



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## A field day at the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge -- Aerial View

Having a field day in the mud flats

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Shorebird habitat is precious in Ohio, and gaining access to it is the key to birding success.

Some of the state's finest mud flats are at the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge west of Port Clinton. But often the choicest spots at the refuge are off-limits to birders and other nature enthusiasts for all but a few days a month.

Fortunately for a group of young birders I accompanied there last weekend, it helps to have friends in high places.

Kim Kaufman of the Black Swamp Bird Observatory coordinates field trips for the Ohio Young Birders Club, one of the best of its kind in the country. She drove 10 of us in the Bird Bus onto the Ottawa dikes that crisscross the network of impoundments where migrating shorebirds find food and safe haven.

The abundance and variety of sandpipers and other waders turned what could have been a hit-and-run stop into a four-hour birding blowout.

Like paparazzi at a Brad-and-Angelina movie premiere, we lined up behind rows of spotting scopes to scan the shorebirds. Club sponsors Jen Brumfield and Gabe Leidy of Local Patch tours served as our lead spotters.

The stars of the show were a pair of marbled godwits, long-legged beauties with oversized two-toned bills and a tawny plumage that seemed to glow in the perfect morning light.

Godwits are Great Plains nesters that spend winters on southern coasts but rarely visit Ohio. Why these birds were here must be attributed to the inviting habitat and available sustenance, a combination of fish, worms and aquatic insects.

Scurrying birds covered the mud, occasionally flushing in large crazy-flying flocks when a bald eagle, red-tailed hawk or peregrine falcon flew nearby. Least, semipalmated and pectoral sandpipers, killdeer and semipalmated plovers and lesser and greater yellowlegs were the majority of the birds present. Fewer numbers of short-billed dowitchers, solitary and spotted sandpipers and lone American golden plover and white-rumped sandpiper filled out the field.

Our appreciation of these streamlined, finely marked birds was enhanced in the hand, courtesy of Tom Bartlett and his team of banders who had set up a netting station on a dike.

The subtle differences between the species that pose such a challenge 100 yards away aren't so hard to discern when the bird's at arm's length.

Whiffing on attempts to relocate four black-necked stilts and a buff-breasted sandpiper seen at Ottawa days earlier, we moved along to the Willow Point Wildlife Area near Castalia. The wetland there was shrinking,

but enough mud and shallow water remained to attract some fabulous shorebird species.

Brumfield nailed the IDs of four stilt sandpipers foraging amid some dowitchers and pectorals, plus a black-bellied plover delivering its three-syllable whistle call and another golden plover.

#### Sightings

Over the weekend, Conneaut Harbor had a black-bellied plover and white-rumped sandpiper, Larry Rosche reported. Craig Caldwell spotted willet and whimbrel there.

Robert Jackson found a Blackburnian warbler along the Cuyahoga Valley National Park's Terra Vista butterfly trail over the weekend.

The Headlands Beach area of Mentor was busy with migrants on Sunday, including yellow-bellied flycatcher, both cuckoos, black-and-white and yellow warblers, white-crowned sparrow and many Baltimore orioles, Rosche reported.

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