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Dike 14 birding remains restricted

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One characteristic of birds that makes them so fascinating is their tendency to show up in the most inhospitable habitats.

For instance, the best place in North America to see a Tamaulipas crow is at the municipal dump in Brownsville, Texas.

And one of the best places to find tropical kingbirds in the country is at the wastewater treatment plant outside of Sierra Vista, Ariz.

Both of these hazardous birding destinations came to mind last week while I hiked a restricted preserve on the Cleveland lakefront that is probably the finest sparrow stop in Northeast Ohio.

Dike 14, which adjoins Gordon State Park, is a noxious dump composed of 20 years of toxic sludge dredged from the Cuyahoga River. The 88-acre preserve is overgrown with cottonwoods and willows and is covered with invasive plants such as mugwort and phragmites mixed in meadows of goldenrod, cattail and aster.

A locked gate and a fence prevent access to anyone without a key. For years, however, birders have entered the site, which the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority and the Dike 14 Education Collaborative oversee. The collaborative encourages birders to join organized tours rather than explore the dike unescorted, said Chris Trepal, director of the Earth Day Coalition and a member of the collaborative. To schedule a tour, birders can call Trepal at 216-281-6468.

Twelve species of sparrows were reported at Dike 14 last week, the most abundant being the stately white-crowned sparrow. I could hardly take five steps on the mowed trails without kicking up a flock of these handsome birds. Adults are big, by sparrow standards. They have gray underparts, white throats and flashy black-and-white striped crowns. Their high-pitched whistling songs permeated the area.

But the white-crowned sparrows weren't what had birders all atwitter. Nor were the field, white-throated, swamp, Lincoln's, Savannah or song sparrows that flitted along the trails, madly dashing for cover whenever they were disturbed.

The buzz started two weeks ago after a juvenile red crossbill showed up. Craig Rieker snapped a picture, which he posted at www.rarebird.org.

The chatter gained steam last week after Heights High hotshot Phil Chaon reported seeing lark, clay-colored and Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrows on the dike - three of the most highly sought of fall migrants.

Then, on Saturday, the levy burst after Gabe Leidy found a bird about the same size as a sparrow, but which acts more like a mouse: a yellow rail. Other birders tried but failed to find the secretive marsh denizen, which apparently had stopped to rest on its journey to the Southern swamps for the winter.

No matter the miss - this place has a knack for attracting some of the best birds found in Ohio. More than

281 species have been spotted. It started with sharp-tailed and curlew sandpipers in 1984, and it continued with 22 short-eared owls in 2003 and a Say's phoebe in 2004.

Birders typically are happy if they can find two orange-crowned warblers on an October day. I stopped counting orange-crowneds at a dozen, although I couldn't help but pause to enjoy every individual as it hung from the goldenrod, picking off insects.

Other late-arriving songbirds continued to brighten the park's drab landscape, including Nashville, magnolia, yellow-rumped, palm and common yellowthroat warblers, golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets, a blue-headed vireo, red-breasted nuthatch, yellow-bellied sapsucker, a late Swainson's thrush and an early hermit thrush.

At least three Cooper's hawks and a red-shouldered hawk periodically strafed the birds, sending them on frenzied flights of escape. Some of the songbirds didn't make it, as attested by the hawks' bulging crops.

While preservationists tout Dike 14 as the only quality habitat for migratory birds along 100 miles of Lake Erie coastline, this vital peninsula sits underutilized. City officials have developed a concept plan that provides for wetlands, ponds, trails, boardwalks, viewing decks and a hawk watchtower. Unfortunately, the plan also calls for bike paths, a mowed amphitheater, picnic grounds and toilets - amenities already available at Gordon Park.

The future for this ugly jewel appears bright, said Trepal, who reported that soil samples taken from the dike turned up low levels of PCBs and heavy metals "but nothing unusual that would prevent it from being a nature preserve."

Public hearings on the issue are scheduled for Wednesday, Dec. 5, and Thursday, Dec. 6.

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