



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Sun's warmth brings out flocks and followers

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Last weekend's magnificent weather was a welcome respite for birders yearning for spring.

The brightness was exhilarating. The sun shone through a cloudless sky, reflecting off a pristine blanket of snow and warming the air, which seemed to invigorate our winter resident species and encourage the first returnees to Northeast Ohio.

The Cuyahoga Valley National Park was busy with hikers, and the Towpath Trail south of Bolanz Road was especially alive with birds. Sparrows, blackbirds and the usual mix of woodland birds flitted among the brambles, basked in the warmth of the morning sun, and visited feeders set up by residents of a trailer park on Riverview Road.

In nearly perfect light, a fox sparrow -- a rare winter resident, and my first of the year -- flushed with a flock of white-throated, song and tree sparrows. Another winter rarity, a field sparrow, later made a brief appearance.

A third unexpected sighting -- a rusty blackbird -- hopped to the top of a thorn bush on the bank of a creek. The stunning male glowed in its emerging glossy plumage; its bright yellow eyes and the rusty-edged remnants of its winter plumage enhanced its inky beauty.

A red-shouldered hawk perched on a branch beside a cornfield, oblivious to the attention of birders and the scolding of crows.

To take full advantage of the perfect day, I drove to the park's Horseshoe Pond and set out on the three-mile loop trail.

During a winter when red-breasted nuthatches were common at backyard feeders, they inexplicably were missing from the hemlocks where they usually are so abundant.

But one bird made up for their absence. When I heard a familiar "chup" from the brush and vines that covered a maze of fallen trees, I mimicked the call. A hermit thrush hopped into the open, completing a four-bagger of rarities for the day.

A parade of winter raptors made the weekend complete.

With my son, Bret, who spent three weeks on the Disabled List, I headed for the Lorain County Regional Airport, a favorite hunting ground for rough-legged hawks in Russia Township.

More than a half-dozen of these stunning Arctic buteos were in full regalia, dressed in various plumages. Some perched at close range. Others hovered over the airport fields.

Our first rough-leg appeared all black until it flew from a limb, revealing its white underwings. Other rough-

legs of light and dark morphs shared the rodent bounty with red-tails, Northern harriers and American kestrels.

We heard horned larks singing and saw them flying from the surrounding farmlands.

A Cooper's hawk circling over Cleveland's Slavic Village neighborhood made it a six-raptor weekend.

Sightings

Right on schedule, the red-winged blackbirds have returned. Males were calling in the Cuyahoga Valley over the weekend. Patricia Harris welcomed a half-dozen to her feeders in North Royalton.

Also in the valley, Marie Morgan and Bert Szabo spotted common mergansers in the river below the Bolanz Road bridge.

Larry Rosche and Judy Semroc found a short-eared owl hunting a field in southern Summit County.

Other heartening sightings: eastern bluebirds returning to Jack Sedlak's nesting boxes in Hiram, a song sparrow scratching beneath Dan Cica's feeders in Bay Village, and a turkey vulture over Mill Hollow in Lorain County.

The weekly common redpoll sightings came from Dorothy Dawson-Sheldon in Wakeman, Big Creek Park in Geauga County, Diann Rucki in Bainbridge Township, Barb Partington in Munson Township, Carol Takacs in Madison, Penny O'Connor in Cleveland and Laura Keene of Mason at the Carlisle Reservation in Lorain County.

Rough-legged hawks and a large flock of snow buntings brightened a Geauga County birding trip for Paula Lozano, Bob Finkelstein and Ben Fambrough.

Among the thousands of waterfowl at the Avon Lake power plant were canvasback, redhead, American black, ring-necked, both scaup, bufflehead and common goldeneye ducks, surf scoter and all three mergansers, Lozano and Finkelstein reported.

Waterfowl at Sims Park in Euclid and the Eastlake power plant included scaup, goldeneye, canvasbacks, buffleheads and mergansers, Nancy Anderson reported.

Jeff Wert found horned larks near Wadsworth in Medina County, and Craig Caldwell said larks were plentiful in Erie County, mixed with snow buntings and Lapland longspurs. Carolyn Holt and Audrey Smith found a lark foraging in Forest Hill Park in East Cleveland.

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