Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

May 2016

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH photo by Barbara Baudot

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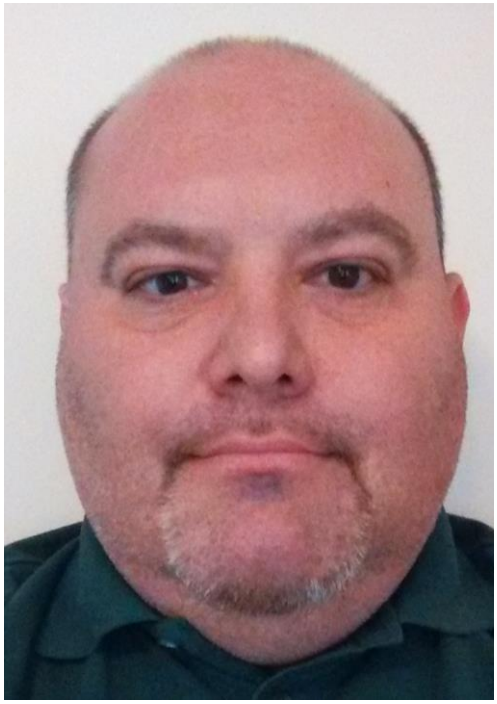
Program

Mark Kocsis, Senior Naturalist, Lorain County Metroparks

Edible Landscape for Man & Beast

May 3, 2016, 7:00 p.m.

Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center



We all know times are tough, both economically and environmentally. If so, why don't we try to solve two problems at once by planting edible foods within our landscapes?

In describing his May presentation to Black River Audubon, Mark Kocsis, Lorain County Metroparks naturalist, points out, "For more than a century we have moved away from utilitarian plants and care to focus on the aesthetic. Is it possible to establish both utility and beauty from a single design? Can we have our landscape plants and eat them too?" In his program, Mark will show that we can.

In 1993, Matt accepted a twelve-week summer internship with the Lorain County Metro Parks. That original three months has now stretched into a career of more than twenty years of historical, cultural and natural interpretation throughout Lorain County. A lifelong area resident, Matt graduated from Keystone High School, received a degree in History and Political Science from Ohio Northern University and completed his teaching certification at Baldwin Wallace College. For the past thirteen years he has been the Senior Naturalist at Schoepfle Garden helping to interpret the life and passions of Otto Schoepfle through the amazing garden he left to the public. His diverse experiences within the Metro Parks include: dealing with more than 500 species of plants at the garden, participating in the Raptor Corps at Carlisle and occasionally wrestling a bear or kangaroo. Matt lives in Elyria with his wife Sandra, three cats and a well- maintained compost pile.

May Field Trip

Magee Marsh

Saturday, May 7, 9:00 a.m.

Meet at the west end of the boardwalk.

March Field Trip
Wendy Park/Scranton Flats

By **Sally Fox**

Fifteen people met with our leader, Chuck Slusarczyk, at Euclid Beach Park in Cleveland on a blustery, cold morning.

We started the day on the fishing pier where we got distant looks at bufflehead, common goldeneye, ruddy duck, red-breasted merganser, lesser scaup, mallard, Canada goose, and three species of gulls, ring-billed, herring and great black-backed.

From the park we went to the old Coast Guard Station at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River in hope of seeing the great cormorant. There were hundreds of red-breasted mergansers and gulls in the harbor and double-crested cormorants were lined up on the break wall, but no great cormorant was in sight.

After some time there we were ready to call it quits when the great cormorant flew up to the break wall and we all got a good look at it. This is the first great cormorant recorded in Ohio, so it was pretty special and a lifer for most of us.

We then walked through Wendy Park, which was rather quiet with only song sparrows, but will soon be alive with migrant passerines.

Photo by Sally Fox

Chuck then led us to Merwin's Wharf further up the Cuyahoga. Here we added black-crowned night heron and Chuck shared some of the history of the area. From there we went to Scranton Flats and walked along the Towpath Trail. Here we saw rock pigeon, mourning dove, turkey vulture, American kestrel, peregrine falcon, blue jay, American robin, northern mockingbird, European starling, dark-eyed junco, American tree sparrow, northern cardinal, red-winged blackbird, common grackle, house finch and house sparrow.

A big thank you to Chuck for a very rewarding and interesting day!

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH

Carduelis carduelis

By **Barbara Baudot**

During Christmas vacation 2011, in Ougny, a hamlet of the Nivernais, in the center of France, I spotted a flock of these colorfully-festooned small finches as they descended to feed at my makeshift bird feeder. These bright multi-colored birds with their red face masks, broad wing band of bright yellow, and longish conical ivory beaks with black tips, appeared like Christmas lights against the day's grey backdrop. After their first visit these birds came regularly in increasing numbers and stayed nearby the entire period of our winter vacation.

I have not forgotten these multicolored, five inch long, song birds with their beautiful nine-inch wing spans and will look expectantly for them in future summers when we return to France.

In the intervening years I have done some research on these birds. I have been most curious why they would be called goldfinch when they are not yellow like their distant North American cousins. Moreover, while the

genders of their American cousins are clearly distinguishable by color, and their colors change with the seasons, the male and female of European goldfinches are hardly distinguishable by the color of their feathers, which do not vary with the season.

The history of *carduelis carduelis* is fascinating. The species was scientifically classified by Linnaeus in the late 1750's in his 10th edition of *Systema Naturae,* but had been physically identified 200 years earlier.

Presently *Carduelis carduelis* is not an endangered species, being classified as of "least concern" among bird populations in the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species.

Its range is extensive in Europe, North Africa and West Asia.

Because of their distinctive beauty and beautiful song, these goldfinches were bred and sold by the thousands in the 19th century as cage-birds. The male goldfinch was sometimes crossed with a female canary to produce a male bird "mule" with an even prettier song than that of the natural male. Caging these birds and cross breeding them was denounced by the British Society for the Protection of Birds in one of their first campaigns after receiving its Royal Charter in 1904.

Artists over a long period of history including painters, poets, writers, and musicians have featured this species in their works. Given the close association of this bird with thistle and thorns and Christ's crown of thorns, a number of famous painters have associated this European goldfinch with Easter and Christ's crucifixion. This connection was drawn notably in paintings of Raphael [1505] and Barocci [later in the 1500's.] The goldfinch featured in the paintings of the Madonna and Child is said to symbolize a foreboding of the crucifixion of Christ.

While it is disturbing to realize how for centuries this most beautiful bird has been abused and exploited by humankind for its own adornment and entertainment, it is comforting to recognize that artists have for centuries been inspired by their beauty and song.

References: **"European Goldfinch"** in Wikipedia; **"The Goldfinch" (painting)** in Wikipedia; iucnredlist.org/search.

A Birder's Diary: The Wonders of Bird Migration

By **Carol Leininger**

Ornithologists have studied bird migration for many years, yet there is still a continual growth of new information. Much of what we know today comes from studying data collected from bird banding, tracking with radio transmitters, radar, satellite imagery, and geo-locators plus experimentation with birds in captivity.

When it comes to navigation there is great variation – starlings use the sun to guide them, indigo buntings use the stars, and blue-winged teal use the wind. Most birds depend on topographical features such as the east and west coasts, the Rocky Mountains, or the Mississippi river.

Recent eBird checklists show that spring migrants follow the "green wave" of new leaves, and the accompanying insects, while fall migrants make fewer detours for food, instead choosing routes that avoid severe head winds.

Some migrating birds converge as the continent narrows into Mexico and Central America while others fly across the Gulf of Mexico. Some hop from island to island while others fly across large areas of ocean non-stop.

Not all birds travel great distances like the arctic tern (25,000 miles) or the sooty shearwater (40,000 miles). Some Ohio birds just go into the southern U.S. or the Caribbean, while others go greater distances deep into South America. Males tend to winter farther north than females and first year birds so they have less distance to travel back to the breeding grounds in the spring. This enables them to claim the best territories. Many birds stop to nest and feed along their routes, often using the same feeding sites every year.

According to isochronal maps, migrating birds tend to arrive at their destination around the same date every year but changing weather and global warming may be changing this pattern. How fast birds fly during migration also depends on the weather – ruddy turnstones have flown from the Alaskan Pribilof Islands to Hawaii, a distance of 2,300 miles in four days, an average of 575 miles per day!

Most birds migrate in flocks, which may consist of one species or mixed with others. Flocking actually helps the birds conserve energy as they fly in the "draft" of the leaders, helps the young learn from the adults, and their calls help keep them from getting lost. Raptors, swallows and herons migrate during the day while small songbirds migrate at night to hide from the predators.

Most songbirds tend to fly at 10,000 feet while migrating, but ducks and geese fly at 17,000 feet. Raptors and shorebirds fly over 20,000 feet. Raptors do not use rising thermals to help them; instead they detour around them.

Finally, tundra swans rarely go straight north in the spring but follow the gradual thawing of lakes along their migration route.

Of course, birds occasionally get thrown off course and appear where they have never been seen before. That's when bird sightings get exciting!

Reference: Statistics come from **The Cornell Lab or Ornithology.**

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

Spinus tristis

By **Jim Jablonski**

Ten years ago I retired from my full-time job, just as soon as I could, and realized that I was going to need some pastime to engage my interest. I thought *"maybe I will get into bird watching, that seems to be what old folks do,"* a stereotype that has a grain of truth to it.

I rarely rush into anything so my first step was to put out a backyard bird feeder that I filled with sunflower seeds. The next morning I glanced out at it and a thought flashed through my mind, ***"Some one's canary has gotten loose."***

It immediately hit me that people rarely seem to keep canaries any more, and a second thought occurred to me, ***"Could that be what they call a goldfinch?"***

There I was, sixty years old and I had never noticed one of the most common, and beautiful, backyard birds in North America. The experience was a true testament to how many of us are totally oblivious to nature in the modern world. Of course, I googled goldfinch into my computer and there it was – ***my bird***. From that point on I was hooked.

Photo by John Koscinski

Goldfinches, and cardinals, have a way of doing that to a person. North American birds are generally not as colorful as their South American cousins but the American goldfinch is as gorgeous as nearly any, on whatever continent you mention. A great sign of spring is the gradually changing color of the male as it takes on its bright yellow breeding plumage. You can tell the change almost daily as they visit your thistle feeders – especially the ones that require these athletic little birds to feed upside down. Such a feeder is a good investment to insure those clumsy, and nasty. house sparrows don't monopolize the seed.

The male goldfinch is in its mating plumage long before its late breeding season starts toward the end of June. Some say the late start is really great timing since it insures that one of the bird's favorite foods – thistle seed – is in abundance just when it is needed the most. However, the goldfinch also consumes other seeds, buds, bark, even maple sap. And, although primarily a vegetarian, it will grab a quick insect, especially during breeding season.

The female, before laying four-to-six bluish eggs will build a small nest, so well constructed they are said to hold water! The nesting period is fairly short as incubation takes only two weeks, and fledging activity takes about the same length of time.

Although they tend to be competitive feeders while raising their young, once breeding season is over, goldfinches flock together in extended family migratory groups. The result is feast or famine for backyard birders. You may see dozens for days on end and then there are suddenly none!

But don't worry, their overall numbers don't seem to be declining and eventually you will hear their "perchicoree" call and watch their roller coaster flight and black and gold colors again soon.

Reference: ***"Lives of North American Birds"*** by Kenn Kauffman

The World's Oldest Bird Mother

Wisdom, the world's oldest known banded bird, recently became a mother at age 65 according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A Laysan albatross, Wisdom returned to Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge with her mate, Akeakamai, or "Lover of Wisdom," earlier this year according to the USFWS. Later she was spotted incubating another egg that eventually produced a chick named Kukini, Hawaiian for "Messenger" by the Refuge's staff.

Once a U.S. Naval Air Station, Midway Atoll, which gave its name to the massive World War II naval battle, has the largest marine conservation area in the United States.

Wisdom was tagged in 1956. Over the last sixty years she has logged three million miles of flight and produced more than thirty chicks in doing her part to maintain the albatross population. ***JJ***

Wisdom with her chick Kukini
Kiah Walker/USFWS in care2.com

References: "Wisdom, the Laysan Albatross" at fws.gov/Midway_Atoll; "**Veteran Mother"** in The Plain Dealer's Earthweek of 02/27/16

Are Urban Birds, Smarter?
And Healthier, Too?

By **Jim Jablonski**

This is one of those topics you can categorize as, ***"Who would have figured?"***

In a study carried out by McGill University ornithologists, it was found that urban bullfinches in Barbados performed better in cognitive tests than their country cousins. Cognitive superiority enables the city-dwellers to exploit new resources.

"We found that not only were birds from urbanized areas better at innovative problem-solving tasks than bullfinches from rural environments, but that surprisingly urban birds also had a better immunity." The quote comes from Jean-Nicolas Audet the study's lead author of the report that appeared in ***Behavioral Ecology***.

Audet was inspired to study bullfinch intelligence because they were always conspiring to steal food from him in outdoor restaurants. He hypothesized that city birds would be more intelligent but would have weaker immune systems than their rural relatives. After collecting 53 birds from various habitats around the island of Barbados he, and his fellow McGill researchers tested their problem solving skills, color discrimination, boldness, neophobia (fear of new objects), and immunity.

The researchers found that the urban birds were better at problem solving, had stronger immune systems, were bolder, but were more neophobic.

The articles I reviewed gave no clear reason for these differences. However, among humans, American Civil War recruits from agricultural areas, although physically bigger and stronger, were more prone to dying from disease due to their less-exposed immune systems than city-bred soldiers. Perhaps the same process occurs with birds.

As for problem-solving skill, perhaps natural selection played a role with only those birds adaptable enough to handle city life able to pass on their genes to their young. But why, then, are they more afraid of new objects? More research is needed.

References: ***"City birds are smarter than country birds,"*** in McGill Newsroom***; "City birds are smarter, healthier than country birds"*** in The Christian Science Monitor.