



THE PLAIN DEALER

Castalia's Blue Hole doesn't come up empty for birders Aerial View

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Long, leisurely drives in the country were a McCarty family tradition when gasoline was 30 cents a gallon.

So it was with a tinge of nostalgia that I packed a thermos of coffee, my binoculars and a spotting scope into my car on Saturday and headed west - a rare splurge with gas at \$3 a gallon.

My first stop was the Erie County town of Castalia, home to the Blue Hole, a once-popular tourist destination now off-limits to the public.

The network of underground springs that feeds the Blue Hole also keeps Cold Creek and a pond in the middle of town ice-free year-round. The open 48-degree water makes the pond a magnet for winter waterfowl.

As anticipated, the pond teemed with ducks when I arrived shortly after sunrise. I wasn't the first birder there: Gifted nature photographer Jim Roetzel and two colleagues were pondside, firing away at close range in the prime morning light.

Gadwalls, canvasbacks, redheads, blacks, scaups, buffleheads, Northern shovelers and American wigeons were feeding on the pond's bounty of fish. A pair of common goldeneyes also was there, Roetzel said, although I saw just the female.

Later, I accompanied a contingent from the Black River Audubon Club on a drive north toward Lake Erie, where we flushed a roost of more than 50 black-crowned night herons. On the trip there and back, I spotted a half-dozen bald eagles, including two on nests.

As club members continued north, I headed south into the open country of Sandusky County. Creeping along deserted farm roads in second gear, I rolled down the window but kept the heater blowing. That way I could hear the birds calling without having to see them first - a tall order as most remained hidden in the plowed earth, tufts of winter rye and dried corn stalks popping through the snow.

For more than an hour, I enjoyed my birding cruise, braking whenever I happened upon a flock of American tree sparrows or horned larks singing their merry, tinkling song in anticipation of spring. Snow buntings and a Lapland longspur also made brief appearances.

Once, a young Cooper's hawk spooked the sparrows, sending them dashing for cover. Later, a coyote prowled warily through a field, leaving a flock of panicked larks in its wake.

Surprisingly, the birding didn't end after I returned home. Approaching the intersection of West 117th Street and Interstate 90 in Cleveland, I noticed a large, dark raptor circling overhead.

Make that seven bald eagles for the day.

Sightings

With high hopes of seeing rafts of ducks and gulls, I headed to the Cleveland lakefront on Sunday to join the Blackbrook Audubon Club and later meet listeners of Jay Reda and Bob Faber's weekly nature radio show, "Inside the Great Outdoors," on WHK AM/1420. A variety of waterfowl was there, but then a deluge of rain hit, driving off the redhead and bufflehead ducks. When Reda and Faber arrived, only canvasbacks, lesser and greater scaups and a pair of common goldeneyes remained. A peregrine falcon later strafed the gulls.

On Saturday, Chris Pierce passed along a report of a long-tailed duck at East 72nd Street in Cleveland. Earlier in the week, breaks in the ice near Edgewater Park attracted large numbers of redhead, canvasback, scaup, bufflehead and black ducks, Gabe Leidy reported.

Waterfowl at East Reservoir and Turkeyfoot Lake in Akron included gadwall, redhead, ring-necked, scaup, bufflehead, common goldeneye and ruddy ducks and hooded and red-breasted mergansers, Gregory Bennett reported.

Jerry Talkington and Ray Hannikman continued to see a long-tailed duck, plus white-winged scoters and Bonaparte's gulls at Fairport Harbor and a gray catbird at Mentor Lagoons.

Inga Schmidt counted 44 wild turkeys in her yard in Geauga County.

A barred owl has been heard calling in East Cleveland and last week basked in the sun for a half-hour, Carolyn Holt reported.

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers appeared at suet feeders for Cynthia Szunyog in Medina Township and Scott Wright in North Olmsted.

Eastern bluebirds feeding on winterberries were a heartwarming sight for Bob Kuk in Brecksville.

A Lorain County birding day produced Northern shrike, yellow-rumped warbler, Eastern meadowlark, rough-legged hawk, horned lark, snow bunting, Northern harrier and long-eared owl for Paula Lozano, Bob Finkelstein, Chris Spagnoli and Ben Fambrough.

Short-eared owls hunting a Geauga County field during daylight were a nice surprise for Jim Heflich and Patty Kellner. Linda Gilbert also reported horned larks and snow buntings.

The common redpoll reports are dwindling. Sally Isacco in Chardon Township, Carol Takacs in Madison and Susan Steinhouse in Moreland Hills reported them. Steinhouse had a red-shouldered hawk visiting her feeders.

Bald eagle reports, on the other hand, are picking up, with sightings by Lisa Rainsong in Cleveland Heights, Barb and Jim Kooser in Geauga County and Joe Dwyer in Lakewood.

Red-winged blackbirds showed up for Marge Stearns in Bainbridge Township and Marcia Evilhizer in Chatham Township in Medina County. Sure signs of spring!

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