



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Migrating songbirds make their returns

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The warm southern breezes that blessed us last weekend brought more than baseball weather, butterflies and the first blooms of spring to Northeast Ohio.

They delivered waves of migrating songbirds, most notably huge numbers of hermit thrush and ruby-crowned kinglets.

Kenn Kaufman predicted the mass movement in an e-mail to the Ohio Birds In ternet site after checking the weekend weather predictions on Friday.

"It's still too early for the full diversity of neotropical migrants, but there should be some slight relief for those of us in the warbler-starved northern counties," Kaufman wrote. "There are undoubtedly large numbers of migrants dammed up to the south of us somewhere, so when conditions for migration improve, our local birding is likely to change in a dramatic way."

A scattering of hermit thrush scouts, plus my first pine warbler of the spring, greeted us Saturday morning at Sheldon's Marsh in Huron, where I joined a group of about 20 members of the Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society for a spring bird walk.

Two sharp-shinned hawks, a flock of yellow-bellied sapsuckers, a bald eagle and a roosting Eastern screech owl rounded out a rewarding tour of the swamplands. Our leader, Mary Anne Romito, had spotted a black-and-white warbler on the marsh trail two days before.

By Sunday morning, the hermit thrush and kinglets had arrived in full force at Headlands Beach State Nature Preserve in Mentor. Veteran Headlands crew members Larry Rosche and Ray Hannikman said the multitudes of thrush were the largest one-day turnout in memory there.

The change in the weather seemed to perk up the birds. On Lake Erie, which was uncharacteristically as smooth as glass, several common loons yodeled and cried as if they already had reached their Canadian breeding grounds. Horned grebes twittered, chattered and engaged in mating dances on the harbor side of Headlands Beach - a phenomenon that Emil Basik said he had never witnessed before. Brown thrashers were especially vocal in the cottonwoods along the fishermen's trail.

A migrating merlin paused to snack on a song sparrow, and an osprey feasted on a fish at Mentor Marsh. Winter wrens and Savannah, vesper, field, white-throated and song sparrows flushed from grassy hiding places as we walked past. Two pine warblers were colorful alternatives to the yellow-rumps. A palm and black-throated green warbler made appearances the day before, Basik said. Caspian, Forster's and common terns have returned to the lake, and ruddy ducks have gathered in huge flocks in preparation for their flight to distant breeding ponds.

Monday morning, a long-eared owl lorded over the Headlands parking lot from its perch in a cottonwood tree, undisturbed by the joggers and dog-walkers that passed by below, Rosche reported.

As we trundled the trails at Mentor Lagoons, DeKay and garter snakes, freshly emerged from their winter dens, slithered in our paths, and rusty blackbirds called from the low branches, sounding like squeaky doors. Small groups of bufflehead and lesser scaup ducks were visible from the lake overlook, but the huge flocks of winter waterfowl have moved on. A lone black scoter was a welcome sight earlier in the week, Hannikman said.

The lake at nearby Veterans Park is attracting increased numbers of fishermen and picnickers, which hasn't deterred the eared grebe that has been there for more than a week. The grebe is far from the Western states where it should be this time of year. A Northern parula warbler was there on Saturday.

Sightings

Monday morning, Larry Richardson was startled by an encounter with a species of bird in Bay Village that he had just seen the day before while on a trip to Texas: a scissor-tailed flycatcher. Richardson, executive director of the Lake Erie Science and Nature Center, spotted the long-tailed beauty flying west along the lakefront at the Huntington Reservation near the intersection of Lake and Dover Center roads.

Suzanne Wagner reported the return of the yellow-throated warblers that nest each year in the sycamores along the towpath trail at Station Bridge Road in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Marty Mangano spotted one of the vibrant warblers on the towpath along Canal Road. A half-dozen yellow-throated males were singing at Bacon Woods in Lorain County, Scott Wright said.

A long-tailed duck remained at Springfield Lake in Summit County, Gregory Bennett reported. Summit and Wingfoot lakes and Nimisila Reservoir continued to host large numbers of buffleheads, ruddy ducks and horned grebes, he said.

The ponds at Sandy Ridge Metro Park in Lorain County still are providing prime viewing opportunities for waterfowl and spring migrants, naturalist Tim Fairweather reported. Kinglets and brown creepers, brown thrasher, blue-gray gnatcatchers, palm and yellow-rumped warblers made appearances last week.

An osprey was a nice find over the Vermilion River near Mill Hollow Park in Lorain County, Keith Tarvin said. A group birding Rocky River Park also spotted an osprey, Paula Lozano reported.

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