



# THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

## Lake Erie marshes, Conneaut Harbor still great for birding

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Two of Northern Ohio's favorite birding destinations are habitats in transition.

But in a surprising turnabout, the changes have had little detrimental impact on bird life, and both sites consistently rank among the most productive locations in the country.

To the west, the Lake Erie marshes of Ottawa County are the remnants of a vast network of wetlands that once enveloped the lakefront from Cleveland to Toledo. Development continues to chip away at these precious resources.

To the east, at Conneaut Harbor in Ashtabula County, veteran Columbus birder Dan Sanders recalled a time years ago when the expanses of sandy shores and spits were submerged beneath Lake Erie's waters. The natural movement of sand and the gradual decreasing depth of the lake have contributed to the emergence of this migratory magnet.

A good argument could be made that both locations are more productive today for some species than they were 50 years ago.

I joined groups of Northeast Ohio birders on field trips to each of the sites over the weekend and was pleasantly surprised by our success.

The conditions were ideal Saturday morning for the monthly auto tour at the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. A caravan of birders wended its way through the impoundment and didn't take long to find a wonderful bird: a red-necked phalarope. This uncommon migrant was a joy to watch, spinning and swimming in the company of a lesser yellowlegs, foraging in the water, plucking tiny insects from the surface.

Traveling farther into the compound, we encountered acres of mudflats and shallows - prime shorebird habitat. Birders formed a chorus line of a dozen spotting scopes, calling out the names as each new species was identified: short-billed dowitcher, Wilson's snipe, and stilt, least, semipalmated and pectoral sandpipers.

Before leaving the wildlife complex, we stopped at the Magee Marsh beach, where three bald eagles were standing proudly on the sand. Two others soon flew in. We stopped counting at 20 eagles before noon.

Less than 10 miles to the west, in Lucas County, we stopped for a hike through the Mallard Bay impoundment. My son, Bret, and I were the only people there and capitalized on the opportunity to share the solitude with nature.

Snakes slithered and leopard frogs leaped as we shuffled along the grassy trail. Butterflies and dragonflies flitted in our wake. Several northern harriers cruised silently and effortlessly over the marsh in search of voles, and eagles circled overhead. A black tern mingled with the hundreds of migrating swallows, and three common moorhens shared the swamp with several great egrets and wood ducks.

At the opposite end of the state, the lake's recession has attracted migrating shorebirds to Conneaut Harbor. At times, the variety of species can be spectacular. Sunday was simply good for an outing of the Kirtland Bird Club.

Predictably, only a few saw one of the best birds of the day - a red knot - before it departed at dawn.

The rest of us didn't complain. Periodically, flocks of sandpipers and plovers flew in, stuck around for a while and then left, pulled by an inexplicable urge to fly more than 9,000 miles to beaches and mudflats in South America.

More than 20 short-billed dowitchers had us studying each one in a search for its long-billed cousin, but no such luck. You had to be quick to catch sight of three flyby black-bellied plovers. From the multitudes of least and semipalmated sandpipers, Bret picked out a single Baird's sandpiper, a similar species that is common in the Great Plains but rare in these parts. Later, Columbus birder Sanders found a second Baird's.

The occasional appearance of an eagle or a bozo in a four-wheel-drive pickup truck scattered the birds. Some returned; some didn't.

Some of the group continued the shorebirding adventure at Mosquito Lake in Trumbull County, where three marbled godwits had taken residence during the past two weeks. The deluge didn't completely wash out the day's plans, as group leader Paula Lozano picked out a little gull from among the flocks of gulls resting on the mud.

#### Sightings

Throughout last week, birders at Conneaut Harbor spotted willets, American avocets, American golden plover, white-rumped sandpiper, red-necked phalarope, ruddy turnstone, little gull and greater scaup. At Mosquito, birders found red knot, long-billed dowitcher, snipe, Baird's and stilt sandpipers.

The two rufous hummingbirds that hung out for a couple of days last week at John Pogacnik's home in the Lakeshore Reservation in Perry Township appeared to have departed for good. If you missed them, you can relive the moment by checking out my blog at: <http://blog.cleveland.com/neobirding/>.

Early migrating songbirds continue to trickle into Mentor Lagoons, where Nancy Anderson reported Canada, black-and-white and magnolia warblers, and American redstart.

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