



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Proper habitats are essential to migrant birds - Aerial View

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Every year about this time, it becomes apparent how vital it is to provide and preserve good birding habitat.

From verdant patches in our back yards to our favorite parks and wildlife preserves, every tract of green space that contributes to the survival of migrants is an important piece of the trail from the birds' nesting grounds to wintering grounds.

As I write this, I'm relaxing on a lounge chair on my back patio, and the air is alive with the musical notes of birds that wouldn't be here if all I had provided them was a lawn.

I can't take credit for all of the landscaping; the four century oaks were here before the house was. But everything else is native additions.

Everywhere I look are the flashes of feathers: yellow-rumped warblers, white-throated sparrows, ruby- and golden-crowned kinglets, American goldfinches, dark-eyed juncos, winter and Carolina wrens.

Insectivores are busily gleaning bugs and spiders from the leaf litter, dogwoods, viburnum, spice bush, witchhazel, tree bark, black gum, wild cherries, goldenrod and serviceberry bushes.

The seed eaters are bulking up on the dried flowerheads of sunflowers, New England asters, Joe Pye weed, purple coneflowers, elderberries, ironweed and milkweed.

I've been hearing from backyard birders recently who are concerned because goldfinches have abandoned their thistle feeders. Let me assure you that the tiny finches are alive and abundant in my yard, feasting on natural seed sources.

If we needed any more evidence of the importance of habitat preservation and restoration, consider the recent run of sightings of Ammodramus sparrows in Northeast Ohio. The Lorain Impoundment, Funk Bottoms Wildlife Area and the Coliseum grasslands in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park all have proven productive grounds for Nelson's sharp-tailed, Le Conte's and grasshopper sparrows. But none of these can match the numbers seen at the Mentor Marsh.

This past summer, Jim Bissell, head botanist for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and a team of volunteers carved out a wetlands mitigation project along a stretch of boardwalk into the marsh. They cut out the invasive phragmites and replaced them with native grasses, cattails and smartweed - plants relished by the secretive marsh sparrows.

On Saturday, I accompanied Jerry Talkington and some of the Headlands Crew to the marsh trail. The swamp sparrows and goldfinches were thick. Soras, marsh and sedge wrens usually make appearances. And a Northern harrier cruised by, skimming over the reed fronds.

Hardly had we arrived when Talkington spotted the first sharp-tail. Soon he found two more, visible only in

flashes before they dove into the tufts of marsh grass and disappeared. Often, the only way to find the shy skulkers is to look for twitching blades of grass as the birds move stealthily out of sight below.

The Nature Conservancy is leading the way toward habitat expansion and preservation with a project designed to create, enhance and protect critical stopover sites on private and public land in Northern Ohio.

"The closer you are to the lake, the more important it is for migrating birds," said the conservancy's Randy Edwards. "Ninety percent of bird mortality occurs during migration."

Sightings

A huge movement of pine siskins arrived in Northeast Ohio over the weekend. I had several flocks of a dozen or more pass over Headlands Beach State Park. Other flocks were seen at the Hinckley Reservation by Jeff Wert, by Dane Adams at his home near Wellington, by Gabe Leidy at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and various sites in Lake and Cuyahoga counties, by Dave Dvorak at the Rocky River Reservation, and by Jim Heflich and Patty Kellner in the hemlocks at their home in South Euclid.

Two probable sharp-tailed and vesper sparrows were at the Coliseum grasslands, Leidy reported.

Parasitic jaeger, little gull, red-throated loon and rafts of common mergansers were the best sightings from John Pogacnik's Lake Erie overlook in Perry Township.

Waterbirds at Sims Park in Euclid included surf and black scoters and lesser scaup, Nancy Anderson said.

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