



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Birding can be a year-round hobby Aerial View

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There was a time not too long ago when birding for me was a seasonal pursuit.

A typical year came down to watching migrating songbirds in the spring and raptors in the fall, finding whatever we could muster up in a day for the Christmas Bird Count, and enjoying the activity at my backyard feeders during the winter -- all through the foggy lenses of \$100 binoculars.

Thankfully, I experienced a life-changing revelation a few years ago, and weekends haven't been the same since.

What an awakening the lakefront has become, as I have accompanied troops of birders patrolling Northeast Ohio's shores and reaping the feathered bounty of a healthy Lake Erie in the fall and winter.

It always helps to team up with talented partners, of which there is no shortage in these parts.

Last Saturday morning, at Rocky River Park, I joined my precocious son, Bret, on his 14th birthday, young-birder mentor Paula Lozano, and one of her star proteges, Ted Gilliland, a recent graduate of Duke University.

The lake was alive with action on an otherwise dreary November day. Just beyond the wave breaks, two surf scoters plied the shallows, diving periodically and emerging with fish in their prominent bills. With the aid of our spotting scopes, the black waterfowl with white facial markings appeared to be no more than a stone's throw away.

The scoters were part of a feeding frenzy. Common loons and horned grebes were almost as plentiful as on their summer lakes in Canada, although their bright breeding plumage had faded considerably. Tiny bufflehead ducks paddled about in small groups, and red-breasted mergansers streamed by in rows of a dozen or more. A solitary female hooded merganser darted by without stopping to land.

Before we arrived, Lozano and Gilliland spotted several rafts of tundra swans. After we left, they reported more surf scoters, black scoters and common goldeneye ducks.

Unfortunately, a grim reality of birding is that no one can be everywhere at once. While we were enjoying lakefront birding to the west, others were getting lucky to the east. During a 10-hour marathon at Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, young birder Phil Chaon logged looks at long-tailed duck, snow geese and tundra swans, little gull, white-winged and black scoters, and a bevy of loons and grebes.

Headlands is where Bret and I decided to start our Sunday, meeting Chaon and Gabe Leidy. We were not disappointed. The passing waterfowl had slowed considerably from the day before, with only flyby views of black scoters, and fleeting looks at diving grebes and a ruddy duck. But the passerines were busy moving overhead, as common redpoll, horned lark, snow bunting and American pipit all made appearances flashing over the dunes.

We drove west to the Cleveland Lakefront State Park and the fields surrounding the fence. The always reliable habitat produced an amazing flock of about 25 fox sparrows, our first of the fall. Leidy kicked up a short-eared owl, which made a beeline for cover. Tree sparrows were the most abundant bird, with lesser numbers of swamp, white-crowned and song sparrows, horned larks, both species of kinglets, a winter wren, Eastern towhee and a hermit thrush.

Scanning the lake along the dike walls, we enjoyed awesome views of loons and grebes at close range.

Our good fortune ended after we left the lakefront. The flock of 30-some evening grosbeaks that had delighted dozens of birders in Geauga County over the past week had dwindled to just a handful.

Linda Gilbert of South Russell continued to welcome several of the stunning yellow finches to her backyard feeders on Saturday, and some of the grosbeaks turned up unexpectedly at the feeders at West Woods Metro Park's nature center about a mile from her home. But by Sunday, the grosbeak invasion had abruptly ended.

The highlight of our visit to West Woods was a solitary pine siskin.

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