, blue jay 114, American crow 54, northern mockingbird 1, eastern bluebird 33, American robin 218, black-capped chickadee 90, tufted titmouse 61, white-breasted nuthatch 44, brown creeper 1, Carolina wren 4, golden-crowned kinglet 1, yellow-rumped warbler 3, horned lark 34, dark-eyed junco 206, American tree sparrow 70, song sparrow 5, white-throated sparrow 3, house sparrow 297, house finch 78, American goldfinch 89, common redpoll 2, northern cardinal 98, European starling 1703, common grackle 2.

SNOW BUNTING

Plectrophenax nivalis



SNOW BUNTING photo by Debbie Parker

By **Jim Jablonski**



Not many birds are tougher than snow buntings despite their “snowflake” nick-name. Finch-sized at seven inches in length, snow buntings are still able to breed in the most northerly North American regions. Then, during the winter they head south but hardly any go beyond the Ohio River. Compared to where they come from, our area might seem downright comfortable to them.

But they really don’t seem to appreciate the “balmy” winter weather south of the border. They tend to arrive in small flocks in very late fall and take off for the barren reaches of the far north at the first signs of spring. They seem to love the tundra, although some of them will nest in bird boxes.

Given their habitat preferences, it figures they are omnivorous, feeding on seeds both in the north and in their more southerly winter areas while feasting on insects on the bug-ridden tundra during the summer. In addition to the flies, beetles, etc. that they feed exclusively to their protein-craving hatchlings, snow buntings will also go after small crustaceans in the many coastal areas of northern Canada.

Much like red-winged blackbirds, snow bunting males arrive on the breeding grounds weeks before the females in order to stake out prime territories. In their mating displays males will glide down to their claimed area while singing to draw attention to the quality of their territory and themselves. On the ground they will turn their backs to the females but only to show off the sharp black and white coloration of their backs and wings. They will even play a little “hard to get” routine in running away from the female.

Once paired up, the female will line a ground cavity with grasses, feathers and hair in preparation for the single clutch of four to seven eggs. It may be spring, but they are still in the arctic, so in many cases the female needs to incubate the eggs continuously, which leaves her mate needing to feed her throughout incubation.

The harsh environment may also call for asynchronous, or staggered, incubation. The female will lay more nesting material and begin incubation after the first egg has been laid. She will continue to do so after each egg in the clutch. This pattern, of course, leads to the first hatchling receiving the advantage of early growth. This might not harm the later siblings if conditions are good, but if food resources are sparse, the later hatchlings might not be able to compete for food. Although seemingly cruel, this pattern may have evolved to insure that some hatchlings survived during bad times. And during plentiful years all might make it through to fledging.

Once the juveniles are able to get by on their own, they form large flocks and remain in them throughout the first winter, at times in association with other species.

These flocks seek protection together and gain the benefit afforded by their collective body heat by roosting together. On the other hand, buntings just can’t seem to get enough of the cold at times; they will even take baths in the snow during the winter. Maybe they could just as well be nicknamed “snow angels.”

References: *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufmann; *The Birders Handbook* by Paul R. Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye; *Snow Buntings* in Audubon.org; *Snow Buntings* in Audubon Field Guide.

AMERICAN BITTERN

Botaurus lentiginosus

By **Cathy Priebe**



It seems that most of the birds I have been writing about lately have been very difficult creatures to see, especially if one is purposely attempting to find them.

The bittern is one of those birds that is rarely seen because of its ability to blend into its immediate surroundings which are usually long grasses and cattails. It will even sway in the breeze with the vegetation to keep from blowing its cover.

Fortunately, I have seen this bird numerous times, but only because I have inadvertently flushed it out of hiding. The bittern only gives you a very quick glimpse of its presence before it is swallowed back into the marshy landscape they call home.

The American bittern is a stocky bird with brown upper parts and brown streaking on its neck from the base of its straight bill down through its breast along with yellow legs and feet. Both sexes look alike. Their platform nest, made of reeds and grasses, is constructed just above the waterline in fresh water or brackish marshes tucked into dense vegetation. The female will lay two to seven buffy olive brown eggs and incubate them for almost a month.



American bittern in Audubon.org.

Feeding on mostly fish, amphibians, reptiles, insects and small mammals, the bittern is a solo feeder. They are patient hunters and will stand or walk in slow motion and then strike with a laser-fast stab. When approached, the bittern will elongate its neck and successfully camouflage itself amongst the tall grasses. At night, their call is easily recognized. It has been compared to “a stake being driven into the marsh.”

Bitterns migrate south in late August through November and return to breeding areas in March and April. They generally do not remain through the winter, but an individual was found recently at Wellington Reservation in December 2015.

Due to land development and other factors, Ohio's wetlands have been declining, thus placing the American bittern on the endangered list. It has been estimated that Ohio has lost over 90 percent of its original wetlands, placing many creatures that breed in that habitat in jeopardy.

Here are some interesting facts about the American bittern:

- Males can be polygamous
- They are very secretive
- Their call, oonka-choonk has earned them the nickname "Thunder-Pumper"
- When feeding their long neck and erect stance make them look like a "snake that has swallowed a football."

References: *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion* by Pete Dunne; *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac; *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* by Donald and Lillian Stokes.

Sandy Ridge Eagle Cam Website!

Sandy Ridge Metro Park has become known throughout northeastern Ohio as a prime birding site. Now it stands to gain even more publicity with the development of a live eagle nest video camera that should draw attention from birders and non-birders alike to the park's website at:

metroparks.cc/sandy_ridge_reservation.php.

Installed this past October, but temporarily unavailable as the computer bugs are being worked out, the camera will be up and running by the time eagle nesting season begins. The real action should start around the first week of March when the eggs are usually laid, according to park naturalist Tim Fairweather.

Vasu Communications, an Avon security company, installed the camera and 3M Corporation of Elyria funded it through a grant request written by Jennifer Bracken of Lorain County Metro Parks.

"We have thought about doing this for years," Fairweather said, "but the biggest thing was where to get the money. 3M paid for the installation, signage and educational materials."

For a project in the woods, a good distance from any roads or highways, solar was the only power source that made sense for the camera. Electrical wires and poles would have been far too expensive, Fairweather pointed out.

"Vasu Communications is a security agency but can do a variety of things. They knew someone who makes a living climbing trees and he was able to install the camera," Fairweather explained. "It went up a lot smoother than I thought it would."

Fairweather sees a lot of good things coming from the camera and its placement on the MetroParks website.

"First, it's good publicity for the parks. But, of course, most people never get to see eagles that close, and it is proven not to be harmful to the nesting process. It's also been educational for me to see flying squirrels and mice inside the nest during the winter when the eagles aren't there. It's like a condominium; I never knew mice would climb fifty feet up a tree to look for a place to live!"

A Birder's Diary: The Diet of Owls

By **Carol Leininger**



Birds may eat more than their own weight in a day but they can't digest everything – some of their prey is released in the form of pellets. Owls regurgitate pellets as a compact mass through the mouth. These consist mainly of bones, beaks, claws, and teeth of mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Owls swallow their prey whole and digested and undigested parts are sorted out in the stomach. The stomach muscles press hair or fur around the hard bones to make a cushioned ball with hard material inside. Thus sharp objects do not get caught in the owl's throat or choke it.

It is possible to dissect these pellets and identify the bones to determine what animals were eaten and the number eaten in one meal. The identity of the owl species can be determined by the size-range and shape of pellets. Pellets of snowy owls are five to six inches long, great horned owls, three to four inches, and screech owls, one to two inches. Rodents comprise most of the great horned owl's diet, and insects most of screech owl diet. I can remember times when owls roosted in the conifers at Caley Reservation. It was hard to find them until you realized that you should not look up, but rather down at the base of the trees for piles of pellets.

Other raptors also regurgitate pellets but they are not as easy to study. Raptors tend to skin and pluck their prey and strip away fleshy portions, careful not to ingest the whole animal and its skeleton.

Get Ready! The GBBC is Coming!!!

By **Jim Jablonski**

For those who would like to perform some citizen science but find the rigors of bird hikes in the middle of winter just too much to handle, the Great Backyard Bird Count is just the thing.

Since 1999 the National Audubon Society, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Bird Studies Canada and eBird have collaborated in what is probably the largest citizen science project around. Birders on five continents take part, submitting 147,265 checklists in 2015 that included over 5,000 species and well over eighteen million individual birds.

This year's count takes place over four days, February 12-15. You can perform your count at any time and anywhere but I suspect most do it, like I do, from the comfort of their back window with a hot cup of coffee in hand.

You can participate all four days or just one and the only time commitment is fifteen minutes watching the birds in your yard and feeders – something that, if you have any interest in birds, you might be doing anyway. During that fifteen minutes per day, you count how many birds of which species you see. Then enter the data on the GBBC website.

You can register for the first time as a new user at gbbc.birdcount.org to get started. Explore the website to see data and distribution from past years in your town, state, country, etc. The details will also be more fully explained at the website in its "How To" slideshow. Then during the count you can keep tabs on when your count appears in the data for your area. Entertaining and citizen science – a nice combination in the middle of February!

National Audubon Changes Dues

According to Lynn Tennefoss, Audubon VP for State Programs and Chapter Services, National Audubon dues will be \$20, effective immediately. There will no longer be lower price memberships for students and seniors. This change applies to new and renewing members. In addition, National Audubon will offer annual memberships only.

Those taking out chapter memberships only will not receive National Audubon membership nor will they receive the Audubon magazine.

Photos by READERS



Frequent visitor to bird feeder. Photo by H Spencer



WHITE-THROATED SPARROW photo by Debbie Parker



RUDDY DUCK photo by Debbie Parker

Local Black River Audubon Membership Application \$15/year (Includes subscription to WINGTIPS but not AUDUBON magazine.) \$15/year.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/ STATE/ZIP _____

Send check to Black River Audubon Society, P.O. Box 33, Elyria, OH 44036

National Audubon Membership Application (Includes membership in Black River Audubon and subscriptions to WINGTIPS and AUDUBON magazine: \$20/year.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/ZIP _____

Chapter Code S52, 7XCH8

Send your check to National Audubon Society, Inc.

225 Varick Street, 7th Floor

New York, NY 10014

Attention: Chance Mueleck

The mission of the Black River Audubon Society is to promote conservation and restoration of ecosystems, focusing on birds and other wildlife through advocacy, education, stewardship, field trips, and programs for the benefit of all people of today and tomorrow.

March Program

West Creek-A Success Story

Derek Schafer

Director, West Creek Reservation

Tuesday, March 1, 2016

Carlisle Visitor Center, 7:00 p.m.