



THE PLAIN DEALER

Birders flock to Coshocton pond to spot rare wood storks

Thursday, September 04, 2008

James F. McCarty

Plain Dealer Reporter

Judging from the turnout at several hot spots over Labor Day weekend, the holiday served as an opportunity for dozens of Northeast Ohio birders to hit the road and chase some spectacular species.

The cars were lined up along a gravel lane in Coshocton County when my son Bret and I arrived at 9 on Monday morning.

The attraction was three young wood storks, an endangered species typically confined to Florida and states of the Southeast.

Kent birder Larry Rosche, who has written a book that documents such rarities, theorized that Hurricane Fay buffeted the storks northward. Fortunately for us, the tall waders landed in a shallow pond replete with fish that must have reminded them of a southern swamp.

Only five wood storks had been seen previously in Ohio, most of them early in the 20th century. In 2001, a stork flew over the Herrick Nature Preserve in Portage County.

Young Amish birder Robert Schlabach discovered the storks Tuesday. Birders from five states have flocked to view the state's first gathering of three storks, and the first birds to stick around long enough to be "chased."

It was entertaining to watch the storks feed as a team, wading in line, swinging their open bills back and forth in the shallows and clamping them shut whenever the sensitive beaks encountered a bluegill or catfish. Sufficiently filled, the birds retired to the shore to digest their meals and for a well-deserved nap.

After observing the scene for nearly two hours, we made a spur-of-the-moment decision to drive two hours to the shorebird Mecca that has sprung up in Bellevue in Seneca County.

For more than a month, flooded farm fields and roads have caused detours for residents but ideal habitat for wave after wave of migrating waders. Every week the numbers and varieties of species change.

More than a dozen birders -- all from Northeast Ohio -- were there throughout Monday, scanning the recent arrivals through binoculars and spotting scopes.

And what a wonderful show:

A marbled godwit and three phalaropes -- two Wilson's and a red-necked -- fed at close range in several of the temporary ponds. At least a half-dozen American golden-plovers stalked the muddy corn stubble. Emil Bacik found a buff-breasted sandpiper earlier in the morning, but it flushed and disappeared after a passing merlin terrorized the flocks.

The least and semipalmated sandpipers that had been in such profusion a few weeks ago had departed for points south, replaced by more Baird's and stilt sandpipers than we had ever seen in one location.

Greater and lesser yellowlegs remained in abundance, with fewer numbers of pectoral, spotted and solitary sandpipers, killdeer and semipalmated plovers, and short-billed dowitchers. Great egrets and Caspian terns also are working the ponds.

The fields are slowly drying, the ponds dissipating. But as long as mud remains, Bellevue will be a luxury for Northeast Ohio birders: a bountiful shorebird destination only an hour's drive from home.

Sightings

The hits at Headlands Beach keep on coming. Ray Hannikman reported a first-time summer sighting there of a long-tailed duck at Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve. A red-necked phalarope and Baird's sandpiper also visited the Mentor beach last week.

A Canada warbler was singing in Bret McCarty's Lakewood back yard before dawn Monday. The day before, he found Henslow's and Savannah sparrows, sora and Virginia rail, bobolink, Eastern meadowlark and three red-shouldered hawks at Frohring Meadows in Bainbridge Township in Geauga County.

Audrey Malloy spotted a black-throated blue warbler at East Ninth Street and St. Clair Avenue in Cleveland.

An olive-sided flycatcher, common redstart, chestnut-sided and Canada warblers were at the Shaker Lakes, Matt Valencic reported.

Chris Pierce reported that the mud flats at the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville are in prime condition, attracting seven species of shorebirds and two ospreys.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plained.com, 216-999-4153

©2008

© 2008 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.