



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## AERIAL VIEW

### City birders have fewer places to keep watch on feathered friends

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**James F. McCarty Plain Dealer Reporter**

Mayor Mike White's least concern when he was plotting to tear down old Cleveland Municipal Stadium and replace it with a new monument to the Browns was the gardens beside the edifice named after landscape architect Donald Gray.

City officials spoke of "moving" the gardens or bulldozing them, then replanting them after the new stadium was built.

But birders knew better. They knew the gardens were one of the finest migrant traps in Northeast Ohio and irreplaceable. Downtown workers often would stop there on their way to the office, or take a walk during lunch hour to catch the latest arrivals from the South in the spring or from the North in the fall. The trees, shrubs, vines and flowers had provided food and cover for more than one Kirtland's warbler spotted there and owls that often roosted in the thick conifers.

The gardens had grown there unscathed since 1937. But they would not survive the mania of a Browns-starved town desperate for 10 football games a year.

When the Donald Gray Gardens were leveled, birders lost what might have been the best urban setting the city had to offer.

It's not uncommon in the spring to find a half-dozen ovenbirds strutting beneath the crabapple canopy on Public Square, or mourning warblers gleaning the leaves of trees that line the Cuyahoga County Administration Building.

But, like Donald Gray Gardens, those rare urban oases are disappearing. And the few others that remain are constantly at risk.

In just the past few months, developers cut down the trees and bulldozed the Irishtown Bend area on Merwin Street in the Flats, which had been a traditional staging area for black-crowned night herons.

Whiskey Island has been in the headlines recently, as city and county officials squabble over ownership and usage plans. Birders have welcomed the proposed sale to the county, which wants to turn it into a park with trails and observation decks — ideal for warbler watching and spotting pomarine jaegers in winter. But the city hasn't surrendered its designs to turn half of it into barren picnic grounds, the other half for marinas and Port Authority use.

Another prized site in peril is Dike 14. The 88-acre plot of lakefront scrubland east of Burke Lakefront Airport comprises the only accessible natural area between Huron and Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor. Although it rests on piles of low-grade toxic soil dredged from the Cuyahoga River, above ground it is a migrant Mecca. Birders have spotted 283 different species there over the past four years, including 14 species of sparrows in a single day and a Say's phoebe in late October.

If the city has its way, according to its proposed long-term lakefront plan, Dike 14 will be developed for widespread use — not for the birds or the birders.



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That, said Harvey Webster, biologist at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, would be a crime.

"Dike 14 just oozes with potential, and it needs to be preserved as a natural area," Webster said. "It's a seedy, weedy overgrown place that most people can't get to. But for birds coming from Canada, it is their first chance at landfall."

Webster calls the city's lakefront plan "extraordinarily impressive," but painfully lacking in provisions for natural areas. At a nearby prime birding spot, the fields north of the airport where Arctic owls and rough-legged hawks prowl in winter, the city wants to build a golf course.

"Lake Erie dominates the geography of the Greater Cleveland area, providing birders a tremendous amount of action," Webster said. "We can't let what little habitat we have go to waste."

## Notable recent sightings

Steve and Beth Cagan didn't see this special bird in Northeast Ohio, but it's worth mentioning all the same. The Cleveland Heights couple was in New York city on family business last week when they learned of a boreal owl discovered in Central Park. They first checked near the Tavern on the Green where the rare Arctic visitor was first found. Failing there, the Cagans walked until they encountered a group of birders ogling a large conifer. And there was the owl — on a branch about 6 feet from the trunk, in plain view. It was the first boreal owl ever seen in Central Park, and a life bird for the Cagans.

Mary Anne and Tom Romito and friends enjoyed watching a flock of 70 tundra swans on Indigo Lake in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. As they walked along the towpath, two more flocks of 50 swans each flew overhead.

John Pogacnik's lakefront observations in North Perry the past week included good numbers of greater and lesser scaup, several surf scoters and common goldeneye, a little gull, a Thayer's gull, and large flocks of tundra swans and common mergansers.

Helen Ostermiller of Medina County spotted a yellow-rumped warbler and a purple finch in her back yard struggling to survive in inhospitable icy and frigid conditions.

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