



THE PLAIN DEALER

A blissful weekend for winter-weary birders - Aerial View

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James F. McCarty

Plain Dealer Reporter

Winter finally released its grip last weekend, mercifully yielding to spring, and signs of seasonal change were everywhere in Northeast Ohio.

At the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville, more than 40 birders turned out for a Kirtland Bird Club walk as if they had just awakened from hibernation.

The ice had melted from the ponds, providing a vast playground for waterfowl. Ring-necked, Northern pintail, greater and lesser scaup, bufflehead, ruddy, gadwall, Northern shoveler and wood ducks, green-winged and blue-winged teal, hooded mergansers and a horned grebe all turned out.

The bald eagles took turns incubating eggs in their nest, and a downy great horned owl chick hopped around a nest in the woods beside a calm parent. An osprey, newly returned from South America, cruised by.

The sandhill cranes rattled a warning cry after one of the eagles passed overhead.

Insect-eaters such as Eastern phoebe and tree swallows were back. Eastern meadowlarks had returned to the fields, and golden-crowned kinglets were vocal and flashing fresh bright caps in the woods. Spring peepers were calling from vernal pools.

For some of the park's winter visitors, the prey and habitat have been too good to give up. A Northern shrike has staked a claim there for more than two weeks and provided plenty of prime appearances for the birders on Sunday.

All about the area, kettles of raptors rode the southwestern winds along the lakefront before crossing over to Canada. Turkey vultures dominated the movement, accompanied by buteos, falcons and accipiters.

The Bonaparte's gulls that disappeared when ice formed on Lake Erie in winter have returned en masse - some with black heads - to Gordon State Park's East 72nd Street warm-water discharge site. And they brought along a dainty friend: a little gull.

On Saturday, my son Bret spotted the tiny gull's dark underwings and distinctive dark hood among the parade of gulls passing by the breakwall. The size difference was apparent after the two similar species settled down beside each other in the open water.

As the ice on the lake crunched and broke into pieces, slivers of open water emerged. Red-breasted and hooded mergansers, common goldeneye, bufflehead and scaup filled many of the open gaps.

The changes have been visible even in our back yards. American goldfinches are acquiring their bright yellow plumage. Dark-eyed juncoes, white-throated and song sparrows are singing. Eastern towhees are announcing their return with a merry "cherwink." And the red-breasted nuthatches that surprised us in November are passing through again on their return north. We had six at a time in our Lakewood back yard

over the weekend.

Before long we'll be opening our windows and awakening to the songs of warblers.

Sightings

Migrating tundra swans and recently-arrived phoebes and tree swallows were a welcome sight for Jeff Wert at the Bath Nature Preserve in Summit County.

A little gull passed by John Pogacnik's lakefront home in Perry Township in Lake County, and he spotted a surf scoter in Lorain Harbor.

Ospreys have returned to the Portage Lakes in Akron, Lisa Romaniuk reported.

American woodcocks are calling and displaying on Matt Valencic's property in Chagrin Falls.

Lynn Josefsen's home in Medina is host to red-breasted nuthatch, field sparrow and woodcocks.

Mary Kelly saw four Eastern meadowlarks behind her house in North Ridgeville.

At Wyoga Lake in Cuyahoga Falls, Douglas Vogus spotted common loon, horned grebe, bufflehead, hooded and red-breasted mergansers.

At Lake Isaac in Middleburg Heights and Coe Lake in Berea, Jan Runyan spotted common loon, hooded merganser, greater scaup and pied-billed grebe.

Common redpolls continued to visit Mike Sandy's feeders in Rocky River and Lyn Miller's yard in Auburn Township, Geauga County.

Gauga County's newest park, Frohring Meadows, has been attracting good birds, Inga Schmidt reported. Last weekend, she spotted Lapland longspur, horned lark, meadowlarks and green-winged teal.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

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