



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Rare sighting of white pelicans in Ohio is highlight of field trip

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Four of the dozen birders who signed up for a field trip to Holmes County bowed out Saturday after 8 inches of snow fell the night before.

They should have risked the white-knuckle drive. The roads were clear south of Medina, and the birding was spectacular.

It's hard to beat the Funk Bottoms and Killbuck state wildlife areas for waterfowl in early spring. The marshy habitat west of Wooster is ideal, and hardly a rarity escapes detection by the local birders, who are talented and abundant.

Our group spent most of the morning in the company of three vanloads of young Amish birders who had hired drivers to take them to the best observation spots.

Unfortunately, our Amish compadres weren't with us when our leader, Jen Brumfield, spotted the birds of the day: four white pelicans soaring in formation near Wright Marsh, far afield from their Central Plains flyway. The pelicans seldom stray east of the Mississippi River, and these were the first I had seen in Ohio.

White pelicans are much larger than their more-familiar brown cousins, which are more confined to the coast. White pelicans are western birds that spend winters around the Gulf of Mexico. This quartet must have been blown apart from its flock by the same storm that brought our snowfall the night before.

Flooding in the Funk/Killbuck area made getting around difficult, but it only enhanced the birding opportunities.

Flocks in excess of 60 tundra swans mingled amid the rafts of canvasback, redhead, Northern pintail, lesser scaup, American wigeon, ruddy and bufflehead ducks. Scattered ponds and marshes also held good numbers of ring-necked, Northern shoveler, green-winged and blue-winged teal, hooded and red-breasted mergansers, horned and pied-billed grebes, and common loons in near-breeding plumage.

Tree swallows have returned to Holmes County and were coursing the fields in search of flies and gnats amid the snowflakes. Rusty blackbirds picked through the mud along the shorelines. American pipits strutted like chickens and bobbed their tails while feeding in the fields and along the roadsides.

Rattling calls from overhead alerted us to two sandhill cranes. A lone pectoral sandpiper and a Wilson's snipe traversed the mudflats at Kister Pond.

Just as our toes and ears were beginning to chill, another Brumfield discovery warmed us. A faint song attracted her attention to a plowed field beside a barn, which was covered with dozens of Lapland longspurs -- many in breeding plumage and singing -- accompanied by horned larks.

We finished the day with 67 species, including 20 species of waterfowl.

For upcoming field trips with Brumfield's Local Patch Birding Tour group, go to her Web site, <http://www.meadowhawkart.com/>. Or call and leave a message at 330-701-6452. Cost is \$8; free for children.

Sightings

At the Sandy Ridge Reservation, Gabe Leidy counted 79 wood ducks, plus good numbers of ring-necked ducks and an Eastern phoebe.

A Northern shrike was at Fieldstone Farms in Geauga County, John Barber reported. Greg Emmert found a shrike on his property in Homer Township, Medina County.

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