

Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

March 2010



Merlin
Dane Adams

Program

The Big Year

Greg Miller

Computer Programmer and Zealous Birder

Tuesday, March 2, 7 p.m.

Carlisle Visitor Center

Greg Miller is a well-known local birder and a founding member of the Ohio Ornithological Society. He is perhaps best known as one of three birders profiled in the best selling book: *The Big Year: A tale of Man, Nature and Fowl Obsession*, by Bob Obmascik. Greg will give us the inside story about the adventure of doing a big year.

Field Trip

March 20, 2010 (Saturday)

Oberlin and Wellington Reservoirs and Pancakes in Chatham, meet at Oberlin Reservoir at 9:00 a.m.

Birding Course for Experienced Birders

Lorain County Metro Parks and Black River Audubon Society are proud to sponsor an exciting new program at Sandy Ridge Reservation. The course is designed for experienced birders who want to build on their weaker areas of birding and maximize their success in the field.

This course will be taught by renowned naturalist and birder Larry Richardson. He served as Executive Director of the Lake Erie Nature and Science Center in Bay Village and Director of Arcadia Lake Park in Oklahoma. He has taught many birding classes and participated in many conferences. Larry has led birding hikes for 25 years including many international expeditions.

The six-session class begins on March 25 and meets every Thursday, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. The course also includes three hikes (8:00 a.m. on Mar. 27, Apr. 10, and 24). Fee for the program is \$60.00 per person which includes all materials, hikes, and certificate of completion. Call the Johnson Wetland Center at (440)-327-3626 for registration. Participants must pre-register by March 18. Class size is limited so don't delay.

Outstanding Speakers Series

Jointly sponsored by

Black River Audubon and Lorain County Metro Parks

March 13, 7 p.m., Carlisle Visitor Center

Letters from Eden

Julie Zickefoose

Nature Artist and Writer

Letters from Eden is a naturalist's journal, telling the countless small stories of the woods and meadows in flowing prose and lively watercolors. Copperheads strike; starlings battle and become prey; bullfrogs snap up hummingbirds in Julie Zickefoose's essays. Reading from her work while showing her paintings and photographs, Julie will reveal the deep connection with nature that keeps her walking her 80-acre Appalachian sanctuary outside Whipple, Ohio. **50 minutes.**



Board Meeting

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

Jack Smith's house, 304 West Ave., Elyria

Field Trip Report

On an unusually warm January 15th, our group of thirteen birders visited ice-covered Lorain Harbor and the open water surrounding the waste-water outlet of the Avon Lake Power Plant.

Raptors constituted the highlight of the Lorain Harbor birding with sighting of a juvenile bald eagle, an American kestrel, and a northern harrier. Waterfowl highlighted our visit to the Avon Lake Power Plant with identifications of American black duck, canvasback, redhead, lesser scaup, bufflehead, common goldeneye, common merganser, red-breasted merganser and ruddy duck.

Wellington Christmas Bird Count

By Erik Bruder

On a day in which the temperature started at 18 degrees Fahrenheit and fell to 15, seventeen birders took to the field for the Wellington Christmas Bird Count (CBC), January 2, 2010. The wind chill was about 5 degrees and ended up at zero. Field counters reported 2 to 5 inches of snow while the National Weather Service only reported 0.01". Winds were 15 to 25 MPH. This created a lot of blowing and drifting snow. The main roads were plowed and partially clear while the side roads were snow covered or icy. The field counters spent very little time outside their vehicles but identified 4683 individuals of 54 species.



Seven additional species, observed either during the three days before or three days after the day of the CBC are identified by the letters CW, which stand for Count Week.

DUCKS, GEESE, AND SWANS: Canada goose 398, trumpeter swan CW, tundra swan 12, gadwall CW, American black duck 5, mallard 99, northern pintail CW, canvasback 2, redhead 6, ring-necked duck 20, lesser scaup 10, bufflehead 2, hooded merganser CW, red-breasted merganser CW, ruddy duck 10,

PHEASANT AND GREBE: ring-necked pheasant 2, pied-billed grebe 1,

BIRDS OF PREY: bald eagle 2, northern harrier 6, sharp-shinned hawk 2, Cooper's hawk 4, red-shouldered hawk 1, red-tailed hawk 22, American kestrel 14,

RAIL THROUGH DOVE: American coot 120, ring-billed gull 82, rock pigeon 50, mourning dove 212,

OWLS AND WOODPECKERS: great horned owl 1, barred owl 1, long-eared owl 1, red-bellied woodpecker 25, downy woodpecker 44, hairy woodpecker 7, northern flicker 9, pileated woodpecker 3,

SHRIKE THROUGH LARK: northern shrike 1, blue jay 134, American crow 46, horned lark 423,

CHICKADEE, TITMOUSE, AND NUTHATCH: black-capped chickadee 94, tufted titmouse 55, red-breasted nuthatch 4, white-breasted nuthatch 35,

KINGLET AND THRUSHES: golden crowned kinglet 1, eastern bluebird 26, American robin 35,

MOCKINGBIRD AND STARLING: northern mockingbird 1, European starling 1295,

SPARROWS AND JUNCO: American tree sparrow 263, song sparrow 19, white-throated sparrow 4, white-crowned sparrow 6, dark-eyed junco 257,

LONGSPUR THROUGH HOUSE SPARROW: Lapland longspur 3, northern cardinal 191, red-winged blackbird CW, brown-headed cowbird CW, house finch 76, American goldfinch 106, house sparrow 106.

Some Board Meeting Highlights

January 26

The Board voted to use Black River Audubon's Mission Statement as a necessary but incomplete basis for judging suitability of requests for support by residents and organizations in our community. Also they appointed Martin Ackermann to replace the late Wayne Shipman on the Board. They reached consensus to share yearly records of bluebird-box-nesting with both the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas organization and the North American Bluebird Association. Jack announced a bluebird-box assembling session, February 6.

A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

If you say its name, it will come! At times I truly believe this – especially when I'm birding with my friend, Norma Kraps. It happens too often to be just coincidence.



Once we drove into Spencer Wildlife Area, and Norma said, "There should be a shrike here." I slowed and noticed a bird perched on a tree off in the distance. I stopped the car, and after a look with my binocs, I set up my spotting scope and focused on a northern shrike.

Another time, accompanied by others, Norma and I visited Maumee Bay. We drove around a water treatment facility where someone had sighted a snowy owl. As we drove I said, "Where do you suppose it might be?" Norma replied "Oh, probably on one of those posts ahead." And there it sat on one of the posts!

Another time in March, Norma and I birded along Krause and Stange Roads near the Ottawa National

Wildlife Refuge. Norma said, "There should be horned larks in these fields." Sure enough, we saw several horned larks. As we continued Norma added "There should be snow buntings here, also." We stopped and a flock of birds flew across the road and back just ahead of us. Their white bodies with bits of brown and black sparkled in the sunshine.

Now I realize that if I name the expected bird, nothing happens. Norma has to name the bird before it shows itself. I'm surprised that more people don't invite Norma to go birding with them!



Owners protect land, preserve history and habitat

By **Kate Pilacky**

Western Reserve Land Conservancy has protected 333 properties of great bird habitat totaling 21,402 acres in north-central and northeast Ohio, much of it in the Black River Audubon service area. In all, nearly 3800 acres have been preserved by the Land Conservancy's Firelands office, located in Oberlin. With help from our Audubon friends providing their expertise collecting bird data and providing letters of support, land protection efforts in this region have increased dramatically. Black River Audubon's Jack Smith has been a great supporter of the organization, serving on the board since its inception in 2003 as Firelands Land Conservancy, which merged into Western Reserve Land Conservancy in January 2006.



The Land Conservancy has preserved several stand-out bird properties in Lorain County that include the 454-acre Firelands Scout Camp in Henrietta Township, preserved in 2007 with 70 species of birds identified, and the 255-acre Wendtwood property in Columbia Station, preserved in 2006 with 71 species of birds identified. These properties have been protected by a conservation easement, a voluntary legal agreement that

protects the natural, agricultural and scenic resources of the land while allowing the land to remain privately owned. This is a very cost-effective way of preserving habitat; a win/win for landowners and wildlife.

Black River Audubon had the opportunity to visit several other outstanding Land-Conservancy-preserved properties this past summer as part of the Findley Blockbusting Bird Bonanza, finding 53 species of birds at the 87-acre Buttler property in Brighton Township, and 47 species at the 1000-acre Babcock property in Rochester and Huntington Townships.

In 2009, the Land Conservancy's Firelands office permanently preserved a total of over 1300-acres. Two fifth-generation farms totaling 384-acres were conserved in Lorain County in December. Rhea Cowie, 91, and her family permanently preserved 208 acres in Rochester Township. The Browand farm, in Brighton Township will preserve 176 acres. "Our thanks go out to these wonderful people who are not only preserving this beautiful property for future generations but are also preserving the rich history of Lorain County. It is an honor to help protect these farms," said Andy McDowell, director of the Land Conservancy's Firelands Field Office.

In addition, 665-acres of farmland, woods, and riparian forests were preserved in Huron County. In Ashland County, 148 acres of farmland, beautiful lakes, and Vermilion River riparian land were preserved. Conservation properties protected in perpetuity also included 61-acres of wooded floodplain along the Huron River in Erie County owned by the Village of Milan and 44-acres of great bird habitat on Johnson's Island in Ottawa County.

If you would like additional information about the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, please contact Kate Pilacky or Andy McDowell at the Firelands Field office at (440) 774-4226. Visit our website at www.wrlc.cc.

Merlin

(Pigeon Hawk)

(*Falco columbarius*)

By **Jack Smith**

In my earlier days, our front-cover bird, merlin, was called pigeon hawk, a name that may have referred to its size, similar to that of rock pigeons. A merlin is 10 to 13 ½ inches long with a wingspread of 23 ½ to 26 ½ inches. Another possibility for the name origination is its favorite

food, pigeon.

A merlin's diet also includes gophers, squirrels, bats, toads, lizards, insects, spiders, scorpions, and crayfish –almost any small animal available. With a burst of speed, a merlin may overtake any small bird, such as a warbler.

Its genus name, *Falco*, comes from the Latin word *falcate*, hooked shape referring to both claws and beak. Its species name, *columbarius* pertains to doves or pigeons. The common name merlin is derived from the Latin word *merula*, meaning a black bird.

The name pigeon hawk is more



Merlin
Dane Adams



descriptive than merlin, because only one of the three North American subspecies, the Pacific merlin (*Falco columbarius suckleyi*) is mostly black. We see infrequently the lighter taiga merlin (*Falco columbarius columbarius*). Its breeding range is the boreal forest of Alaska and Canada to the east coast then south into northern New England.

Nesting merlins have been reported in Cuyahoga, Lake, and Ashtabula Counties.

Merlins, peregrine falcons, prairie falcons, aplomado facons, gyrfalcons, and American kestrels, have a small tooth and notch near the tip of the upper beak. These birds use this modified beak to quickly dispatch birds or other animals by severing spinal cords.

Several years ago when Joe Strong and I were birding in the Grand Canyon area, we spotted a peregrine falcon high above the Canyon when suddenly it went into a dive toward a dove. As it hit its target we saw feathers flying in one direction and the dove in another.

Often merlins fly just above terrain levels and surprise their prey. Perching in a tree overlooking open areas, such as the bird on the cover appears to be doing, is another method.

Our cover bird is an adult male, taiga subspecies. It has a bluish slate-colored back, some orange splashes mixed with brown streaks on its breast, and a subdued mustache. Females are larger with brownish backs and less orange on their breasts.

Merlins breed in terrain with some trees for nesting and more open areas for hunting. Courting males display spectacular flight maneuvers involving steep dives, glides, rolling from side to side, and fluttering with shallow wing beats. During courting, males bring food to females.

Nesting sites tend to be solitary and can be abandoned stick-nests of other species, large tree cavities, cliff cavities or ledges. A pair adds little or no additional material. The female lays five or six light-buff colored eggs stippled with chocolate and purple colors. The female mostly incubates while the male devotedly brings her food. Occasionally the male keeps the eggs warm while his mate eats. The monogamous pair usually remains together until something happens to a mate. After 28-32 days, the eggs hatch, and the nestlings are entirely dependent on parents for survival. While the chicks are small the female does most of the brooding, feeding the young with food brought by the male. After about 29 days the young fledge.

In late summer and early fall, merlins begin migrating to their wintering grounds accompanied by an ample food supply in the form of a host of smaller birds.

Two examples of good viewing areas of migrating merlins are Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania and the Atlantic coast.

Merlins also are native to Europe and Asia. During the Middle Ages, Ladies of Courts used merlins to pursue skylarks.

In North America both peregrine falcons and merlins were seriously affected by the chlorine-containing pesticides such as DDT. Both species recovered after the pesticides were banned. In Europe, as a sport, great numbers of raptors, including merlins, are killed in both spring and fall. Malta is one notorious spot for this sport hunting.

Migrating merlins usually do not soar on thermals, instead flying at tree-top levels. During September through late October migration, juveniles precede the adults. Hawk watchers often set their watches by merlin time, 4:00 p.m.

References: *The Sibley Guide to Birds* and *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior* by David Allen Sibley, *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman, *The Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn, *National Geographic Complete Birds of North America* by Jonathan Alderfer, *Raptors* by Scott Weidensaul, *Smithsonian Birds of North America*, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres.

Wonders of the Natural World

Concerning the Northern Saw-whet-Owl painting

By **Kate Pilacki**

I feel it is my job as an artist to re-enchant people - to reintroduce them to the wonders of the natural world. With my palette knife paintings, I try to depict light and color-like facets shimmering in the sun. I try to convey a balance, a vibrancy, a rhythm in all my paintings - especially my landscapes - everything being interconnected and dependent on each other for survival. I also wish to portray a feeling of hope and perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds.



Northern Saw-whet Owl painting by Kate Pilacki

Editors: Jack Smith and Harry Spencer

Photographer: John Koscinski

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