



THE PLAIN DEALER

It was a spectacular year for birding Aerial View

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It's going to be pretty tough to match the magnificence of 2007's bird sightings in 2008.

What are the chances of back-to-back boreal finch invasions? Historically, unlikely. So enjoy the red-breasted nuthatches, common redpolls, and the occasional white-winged crossbill, evening grosbeak and Bohemian waxwing while you can. Another decade may pass before the phenomenon is repeated.

Are you hoping for another wave of rose-breasted grosbeaks at your backyard feeder in the spring? Let's hope not, given that their surprise appearances were probably caused by an April snowstorm and an accompanying freeze that destroyed their normal food sources on sprouting tree buds throughout Northeast Ohio.

We enjoyed what may have been an unprecedented encroachment of Northern saw-whet owls in the state this fall, and have begun to see promising signs of snowy, long-eared and short-eared owls this winter. But the likelihood of a great gray, boreal or Northern hawk owl venturing south of the Canadian border is so remote that my son, Bret, and I decided to improve our chances by taking a few days off for a trip north of the border last week.

Seeing a Northern hawk owl may never be easier. This daytime hunter from the boreal forest rarely strays so far from its traditional winter feeding grounds. But this spectacular bird has staked out an area of fields and woods about a half-hour's drive north of Niagara Falls in Stoney Creek, Ontario.

When you're near the owl site, you'll know it by all of the cars parked along both sides of the roadway, many bearing license plates from the United States.

An ethical conflict is developing, however, as nature photographers have been feeding the owl mice purchased in pet stores to obtain close-up action shots. The practice is controversial, and enrages many birders, because it causes owls to stop hunting on their own. This bird was flying around with a white mouse in its talons while we watched it at close range.

Even without the hawk owl, the birding in Ontario can be spectacular this time of year.

A leisurely drive north yielded common redpolls and a Northern shrike at the Guelph Arboretum, and a flock of 15 pine grosbeaks feeding on ornamental cherries nearby at the University of Guelph.

Let others waste their time gambling in the Niagara Falls casinos, and check out the thousands of winter waterfowl and gulls on the Niagara River. At Niagara-on-the-Lake, we enjoyed ideal views of red-necked and horned grebes, red-throated loons, and long-tailed ducks. An Iceland gull made a showing at the Lord Adam Beck II dam. And along the parkway to Fort Erie, we spotted huge rafts of greater scaup, common goldeneye, redhead, canvasback, American wigeon, and bufflehead ducks, common, red-breasted and hooded mergansers, tundra swans and Canada geese.

So as we embark on a new year of birding, we can resolve to hit a home run -- metaphorically speaking -- but I suspect most of us would be thrilled with a long double to match 2007.

Sightings

For those who don't track rare-bird reports on the various Internet sites, the biggest birding news of the winter so far may have been the sighting of a black vulture in Cleveland on Christmas Eve. The raptor was seen flying west along the North Marginal Road by Gabe Leidy, Jerry Talkington, Emil Basik, Bret McCarty and yours truly. It marked the seventh confirmed sighting of the southern vulture in Northeast Ohio, and the first ever not seen in March, April or May, according to the "Birds of the Cleveland Region."

Drivers along the East Shoreway near the Cleveland Public Power plant at East 72nd Street must marvel at the billowing clouds of thousands of gulls in the air and on the water. Notable species picked out from among the masses included several glaucous, Thayer's and Iceland gulls, at least a half-dozen lesser black-backed gulls, with occasional appearances by a juvenile Northern gannet.

Jeff Wert, son Bret and I watched dark morph and light morph rough-legged hawks hunt the tundralike fields at Burke Lakefront Airport, along with several Northern harriers, red-tailed hawks and American kestrel. No signs of the two short-eared owls seen earlier in the week by Dick and Jean Hoffman, however.

The long-eared owl flock at the Caley Reservation in the Lorain County Metro Parks has grown to four, Nan Miller reported.

Common redpolls continued to grace our backyard feeders, with reports by Nancy Howell in Middleburg Heights, John Pogacnik in Perry Township, Linda Gilbert in South Russell, Liz Clingman in Brook Park, Susi Brown in Huron County, Bob Glauser and Lisa Brohl on South Bass Island, and Larry Gorbet and Ashli Maruster of Albuquerque, N.M., while visiting her parents in Westlake.

Maruster and Gorbet also found an American bittern at Sheldon's Marsh in Huron County.

Pogacnik continues to host a white-winged crossbill, plus pine siskins and red-breasted nuthatches.

Wert also spotted a merlin, a snow goose and dozens of Eastern bluebirds at the Bath Nature Preserve.

Leidy found a Northern shrike at the Oak Hill Trail area at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

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