



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEWMerlin no. 640009

Migrations make for amazing views for bird watchers

Thursday, September 20, 2007

James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

If you really want to bug a birder, tell him or her, "Sure, it's good today, but you should have been here yesterday."

So I'll spare you the birder's remorse. Let's just say it's going to take a special day to top the avian action in Northeast Ohio last Sunday.

This special event came about after a friendly weather pattern met up with multitudes of migrating songbirds in Ontario desperate for northern winds to buffet them across Lake Erie. When the right conditions converged, groups of expectant birders were waiting on the lakefront to welcome them to Ohio.

At Headlands Beach State Nature Preserve in Mentor, the birds arrived in waves of warblers and wrens, vireos and flickers, thrush and thrashers.

A thick cloud cover seemed to push the birds into the first line of trees they encountered after their 45-mile lake crossing. When the clouds parted and the sun emerged, it was as if a curtain had been raised on a wild stage and a spotlight had been shone on the birds.

On a 20-warbler day, how do you choose a favorite when each was a star in its own way?

Some of the Wilson's, black-and-white, black-throated blue and black-throated green warblers were so bright, you might have thought it was May.

Many of the Northern parula, palm, Cape May, Nashville, American redstart, common yellowthroat and yellow-rumped warblers have acquired their drab fall plumages. Blackpolls and bay-breasteds look like entirely different species.

But how to explain the Philadelphia vireo, which is brighter now than it was in the spring?

And how to account for the profusion of red-breasted nuthatches? The irruptive appearance of these uncommon sprites with a call like a toy horn is a blessing and hopefully an omen of a winter finch invasion to follow.

What a sight it was to come upon six brown thrashers in a single bare tree. Swainson's thrushes seemed to lurk in the dark understory everywhere we looked. It had been a while since I saw a rose-breasted grosbeak, a marsh wren or a yellow-bellied flycatcher on the same day. And we couldn't help but notice the arrival of several late migrant scouts, such as winter wren, ruby-crowned kinglet, yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown creeper, Lincoln's and white-throated sparrows.

I thought the birding was over for the day when I left Headlands, but was I surprised. The trees and shrubs at my home in Lakewood were alive with songbirds throughout the afternoon.

My bird bath alone hosted a black-and-white warbler, a redstart, a red-breasted nuthatch, a house wren, an indigo bunting and two common yellowthroats.

I never expected to see black-throated blue and blackpoll warblers gulping down elderberries alongside robins, catbirds and a thrasher.

A vivid blue-headed vireo was a stunning sight, picking off insects from oak leaves, and our fifth vireo species of the day.

What a joy it has been to host these feisty red-breasted nuthatches, constantly mixing it up with the chickadees, sparrows, cardinals and their white-breasted cousins in the contest for sunflower seeds. Long may they stay.

The fall migration remains in full swing through September. But the opportunities to see these colorful tropical visitors for the last time until spring are fluttering away.

Sightings

A Connecticut warbler was the highlight of Phil Chaon's 14-warbler visit to Headlands Beach.

Paula Lozano's Lakewood back yard was hopping, too, with Philadelphia vireo, red-breasted nuthatch, ruby-crowned kinglet, and warblers: Nashville, chestnut-sided, Cape May, black-throated blue, black-throated green, bay-breasted and Wilson's.

Earlier in the week, Bret McCarty witnessed a warbler fallout in Lakewood, with several hundred birds, dominated by blackpoll, Wilson's, magnolia and Nashville warblers, and lesser numbers of black-throated blue, black-throated green, bay-breasted, black-and-white and American redstart.

Migrants invaded the Shaker Lakes Nature Center, too, where Ben Fambrough had a busy day spotting olive-sided and yellow-bellied flycatchers, Philadelphia vireo, gray-cheeked thrush, scarlet tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, kinglet and warblers: Nashville, chestnut-sided, black-throated green and ovenbird.

Birders on the weekly Wednesday walk at the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville saw 11 warbler species and a merlin that had caught a barn swallow.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

Bird walks

Every Wednesday through Oct. 10, naturalists will lead birding hikes through the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville. Meet at 8 a.m. at the Johnson Wetland Center. For details, call 440-327-3626.

At 9:30 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 29, discover the birds and botany of Lake Erie, exploring Mentor Marsh, Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve and Mentor Lagoons. The Native Plant Society of Northeast Ohio and the Cleveland Audubon Society are sponsoring the event. Lunch includes hot dogs and beverages, but bring a side dish to share. Meet at the Marsh House, 5185 Corduroy Road, Mentor. Call 216-371-3345 to register.

Bird news

Ohio Division of Wildlife biologists placed transmitters on two sandhill cranes that spent the summer in Geauga County. They hope to track the cranes' migration south for the winter. You can follow their migration online at www.wildohio.com. This year, 22 young cranes fledged from 16 Ohio nests - the most ever in the state.

In another state first, a pair of Mississippi kites nested at a Hocking County golf course this summer and fledged one young. The southern kites are rare visitors to Ohio and had never nested here. The Hocking

County site marked the northernmost nesting pair ever recorded in North America, according to Division of Wildlife biologists.

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