



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Time to be thankful for great birding in area

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James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

Birders in Northeast Ohio have a lot to be thankful for, and we received plenty of reminders over the past week.

Put aside for a moment your natural distaste for cold, wet and windy weather and recall a birder's credo: Bad weather brings good birds.

That brings us to our first, and most important, gift to remember as we carve the magnificent roasted bird on this special day: Thank you for our blessed habitat, especially our bountiful great lake, Erie.

Up and down the North Coast, birders bagged spectacular migrants.

At Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor, nine tundra swans glowed in the sunlight Sunday as they drifted by on their way toward their East Coast wintering grounds. Hundreds of red-breasted mergansers streamed by in opposite directions, at times accompanied by black and surf scoters. Bufflehead, scaup and hooded mergansers joined the aerial show.

Dunlins prowled and pecked along the shoreline, and flocks of snow buntings swirled by overhead. Take your pick, almost anywhere you went good birds were to be found.

At Lakewood Park earlier in the week, blinking into sleet and a stiff wind, Bret McCarty found three pomarine jaegers, a white-winged scoter, long-tailed and Northern pintail ducks, a late Caspian tern and snow geese. Gabe Leidy had a marsh wren and black scoters there.

At Lakeshore Metro Park, John Pogacnik spotted a Northern gannet, red-throated loons and a glaucous gull. A common redpoll and a pine siskin came to his feeders.

At Rocky River Park, Bret and I found dozens of horned grebes, common loons and a mixed flock of black and surf scoters totaling more than 20 birds, plus scattered groups of bufflehead, goldeneye and red-breasted and hooded mergansers.

By Monday, the scoter flock had grown to 70, Paula Lozano said. At Bradstreet's Landing, Leidy had a flock of 39 containing all three scoters.

All of these fabulous birds on the lakefront wouldn't amount to much if we couldn't appreciate them. That leads me to my next category:

Let's all give thanks to the ranks of Ohio's elite birders who grace us with their knowledge, take us on field trips, and find the marvelous rarities that we love to chase and admire.

Regular readers of this column will recognize the names of some of our favorite birding stars.

People like Kenn and Kim Kaufman, who devote so many hours to the next generation of birders through their mentoring of the Ohio Young Birders Club.

Larry Rosche, who authored the birders' bible, "Birds of the Cleveland Region," and who leads walks and talks to clubs.

Paula Lozano, who has shepherded some of our finest young birders since before they earned their driver's permits and religiously keeps watch on the West Side migrant traps and shore fronts.

Pogacnik, a Lake County Metro Parks naturalist who lives beside what is probably the best birdwatching yard in Ohio and isn't averse to welcoming birders to share it when something rare arrives.

And the members of the Headlands Crew, some of the sharpest birders in the country who patrol the eastern lakeshore every day of the year and who rarely miss a beat — you can look it up (see Swainson's and Kirtland's warblers, gyrfalcon, gray flycatcher, etc.).

Take Sunday, for instance. Walking the fishermen's trail at sunrise, Emil Bacik was startled by a tiny owl flying from the lake toward the tree line. Almost immediately, several shots rang out from the duck hunters hunkered down behind the breakwall. Bacik feared the bird was a goner.

About two hours later, Jerry Talkington urged Bacik, Brenda Baber and Ray Hannikman to accompany him on an owl-finding mission. The rest of us decided to stay behind, scanning the lake and secretly doubting the likelihood of their success.

Oh, we of little faith. Barely 10 minutes passed before Hannikman was waving us over. Talkington had found the bird, a Northern saw-whet owl, hidden in a grape tangle barely 4 feet off the ground.

The owl was barely bigger than a pop can, but it was a huge symbol of what a wonderful place Northeast Ohio can be for birders.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

jmccarty@plaind.com, 216-999-4153

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