

# Black River Audubon Society

# WINGTIPS

January 2011



SNOW BUNTING/WILLIAM BOFINGER



Editors: Jack Smith and Harry Spencer  
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## **.Program**

Tuesday, January 4, 2011

Carlisle Visitor Center

**Joseph P. Reardon**

Board of Directors, Ohio Chapter, American Chestnut Foundation

**American Chestnut – Restoring Life to Ohio's Strip-Mined Lands**

**Joseph Reardon** has a doctorate in chemistry and has been a high school teacher, research chemist, and industrial R&D manager. He has been interested in trees, particularly the American chestnut since boyhood. He is an active member of several conservation organizations.

## **Field Trip**

Saturday, January 22, 2011

**Lorain Harbor and Avon Power Plant**

Meet at Spitzer Lakeside Marina, 9:00 a.m.

## **Board Meeting**

Tuesday, January 25, 2011

304 West Ave, Elyria

Everyone welcome!

## **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.

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

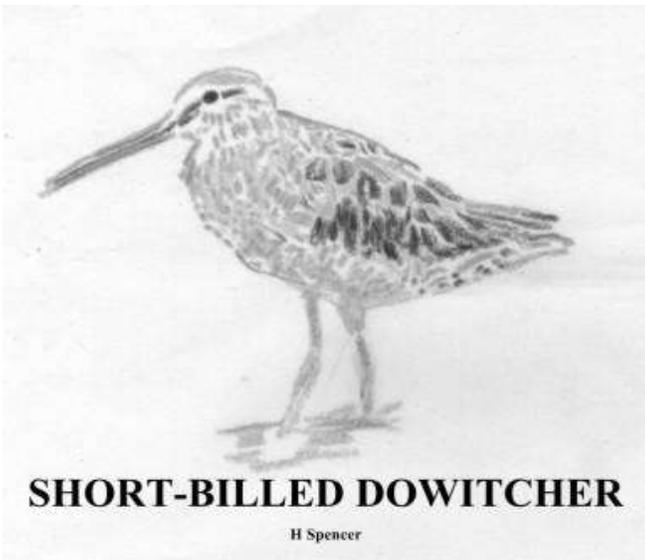
now threaten rare Maine seabirds such as great cormorants and roseate terns.

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 murrelets 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.

Steve with Puffin  
at Egg Rock



## Short-billed dowitcher spotted during Wellington Field Trip



Identification of this species highlighted our November 20 Field Trip to Wellington Reservation. The short-billed dowitcher, *Limnodromus griseus*, is a medium-sized, stocky, long-billed shorebird that favors northern tundra for nesting and ponds and mudflats of Middle America and northern South America for southern migratory termini. It feeds on invertebrates often by rapidly probing its bill into mud in a sewing machine fashion.

According to Jack Smith, Dick Lee sighted an unusual shorebird probing a mud flat in such a fashion. Jack realized that this behavior along with the bird's size and long black bill indicated a dowitcher. In addition he noticed that the long bill was slightly downward-curved at its tip indicating a short-billed dowitcher. In the past he has

observed the species several times at the Ottawa National Wildlife refuge.

Other species identified: Canada goose, wood duck, mallard, northern shoveler, green-winged teal, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-tailed hawk, rock pigeon, red-bellied woodpecker, downy woodpecker, blue jay, American crow, black-capped chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, eastern bluebird, American robin, cedar waxwing, American tree sparrow, song sparrow, dark-eyed junco, northern cardinal, house finch, American goldfinch, house sparrow.

Harry Spencer

## Purple Martins at Lakeview Park

By **Harriet Alger**



Lorain County Metro Parks has officially approved establishment of three racks of purple-martin gourds in the northeastern corner of Lakeview Park. At an approximate cost of \$500 Black River Audubon will donate the gourds, which will replace gourds maintained on private property adjacent to this corner of the park. The gourd-maintainer, Phil Young recently died, leaving no one to monitor the gourds.



Phil Young's gourds have had a thriving population of martins for many years. In 2010, 24 nests with 48 adults and more than 30 fledglings were documented on our Black River Audubon e-bird site.

This collaboration between Lorain County Metro Parks and Black River Audubon will provide suitable nesting sites for returning martins next spring. Furthermore, a Cleveland State University student, Courtney Brennan, who is an excellent birder, has agreed to monitor the new gourds in 2011. She wants to make this monitoring project a part of her masters-degree program.

### A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

So you're Carol Leininger! I get that a lot. After teaching birding classes at LCCC and LCMP, giving talks to various school and senior groups, leading bird hikes, and perhaps from my activities in Black River Audubon, people I have never met seem to recognize my name. That's ok – I love to talk about birds.



The phone calls can be most interesting.

An hysterical friend called. She had heard scratching noises in the closet where her furnace was located. She opened the door and a huge black bird flew into her face. I suggested that she open all doors and windows, and it (crow) would eventually fly out.

The same friend called again one spring day. A robin kept flying into her window. Since she had a bush outside the window that reflected both the bush and the robin, I suggested that she cover the window with a newspaper.

Students at the college called about a strange looking bird sitting outside a cafeteria window. When I asked for the color of the bird and learned that it was every color in the book, I decided to see for myself how beautiful a pigeon could actually be.

Friends owning a beautiful redwood house in Westerville called. A woodpecker was drilling holes in their house. I suggested an owl decoy.

Some former students were concerned about a ring-necked pheasant that wandered into a courtyard area on campus. If it wandered in, it will surely find its way back.

A college secretary called about a bird feeding in the gravel outside her window. A chukar must have escaped from a bird lover in the neighborhood. It was gone the next day. What happened to it? Had she noticed that on the previous day, exterminators had been spraying the gravel around the building?

A colleague described a blue bird he wanted identified. After a few questions, I showed him an indigo bunting in a bird book. No, it was not that particular shade of blue. I showed him every blue-colored bird in the book. None was quite satisfactory. Apparently he and the book-artist did not agree on the exact hue of blue.

I have an Amish friend in Holmes County who calls from time to time. I seem to be his hot line. Any interesting birds sighted along the lake this week?

When people call for help in identifying a bird I always ask for size and colors first, followed by location,

and the bird's activity. Often that is enough to identify a tree swallow, or a killdeer, or a red-tailed hawk, or some other possible species. And if it's a friend, I just might give them a bird book for Christmas!

Yes indeed, bird identification over the telephone can be quite interesting.

## Winter Visitors from the Tundra

By Jack Smith

Our high-lighted winter visitors are Ross's goose, just resting during its long southern migration, and snow bunting, which stays with us all winter.



The William Bofinger photo above shows the winter plumage of snow buntings. The birds appear every year like “snowflakes”, according to some authors. Swirling through the air in sizable numbers and settling on a farmer's field is a common winter sight to behold. I cannot remember a year that our Christmas Bird Count has not included snow buntings.

Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) is a hardy land bird that nests in the harshest regions of the high Arctic, farther north of the nesting regions of any other species of bird. As long as food is available snow buntings survive even at minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit. In Ohio we often see snow buntings seeking seeds, its principle food during the winter months. However, heavy snowfall can result in the death of many snow buntings.

These night-migrating buntings arrive in Ohio during the latter days of October and mostly leave during March.

In the far north the males arrive three to six weeks before the females and stake out territories with suitable nesting sites such as those in rocky areas free of low, wet tundra. A protected cavity in a deep fissure among rocks is a favorite nesting site.

Courtship involves males flying up twenty or thirty feet followed by a downward glide while singing. The males strut around with spread wings. They turn their backs to the females to show off their contrasting black and white breeding plumage.



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Females build nests with a bulky cup of grass lined with moss, finer grass, and feathers. Generally a female lays four to seven eggs, white to blue-green marked in brown and black. She does all the incubation, possibly because she alone has a brood patch that develops a few days before the eggs are laid.

(Note: A brood patch forms on the belly of a bird about to begin incubation. First, down feathers drop from the abdomen. Then the featherless patch swells with a rich supply of blood vessels. This brood patch keeps smothered eggs warm and encourages development of the embryos. If a male without a brood-patch tried to incubate, the eggs would probably not hatch in severely cold climate.)

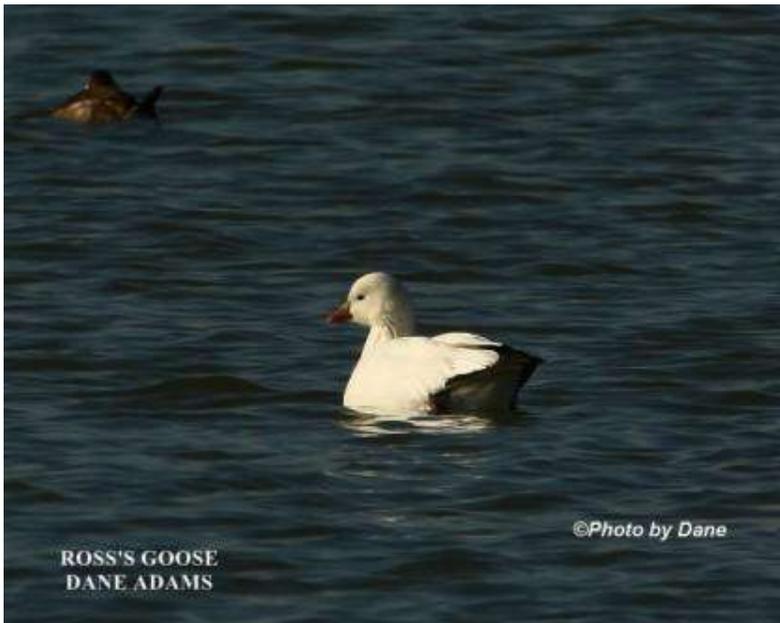
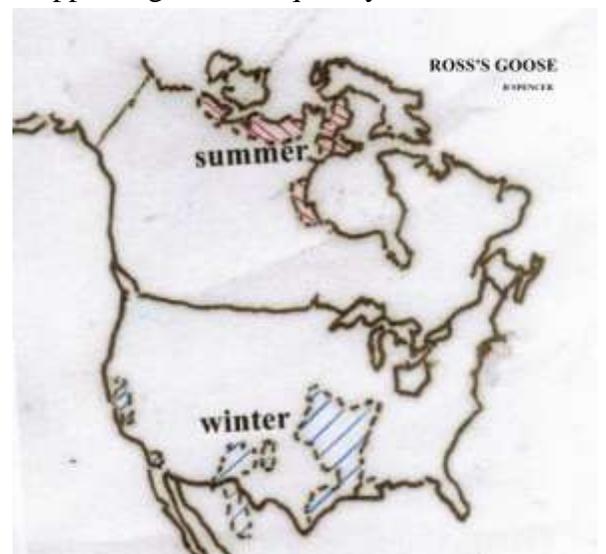
Males feed the females during the entire 10 to 16 day incubation period. Once hatched, both male and female adults feed the chicks a diet consisting mainly of insects with some spiders. The chicks leave the nest ten to seventeen days after hatching.

Currently the population of snow buntings seems to be stable. And the minimal ravage of human activity in the far northern breeding range may be an enabling factor.

In contrast to the common status of snow buntings in our area, Ross's goose is considered to be rare to accidental in northern Ohio, although individual birds seem to be appearing more frequently. It is the smallest of the geese, whose size can be appreciated by comparing the similar sizes of the two birds in the photo below. The upper left corner of the photo shows a relatively small ruddy duck.

After long migration in the early spring, Ross's geese arrive at their breeding territory in the Arctic tundra, where they select their nesting sites, often on islands or on shores of tundra lakes, usually on edges of low thickets. Females build nests, bulky bowls consisting of twigs, leaves, grass, and moss, with down linings.

Courtship involves rapid head dipping by both males and females.



Upon completion of her nest, a female usually lays four dull white eggs, which she alone incubates. A male develops no brooding patch and does no incubating. In 21 to 23 days the precocious young hatch. Almost immediately the chicks begin running and eating seeds and plant material. Both parents, however, tend the young. The adult male aggressively protects against predators. The young fledge in 40 to 45 days.

Populations of Ross's geese are increasing as are Arctic-nesting birds such as snow and white-fronted geese. Ross's and snow geese hybridize, which does not seem to be a major problem.

**References:** *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman; *Birds of North America* by National Geographic; *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres; *Birds of the Cleveland Region* by Larry Rosche.

## **Black River Audubon partners with LCCC**

Black River Audubon is now a Community Partner with Lorain Community College in its Service Learning Program. Harriet Alger negotiated the partnership agreement with LCCC, and she will be joined by Dick Lee and Joe Strong in working with students on several projects. They include maintenance and plant identification of both the existing Flora Interpretive Trail and Meadow Preserve, survey of campus birds and habitats, birding hikes, bluebird-box construction, installation, and monitoring. The program applies to the 2010-2011 fall, spring, and summer terms.

## **Record Audubon Adventures Participation**

Education Chair Dick Lee has arranged involvement of a record-setting 131 classrooms/programs with the Audubon Adventures program. Last year's number of 109 also was a record. Congratulations Dick.

## **Icebreaker**

Peg, my wife, told me this bird-related story. In the bird-feeding area behind our home is a water tray for the birds. Squirrels also drink there, but one cold late-November day, a gray squirrel found that a layer of ice blocked his drinking. He tried unsuccessfully to break the ice by nosing around the tray. Then he climbed the adjacent bench and jumped to the icy surface. Nothing happened, so he repeated the process. On the third try the ice broke, and the squirrel drank.

Harry Spencer