

# Black River Audubon Society

# WINGTIPS

October 2011



Photo by Dane Adams

PURPLE MARTIN

Editors: Jack Smith, Harry Spencer, Cathy Priebe  
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## **Program**

Tuesday, May 1, 7:00 p.m.

Carlisle Visitor Center

### **Lisa Petit**

#### **From Basketball to Bobolinks: The Transformation of the Former Richfield Coliseum into a Biologically Diverse Grassland Habitat**



Before it was forced to close, the Richfield Coliseum was both the home of the Cleveland Cavaliers and a rock-and-roll concert venue in Northeast Ohio for decades. Dr. Lisa Petit will explain how the sounds of crowds cheering and guitars wailing gave way to a different sort of music in the form of birdsong.

“I have been following this remarkable transformation from concrete and asphalt to a high quality natural resource that now attracts bobolinks, meadowlarks, and other imperiled and rare grassland birds,” she stated.

Petit, who joined the National Park Service in 2000 as a Wildlife Biologist of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, is now its Chief of the Resource Management Division that oversees all natural and cultural resource stewardship. Before coming to Ohio she was a Research Biologist for eight years with the Smithsonian Institution Migratory Bird Center in Washington, DC.



Richfield Coliseum



Restored Field

### **Field Trip**

Saturday, May 5, 9:00 a.m.

#### **Magee Marsh**

Meet at Boardwalk

### **Board Meeting**

Tuesday, May 29, 6:30 p.m.

Election of Officers

Site: Elyria YWCA

**June Field Trip**  
Saturday June 16, 9:30 a.m.  
**Oak Openings-Toledo Metropolitan Park**

**Summer Hikes**

Saturday, July 21, 9 a.m.  
**Indian Hollow Reservation**

Saturday, August 18, 9:00a.m.  
**Sandy Ridge Reservation**

**Purple Martin Symposium scheduled for June 30 at Lakeview Park**

The Lorain County Metro Parks, the Black River Audubon Society, and the Purple Martin Conservancy Association jointly will host a Purple Martin Symposium on June 30, 2012, at Lakeview Park, in Lorain. Visitors can observe this amazing bird at the active Lakeview Park purple martin colony. Andy Troyer, who designed the T-14 Purple Martin house, will be a guest speaker.

**Birding-by-Tram scheduled at Sandy Ridge**

By **Harriet Alger**

In response to last year's increased requests for reservations, Black River Audubon and Lorain County Metro Parks are offering birding-by-tram every Thursday morning in May and June this year. Birding-by-tram is provided for experienced and beginning birders unable to walk the trail.

Because the tram stops when birds are seen or heard, trips take about two hours. Riders able to walk can get out at each stop to use binoculars and scopes. Some riders bird while seated in the tram. Volunteer birders may walk beside the tram to help with bird location and identification.

The birding trips begin at 9a.m. Call Senior Naturalist Tim Fairweather at 440-327-3626 for reservations. Seating is limited.



## **Pull garlic mustard to save native flora and fauna!**

Saturday, April 28, 10 a.m., Bacon Woods  
[www.wcasohio.org/weeder\\_in\\_the\\_wild.htm](http://www.wcasohio.org/weeder_in_the_wild.htm)

Saturday, May 12, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., Wendtwood  
kpilacky@wrlandconservancy.org  
440-774-4226

### **Purple Martin**

*(Progne Subis)*

By **John Ryan**

The purple martin is the largest member of the swallow family. In appearance, the almost iridescent steel blue of the adult males contrasts with the duller dark head, gray throat, and gray underside of the adult female.

Like all swallows, purple martins feed primarily on flying insects, which they capture in a swift, sustained flight. Importantly, their main diet is large insects such as dragon flies -- not mosquitoes, as most people believe.

The purple martin was probably the first "backyard bird" of North America. Historical documents record the beginnings of a special relationship between man and purple martins. Native Americans put hollowed-out dried gourds over their gardens to attract the martins so the birds would chase away crows. The martins effectively became a type of living scarecrow.

In Eastern North America purple martins are now almost totally dependent on man-supplied housing. This includes wood houses, artificial gourds, natural gourds, and aluminum houses. Whereas eastern martins thrive in colonies, western martins are solitary nesters in natural cavities.

Attracting a purple martin colony is not as simple as putting up housing and expecting them to appear and nest. I am acutely aware of this fact, as I was a "wannabe landlord" for 23 years.

Purple martin houses must be placed in close proximity to human housing, the best distance being 30-100 feet. There should be no trees within 60-100 feet of the nest site. Houses should be mounted in such a way as to permit the structures to be lowered for nest checks and cleaning.

Purple martin colonies must be diligently managed for controlling invasive species, such as house sparrows and European starlings. It is important to check for parasites. Other predators are owls, hawks, snakes, and raccoons.

Purple martins spend the majority of their lives in South America, wintering in the Amazon Basin. Each year they migrate to North America, traveling about 6000 miles. In our area, martins return in the early days of April. Southern migration begins in early August, and large congregations, or roosts are found at Lake Ponchatrain in Louisiana, and Presque Isle, in Erie, Pennsylvania.

**References:** *The Martin Landlord's Handbook* by Richard A. Wolinski; *Stokes's Purple Martin Book* by Donald Stokes; and Purple Martin Conservancy Association brochures.



### **Species identified during March 17 Field Trip**

On eBird, Dick Lee reported identifications by eight birders at three locations: Oberlin Reservoir, Caley Reservation, and Wellington Upground Reservoir. Viewing conditions were ideal: sunny, calm, mid-fifties to 55-65 degrees F. Species identified: Canada goose, northern shoveler, redhead, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup,

bufflehead, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, wild turkey, pied-billed grebe, horned grebe, great blue heron, turkey vulture, bald eagle, American coot, killdeer, ring-billed gull, mourning dove, northern flicker, blue jay, American crow, eastern bluebird, American robin, European starling, song sparrow, northern cardinal, red-winged blackbird, and house sparrow.

In addition, Nan Miller and Nancy Dowdell spotted ring-necked pheasant and horned lark while travelling and red-breasted nuthatch at Findley State Park.

## **MYSTERY OF CABOT'S WINTER HOME SOLVED**

Adapted from Project Puffin eNews, February 9, 2012

Scientists and birdwatchers have long wondered exactly where puffins go in the winter months. Now, Project Puffin researchers are beginning to unravel the mystery. Geolocation technology has enabled the first ever winter tracking of individual Atlantic puffins during their surprising far-flung travels.

In 2009, researchers attached tracking devices to the leg bands of eight puffins at their summer nesting site, Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge, a 65-acre treeless island located 21 miles off the coast of Rockland, Maine. In June 2011, the researchers recovered the devices from two puffins. The tiny tracking devices revealed that one puffin, nicknamed Cabot, ranged from the icy waters of the northern Labrador Sea to warmer waters near Bermuda while the other wintered in the Gulf of St. Lawrence before travelling south to the offshore waters of the mid-Atlantic American states.



Black River Audubon stalwart Dick Lee on left and National Audubon Vice President and puffin expert Steven Kress

## **SANDY RIDGE BIRD WALKS**

By Nan Miller

Sandy Ridge conducts birding walks every Wednesday until the middle of June. They start at 7:30 a.m. and last about two hours. Tim Fairweather leads and knows the birds and most anything else in the park. There are some excellent birders in the group, who are willing to help new people. We usually meet afterwards for light refreshments and listing of our bird identifications.



# A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

I wonder as I wander. The more I study nature, the more I wonder about the things I see. Here are a few of my ponderings:



Why does a motmot have such a strange looking tail? Is there a reason for it?

How did a gannet and a Sabine's gull find their way to Lorain County one winter? And why did they both choose the pier in Avon Lake of all places?

How far must a skimmer fly to get a full belly, or before he swallows?

How much of the day does an anhinga spend drying its feathers?

How many practice sessions does it take for grebes to perfect their synchronized water ballet?

Why don't woodpeckers get headaches from all that hammering?

Does a nighthawk scream before or after it catches an insect? Surely it's not to attract the bug.

Of all the cattle egrets I have seen, why have I only once seen the birds perched on the backs of cattle? They seem to prefer following behind a tractor instead.

What did the frigate bird think of its visit to Ohio after hurricane Andrew? Do birds get motion sickness when flying inside hurricanes or tornadoes?

Does a wood stork (nickname: flint head) really have a harder head than other birds?

Why can't hummingbirds learn to share their feeder with others?

Why would a pair of bald eagles prefer to nest on the edge of an active shooting range?

How is it that soras and rails don't get lost as they wander and feed among all those marsh grasses?

Are there really birds that form homosexual pairs?

Are wattles really that attractive? Picture bellbirds of Trinidad, wild turkey in Lorain County, and lapwings in Ghana. What do the female birds really see in these wattles?

Why don't all birds have such fancy dance steps as those of manikins, prairie chickens, sage grouse, and ruffs?

Do black-necked stilts, often called daddy long legs, actually eat that particular arachnid?

How do flocks of shorebirds manage to change directions and avoid collisions?

How long do egret feathers last on a woman's hat if the feathers are powder downs?

How many passenger pigeons did my ancestors kill and eat? Those ancestors were farmers in eastern Pennsylvania in the 1750s. Certainly no recipes have been passed down in the family.

## Rose-Breasted Grosbeak

*Pheucticus ludovicianus*

By **Cathy Priebe**

I became acquainted with the rose-breasted grosbeak (RBGU) when I started feeding birds many years ago. It was early spring and I just happened to look out the patio window. There, perched in our oak tree, was a robin-like bird with a bright red and white breast and dark back.



"Oh my, has it been injured?" was my first thought as I carefully scrutinized the bird as it sat calmly on the branch. Common sense took over and I grabbed my field guide. OK, this was a different bird for my yard. Why have I not seen this bird before? Especially since all of my sources indicate that this is a fairly common migrant east of the Rockies.

It was also a relief to discover that I was not the only one who's first thought was "is this bird hurt?" The RBGU is a robust, canopy-loving forest bird, according to Pete Dunne. "The crimson-bibbed black and white males look like they've been shot through the heart".

Of course, females are not as striking as males. A female has been compared to a "giant female purple finch

or a very plump sparrow.” Both sexes have huge, pale-pinkish, conical bills, large egg-shaped heads, oval bodies, and relatively short tails.

Males usually arrive on their breeding territories from late March to early June. They find the highest tree top and sing their “hearts out.” Their hurried song has been likened to a “drunken American Robin”, and their location call is a “sharp, harsh squeak, like a sneaker scuffing a gym floor.”

Rose-breasted grosbeak numbers seem to have been gradually increasing in Ohio, because they prefer second growth forests, according to Jim McCormac, author of *Birds of Ohio*. He also refers to them as being very common nesters in many parts of the state. They are more easily spotted in early spring when trees are not completely leafed out. (That is why I had not seen one before.)



Rose-breasted grosbeak photo by Dane Adams

Deciduous and moist, mixed-woodlands are their favored habitats. The birds are also partial to woodland edges of streams, suburban yards, parks, pastures and orchards. They come to feeders in the spring for sunflower seeds, but they prefer to glean insects, fruit and buds from trees and other vegetation.

Their somewhat flimsy cup-like nest of twigs and grasses can be generally found fairly low in a tree or tall shrub, often near water. They incubate three to five brown-spotted pale greenish blue eggs for about two weeks.

These often quiet, secretive birds stay here through late August to mid-November before migrating to their winter homes.

If you have not yet had the pleasure of seeing a RBGU, don't be alarmed when you see it's bright red heart for the first time. I know that it has stolen my heart and I look forward to seeing them in my yard every spring.

**References:** *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac and Gregory Kennedy; *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion* by Pete Dunne; *Birds of North America* by Kenn Kaufman.