



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Southern migrants arrive with spring

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I was amazed after seeing photographs of thousands of British bird-watchers who crammed along a seaside breakwall in Devon in December, eager for a chance to see the country's first long-billed murrelet.

We may never experience such a birding phenomenon in North America, but that's not to say bird watching isn't catching on in Northeast Ohio, drawing unprecedented interest to this fascinating pursuit.

Traditionally, when spring arrives and the weather warms up, it's as if we've awakened from a long winter's hibernation -- and just in time, too, to catch the first wave of southern migrants.

I birded the East Side and the West Side last weekend, first with a close group of veterans and later with a crowd, many of whom were newcomers. Both excursions were equally satisfying.

On a windswept beach beside a roiling Lake Erie, I joined four members of the Headlands Beach State Nature Preserve crew in Mentor. Common loons, scaup and red-breasted mergansers were moving eastward as if disoriented by the approaching rough weather.

At the Mentor Lagoons lake overlook, a handsome drake surf scoter, redhead and canvasback ducks joined the bobbing flotillas of scaup, Common goldeneye and bufflehead.

In the woods at the Lagoons, the resident species welcomed fox sparrows, brown creepers and golden-crowned kinglets into their midst. Some of the winter wrens were singing. But a red-winged blackbird would sing no more after a Cooper's hawk embraced it in its talons and flew away for a private meal.

Later in the evening, I was pleasantly surprised to find more than 40 birders gathered at the Sandy Ridge Reservation of the Lorain County Metro Parks in North Ridgeville. Senior Naturalist Tim Fairweather led us on a walk around the ponds, where the waterfowl was varied and plentiful.

Ring-necked ducks and American coots predominated, with good numbers of Northern shoveler, ruddy, wood, gadwall, American wigeon, and bufflehead ducks, blue-winged and green-winged teal, and pied-billed grebes. The resident bald eagles and sandhill cranes are nesting. Small flocks of Wilson's snipe flushed at our approach. Swamp, tree and song sparrows also made appearances.

We didn't depart at dusk, but stayed around to enjoy the mating dances of the American woodcocks on the fields beside the access road.

Our sightings on Saturday turned into a preview of what would appear on Sunday in many Northeastern Ohio back yards.

Paula Lozano welcomed fox sparrows to her feeders in Lakewood, and Bill Fissell in Brecksville spotted fox sparrows along with song, white-throated and chipping sparrows. Bret McCarty counted six fox sparrows in one group and three in another, plus a brown thrasher, hermit thrush, Eastern phoebes and two Eastern bluebirds at Lakewood Park.

Kenn Kaufman told us in a post to the Ohio Birds Internet site last week that the Lake Erie shoreline this time of year "has to be the best place and time in the world for seeing fox sparrows."

Kaufman, the renowned author and naturalist who lives in Ottawa County, counted 70 fox sparrows in a single day -- a startling number for a bird considered uncommon and secretive. They tend to hide in thickets and blend in with the leaf litter, scratching with both feet at the earth to uncover seeds and insects.

"It takes some careful attention to even notice they're around," Kaufman wrote, "but they're beautiful enough to be worth the effort."

Sightings

A Northern goshawk appeared at Headlands Beach, Jerry Talkington reported. Jim McConnor found two surf scoters and a Caspian tern at the Lagoons, and Ray Hannikman found the Headlands' first ruby-crowned kinglet and purple martin of the year.

A palm warbler was a surprise at Sandy Ridge Reservation for Tim and Liz Colborn on Saturday -- just two days later than the earliest-ever sighting in Northeast Ohio.

A Louisiana waterthrush showed up at the South Chagrin Reservation of Cleveland Metroparks, Matthew Studebaker said.

Cheryl Howard reported that an Eastern screech owl has taken residence in a box erected in her Parma Heights back yard.

Cliff swallows have returned to West Branch State Park in Portage County, Ethan Kistler reported.

Elmwood Park, a precious piece of suburban habitat in Rocky River, is host to hermit thrush and Eastern towhee, plus fox, field, song and white-throated sparrows, John and Ann Edwards reported.

Lake Erie was busy with birds, per John Pogacnik, who spotted a black vulture, pine siskins, American pipits, surf and white-winged scoters, little and lesser black-backed gulls and a red-throated loon from his perch in Perry Township, Lake County.

Nancy Anderson reported that Wildwood Park on the East Side of Cleveland had a hermit thrush, Eastern phoebe, Eastern towhee and fox, field, swamp and chipping sparrows on land, and common loon, horned grebe and wood duck off shore. Earlier in the week, she saw brown thrasher and yellow-bellied sapsucker there.

Several birders were excited to find a pair of trumpeter swans -- both with identifying neck collars -- gracefully paddling at the Shaker Lakes last week.

The state's peregrine falcons are off to a good start, the Ohio Division of Wildlife reported. Six pairs have laid eggs, with three eggs in the box on the 12th Floor of Terminal Tower in downtown Cleveland, and others at nests at the Bohn Building and the Cleveland Clinic. At least 23 peregrine pairs are nesting in the state, including at sites in Akron, Eastlake, Lakewood and Lorain.

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