



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Ohio's talented young birders take wing - Aerial View

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James F. McCarty

Plain Dealer Reporter

I have seen the future of birding in Ohio, and it looks extremely promising.

Some of the state's most talented birders, aged 12 to 18, gathered in Holmes County on Saturday for the second annual conference of the Ohio Young Birders Club.

Let me assure you, had you been among the 120 or so people who attended, you would have been as proud and optimistic as I am.

It was strictly a youth-driven event as the best and the brightest of our progeny dazzled the crowd with skillful Power Point presentations of ornithological wonder.

Auriel Van Der Laar, 18, a founding member of the club, took us on a visual trip to the Lake Erie marshes of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, where she has helped to conduct rail studies for the past two years. The object of her research is to determine spring migration timing and habitat use within the marshes, and to gain knowledge of the endangered king rail.

This summer, Auriel captured 186 rails in wire traps, and outfitted six of them with radio transmitters to track their movements.

My son, Bret, 14, took the crowd on a photo tour of the Lake Erie shoreline in winter and the wide variety of bird life that migrates to the state's northern coast after the snow falls and the water freezes. While the rest of the state is cuddled up by the fireplace, Bret urged birders to bundle up and hit the frigid lakefront for a chance to see jaegers, gulls, shorebirds and waterfowl that can only be found here during the winter.

Jacob Bowman, 17, of Millersburg, is one of the growing number of Amish birders who must use bicycles or hire vans to reach the hot spots. He spoke of leaving his farmhouse at 5 a.m. and peddling 45 miles round trip to the Killbuck Marsh where he and his buddies sometimes paddle a canoe to the most inaccessible reaches of the wetlands.

"When we went in there and started calling, there were rails all over," Jacob recalled.

He and his friends have counted up to 125 species in a day, including 25 Virginia rails, 48 soras, 48 common moorhens, at least 20 marsh wrens, and three least bitterns.

Jared Merriman, 18, of Xenia, Brad Wilkinson, 17, of Tallmadge, and Ethan Kistler, 18, of Newton Falls, all spoke about the joys and importance of ecotourism to birds. Jared has birded in Florida, Washington, Louisiana, Arizona, Maine and Panama. Brad and Ethan traveled together to Ecuador in the summer.

All three of the young birders drove home the message that American tourism dollars can help to preserve habitats in other states and countries that are vital to the continued success of migrant and resident bird species.

Featured speaker, Hope Batcheller, 16, of Petersburg, N.Y., told us about a fascinating summer project she pursued in New England, where she used sensitive audio equipment to record nestlings and fledglings.

Little is known about the begging calls of young birds. But Hope overcame the white noise of airplanes, streams, dripping trees, wind, construction and people to capture quality sounds from 35 species, and to advance the knowledge of these odd little creatures.

Club mentor Kim Kaufman always gets emotional whenever she talks about the young birders.

"These kids just knock me out, they're so amazing," she gushed.

Proof of her pride can be found in the number of young birder clubs modeled after Ohio's that are popping up across the country in Oklahoma, Florida, New York and seven other states, she said.

Also, Steve Carbol of the American Birding Association attended the conference in search of ideas for a plan to "take the ABA's youth club in a new direction," he said.

Of course, it helps to have one of the country's top birders, authors and conservationists as a co-leader of the club: Kenn Kaufman.

Kim Kaufman's husband has been promoting the Ohio Young Birders Club globally at birding events and in articles he has written for Bird Watcher's Digest and Audubon Magazine.

Sightings

The fall migration was in full swing last week, featuring some of our rarest sparrows and wrens. The Mentor Marsh led the way, as Jerry Talkington found an amazing five Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrows and a Henslow's sparrow on Sunday; three each of LeConte's sparrows and sedge wrens on Friday; and one of each on Saturday.

Gabe Leidy discovered two Nelson's sharp-tails at the Lorain Impoundment, which later provided joys of pursuit for Larry Richardson, Jan Auburn, Bret and me.

Other Nelson's sharp-tails made appearances at the Coliseum grasslands of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, per William Fissell, Leidy and Bill Whan; along the fence at Dike 14 on the Cleveland lakefront, per Chris Pierce; and at the West Creek Reservation in Parma, per Jen Brumfield and Leidy.

Other Pierce sightings at Dike 14: orange-crowned warbler and nine sparrow species.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

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