



THE PLAIN DEALER

Braving the weather proves fruitful for Northeast Ohio birders

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If we birders had made the mistake of heeding the dire warnings of the local TV weather prognosticators, we would have spent Sunday indoors, curled up on the couch watching the Browns pre-game show.

But we're wise to the changing Northeast Ohio weather patterns. What's a little mist, wind and cloud cover when the potential for sightings of fall rarities is at stake?

Had my son Bret and I stayed home, we would have missed some spectacular species within 15 miles of our doorstep.

Contrary to the forecast, the overnight rain abated shortly after daybreak. The gusty winds out of the southwest made for a calm lake and some odd bird movements.

Lakewood Park, at times as barren and frigid as the Arctic Circle, was alive with birds. From the lakeside overlook, we enjoyed prime views of a lesser black-backed gull bobbing on the water, black scoters and common loons.

As we prepared to leave, nine tundra swans passed overhead and landed in the cove behind Lakewood Catholic Academy.

While we admired the swans, two Northern harriers and a bald eagle flew by. Then Bret did a double take on a fly-by duck, which he correctly identified as a long-tailed duck. But just to make sure, we drove about a half-mile west to another lake overlook, where we found the Oldsquaw busy chasing fish and desperately diving to avoid the marauding eagle.

At the Clifton Beach Club, at the mouth of the Rocky River, a large flock of hooded mergansers paddled past the breakwall.

On the other side of the river, the amazingly reliable divers remained on their usual feeding grounds off of Rocky River Park, which had large mixed flocks of black and surf scoter, hooded merganser, common goldeneye, bufflehead and ruddy ducks.

Meanwhile, another three Northern harriers soared by. It was unusual for that location, no doubt brought about by the swirling winds confronted as the raptors migrated across the lake.

Bret's sharp ears and eyes paid dividends at the Huntington Reservation in Bay Village, where he picked out a common redpoll and several pine siskins from among the multitudes of American goldfinches feeding on the birch, sweet gum, alder and sycamore seeds there.

The redpolls are the latest wave of boreal finches to grace our region, coming on the heels of backyard appearances by red-breasted nuthatches, pine siskins and evening grosbeaks. A poor seed crop in Canada is believed responsible for the redpoll invasion - the first here in more than a decade.

We wrapped up our foul-weather safari at Miller Road Park in Avon Lake, where we found no fewer than three lesser black-backed gulls, our first common mergansers of the fall, several common loons, ruddy ducks and hooded mergansers.

If there is a moral to the weekend story, it is that birders should consider the rewards - and dress warmly - whenever the TV weather forecasters recommend staying home.

Sightings

Common redpolls continued to thrill birders last week. Gabe Leidy counted nine of the tiny red-capped finches at the West Creek Reservation in Parma and 10 at Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor.

A black-legged kittiwake flew by Headlands Beach on Friday, Ray Hannikman reported.

For the second week in a row, a white-winged crossbill visited John Pogacnik's feeders in Perry Township in Lake County. This time, it stuck around long enough for a photograph.

Chris Grame, conservation supervisor for the Lorain County Metro Parks, found a Northern shrike hunting for voles on Saturday near the Diagonal Road east-side entrance to the Caley Reservation in Pittsfield Township. Senior naturalist Tim Fairweather saw it on Sunday.

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