



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Ohio birders can take part in annual four-day backyard count

Thursday, February 07, 2008

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For the fourth year, I teamed up with Jamey Graham of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Wildlife to talk about birds at the National City Home & Garden Show now under way at Cleveland's International Exposition Center.

It seems that more people come every year to hear about the best places to watch birds in Northeast Ohio, how to attract birds to their backyard feeders, and what birds they can expect to see here.

I have long suspected that the majority of readers of this column were casual birders more apt to spend their time looking out their back windows than freezing on the Lake Erie shoreline or driving to Niagara Falls to chase a rare Ross' gull.

Graham confirmed my suspicions last Saturday. When she asked how many in the crowd considered themselves serious birders, only one or two hands went up. But when she asked how many did most of their bird-watching in their own yards, nearly every hand in the group was raised.

Boy, do I have a challenge for you. It's called the Great Backyard Bird Count, and for the 11th year in a row even the most casual of birders will have a chance to contribute to the scientific knowledge of birds.

It is amazingly easy to participate. For four days beginning Friday, Feb. 15, birders are being asked to record all of their sightings and submit the tallies online. Participation is free and no registration is required.

"There has never been a more detailed snapshot of a continental bird-distribution profile in history," said John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, citing the more than 80,000 checklists submitted last year.

By analyzing data collected from the count, ornithologists have been able to track the spread of Eurasian collared dove and red-bellied woodpecker in recent years, as well as declines in American crow and Northern pintail.

They also have documented some of the effects of climate change, noting how more insect eaters such as tree swallows are staying longer in northern states before migrating south.

In 2007, for the second consecutive year, Mentor's backyard birders submitted the most checklists in the state, and the second-most in North America, with 423 reports. Only Charlotte, N.C., had more. Cincinnati was third with 385.

Ohio tallied just 139 species in last year's backyard count, compared with 333 observed in Texas and California. But a shortage of species didn't deter Ohio's birders from participating in the count, as the state finished seventh overall with 3,745 checklists submitted.

Here's how it works:

1. Count birds for at least 15 minutes a day during the four-day event.

Watch for birds at as many locations as you like -- parks, nature centers, schoolyards, neighborhoods, or in your own back yards -- but remember to keep a separate list for each day and location.

2. Count the greatest number of individual birds of each species that you see together at any one time, and record it.

3. Enter your results at www.birdsource.org/gbbc.

For those who prefer to bird-watch in groups, the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland will sponsor a Great Backyard Bird Count outing at 9:30 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 17 at the Aurora Sanctuary. Jim Tomko will lead. Meet in the parking lot on the south side of East Pioneer Trail, just east of Page Road in Aurora. For details, call 216-556-5441 or log on at: www.clevelandaudubon.org.

Sightings

Even after the ice melted on Lake Erie last week, the gull-watching at Gordon State Park in Cleveland remained fabulous, with up-close looks at Thayer's gulls, plus Iceland, glaucous and lesser black-backed gulls mixed in among the thousands of herring, ring-billed and great black-backed gulls.

The thaw stripped our snow cover, but the common redpolls didn't abandon us and continued to make appearances at the home feeders of Diann Rucki of Bainbridge Township; Sally Isacco of Chardon; Tim and Liz Colborn of North Olmsted; John Pogacnik of Perry Township; at West Woods and Big Creek parks in Geauga County; Judy Kolo-Rose of Richfield; and at Linda Gilbert's home in South Russell.

Gilbert also spotted a flock of snow buntings at Frohring Meadows, a new park in Bainbridge, pine siskins at Big Creek Park, and Eastern bluebirds at her home.

Susi Brown spotted a rough-legged hawk over grassy fields in Greenfield Township, Huron County.

Harold and Mary Lou McGurk did the right thing after a red-tailed hawk struck a window at their home in Huron last week. Harold picked up the stunned bird from the snow and placed it in a box. The hawk flew away after it regained its senses, and later returned to snatch a robin from the McGurk's hawthorn tree, Mary Lou reported.

Robins and bluebirds are feeding on holly berries at the Ashtabula home of Dave and Jackie Dirrigl.

Paula Lozano and Bob Finkelstein, birding the Lakewood shoreline, spotted ring-necked, common goldeneye and bufflehead ducks, surf scoter and common merganser. To the east, Pogacnik saw several hundred mergansers and a single long-tailed duck.

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