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Bitter cold, wind drive away all but heartiest birds

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Consider the tenuous existence of the birds that spend the winter in Northeast Ohio.

It's not the Arctic here, to be sure. But it felt like it this past weekend.

The temperature plunged to single digits. The winds gusted out of the north at up to 50 mph. The snow felt like tiny needles as it blew and drifted, causing occasional whiteout conditions. Lake Erie was angry, hurling whitecaps into the rocks and shooting blankets of spray that turned to ice on contact.

How the birds survive such conditions is a mystery that causes birders to love and respect them all the more.

The relative comfort of Saturday revealed no clues to the blast of winter that awaited on Sunday. But the birds seemed to know.

I joined about a dozen members of Cleveland's Kirtland Bird Club for a trip Saturday to Lorain County hot spots. Our leader, Craig Caldwell, said it was obvious the bird numbers and behavior had changed from when he scouted destinations the day before.

Nearly half of the waterfowl in the Wellington and Oberlin reservoirs had departed to places unknown. The common mergansers and Northern pintails had disappeared altogether.

Which is not to say we didn't enjoy the birds that stayed behind: ring-necked, ruddy, redhead, canvasback, black, bufflehead and scaup ducks, pied-billed and horned grebes. Six trumpeter swans in a flooded cornfield were a beautiful sight.

It's hard not to revel at the sight of a roost of long-eared owls in a stand of pines at the Caley Reservation. Jen Brumfield's Local Patch Tour counted 11 owls on Friday. We found eight, all fluffed up against the wind and napping the day away amid the cover of the conifers.

At the Lorain County airport and in the fields along the way, rough-legged and red-tailed hawks, Northern harriers and American kestrels patrolled the air, scanning the grass below for rodents and other prey.

As we surveyed the airport grounds, huge flocks of snow buntings and horned larks passed by in a desperate dash for safer land. But there was no escaping the storm that would strike the following morning.

A combined assault of cold, wind and snow accomplished what no raptors or boaters could do over the past month, dispersing the thousands of gulls from Gordon State Park on the Cleveland lakefront.

Many of the gulls and waterfowl retreated to the relative shelter of the marinas, where huge flocks of scaup and redhead ducks joined the usual array of divers such as common goldeneye, bufflehead and hooded merganser in the rough and gusty coves.

Snow buntings and horned larks huddled in depressions at Burke Lakefront Airport, which looked like the tundra as the snow whipped across its grass.

But there was no one else with whom to share the sightings. For the first time in memory, I was the only birder in sight to witness this display of grit and survival by our visitors from the north.

Sightings

Phil Chaon said late Sunday, he saw flocks of horned larks and snow buntings across the Cleveland area, even hopping along the Shoreway and on downtown sidewalks. Marie Morgan reported horned larks in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and snow buntings for the first time there in about 15 years. She also spotted fox and white-crowned sparrows, Eastern towhee, rusty blackbird and bald eagle.

They haven't acquired the fame of the Hinckley buzzards or Capistrano's swallows, but that may change soon for the great blue herons of Bath Road. The birds nest in a rookery within the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and provide a favorite destination for Summit County birders. Susan Kilcoyne, Peggy Taddeo and Maureen McCarty all noticed the herons' return to the nests last week - the earliest date on record. The nearby Old Trail School will host a Blue Heron Day pancake celebration 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, March 1.

A Northern shrike is hunting the scrubby fields around the marshes at the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville, naturalist Tim Fairweather reported.

Hooded mergansers were on Mallard Lake in Medina, Dave Kersten and the Rev. Beth McGuire reported.

Doug Vogus spotted a merlin and a sharp-shinned hawk near the Valley View Golf Course in Akron.

The common redpoll roundup for the week included sightings by Robert Jackson in Broadview Heights, Sally Isacco in Chardon, Dorothy Dawson-Sheldon in Wakeman, Cindy Ondercin in Strongsville, Jan Kepple in Bentleyville, Lyn Miller in Geauga County and Kathleen Beard in Chagrin Falls.

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