

Black River Audubon Society 1958 – 2008  
Address by Jack Smith Commemoration  
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Edited by Harriet Alger

On July 10, 1958 Harlie Stevick, Executive Director of the Elyria YMCA, sent a check for \$118, a signed Branch Agreement, and a proposed roster of thirty-two members to the National Audubon Society. On July 15, 1958 he received the cosigned agreement from National Audubon granting branch status to the Elyria Audubon Society.

Many of the original members had served as guides for spring bird walks sponsored by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. In addition to Harlie, they included Jim Akers, Perry Johnson, Dale Kellogg, Frank Phelps, Jack Smith, and Elizabeth Yoder. Harlie and Perry Johnson, who at that time was Boy's Director and Naturalist for the YMCA, had become very interested in bird watching, and they became convinced that having a local Audubon branch would be a valuable asset to the community.

Through their leadership, the original 32 members were obtained, and at the first meeting officers were elected: President: Harlie Stevick, Vice President: Elizabeth Yoder, Secretary: Elaine Dirrim, and Treasurer: Jack Smith. Committee Chairs were: Education: Perry Johnson, Field trips: Pierre Smith, Membership: Bob Morse, Program: Mrs. W. A. Sayles, Social: Mr. and Mrs. J. Mockler. A complete list of the 32 original members could not be found, but surviving chapter members and guests attending, in addition to me, are Jane Coven and Norma Kraps.

In 1970 the constitution was amended to change the name of the organization to Black River Audubon Society to indicate that the Society's boundaries, as outlined in the original charter, encompassed all of Lorain County, not just Elyria. In a more recent change, part of Medina County, which is in the Black River Watershed Area, was included in the Black River Audubon charter by National Audubon.

One year before the founding of the local Audubon group, the Lorain County Metropolitan Park District was created. For the past 50 years, a close cooperative relationship has existed between these two organizations. Many members of Black River Audubon are active volunteers, contributors to and supporters of the Park system. Metro Parks and Black River Audubon have sponsored joint projects year after year, including bird Jack Smith. Photo by H. Spencer Norma Kraps. Photo by H. Spencer Perry Johnson. Copy by H. Spencer of photo hanging at the Visitor Center, Carlisle Reservation. hikes, educational programs and special events.

The stated mission of the new local Audubon was essentially the same as that of the organization today, which you can find in every issue of our newsletter, Wingtips: The mission of Black River Audubon is to promote conservation and restoration of ecosystems, focusing on birds and other wildlife through advocacy, education, stewardship, field trips and programs for the benefit of all people of today and tomorrow.

In trying to fulfill this mission, Black River Audubon Society projects and activities can be organized in three main categories: conservation, education and advocacy.

Conservation projects have included providing and protecting habitats for birds that are on threatened or endangered list, planting trees, Black River pollution studies, Christmas Bird Counts, and participation in two five-year Breeding Bird Surveys. These projects are funded by income from an endowment fund specifically established to support conservation activities. Black River Audubon is an organization of volunteers. This is no better illustration than the Bluebird Project which began in 1977. Over the last 30 years in an attempt to counter the decline of these beautiful little birds, members of the Society have built, placed and monitored over 250 specially designed bluebird boxes in area parks and other suitable environments. This effort has contributed importantly in bringing the status of this species in Lorain County from rare to common. The boxes are currently monitored by eighteen volunteers under the leadership of Wayne and Nancy Shipman. Wood Duck nest boxes have also been placed at Findley State Park. Another successful conservation effort has been the establishment of two projects in partnership with Lorain County Community College on the LCCC campus. Joe Strong, who often frequented the trails and fields at the College, was particularly interested in two areas of the campus: the northeast corner where Bobolinks and other grassland birds nested in a meadow and a small wooded area close by which was blessed with a diversity of wildflowers. He enlisted my interest and the two of us met with the President of the College, Dr. Roy Church, who granted permission for the establishment of prairie grassland in the meadow and a floral interpretive trail in the woods. The College maintenance department now suspends mowing operations in the meadow from April to October to protect the nesting birds. A grant proposal request was funded by the Stocker Foundation to provide for a display case at the edge of the meadow with pictures of the birds and meadow plants protected by this conservation project. The grant also funded the construction of a split rail fence along the interpretive trail through the wooded area with signs at each end and boxes with guides which describe and identify the plants and trees in the area. Joe Strong, Dorothy Hagerling, Wayne Shipman and Harriet Alger have the responsibility for the maintenance of the trail and meadow display case. The first Christmas Bird Count, both a conservation and educational activity, was held almost 50 years ago on Dec. 29, 1958. An area 15 miles in diameter was covered by 12 participants who identified 3900 birds in 39 species. Since then at least one has been held every year, and two Christmas Bird Counts have been conducted recently, one in the Elyria/Lorain area and the other in Wellington and southern Lorain County. Last year, 40 participants identified 21,321 birds in 63 species in the Elyria/Lorain count and 10994 birds in 67 species in the Wellington count. CBC data is forwarded each year to the National Audubon Society which uses it to plot population trends. This popular yearly activity attracts both experienced and new birders, infecting many with an addiction to birding known as "the enthusiastic bug."

Education projects include monthly meeting and lecture programs, field trips for birders, the Audubon Adventures program for 3rd – 6th grade classrooms, scholarship awards to naturalists and teachers for summer ecology camps, and educational displays at special school and park events. The Society's 9 monthly programs a year feature outstanding speakers: naturalists, researchers, biologists and environmentalists. These meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month, September through May, at 7 p.m. and are free and open to the general public as well as members. We have been fortunate in recent years to have had exceptionally interesting programs through the efforts of our last program chair, Carol Leininger, and current chair, Martin Ackermann. Membership chairs who welcome participants at

meetings are Bernie Pluchinsky and Betty Lake. Making sure that refreshments are provided for a social hour is the responsibility of Jean Sorton and Jenny Austin. No educational activity is more important than the monthly field trips to forests, meadowlands, wetlands, streams and lakes. Each year 12 or more wonderful places in Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania have been visited. How many of us remember weekends spent at Butternut Lodge or Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge or great trips to Magee Marsh, Point Pelee, Hawk Mountain, Burr Oak State Park or Mohican State Park? Current field trip co-chairs are Ken Austin and Joann Wagner. Since 1990, Black River Audubon has worked with public and private school teachers in sponsoring the Audubon Adventures series for children in 3rd through 6th grade classes. This program is supported by the income from another endowment fund specifically dedicated to this project. Through the leadership of Dick Lee, a record number of 41 classes received Audubon Adventures kits, provided free of charge by this organization last year. Each kit has materials for 32 children. Also in the last two years, Black River Audubon has joined Lorain County Metro Parks in an effort to create a Black River Young Birders Club for 12 – 18 year olds, as an affiliate of the Ohio Young Birders Club which Kim and Kenn Kaufman sponsor at the Black Swamp Bird Observatory. Through the camp scholarship program, a scholarship has been awarded each year to a local teacher or naturalist, primarily to Hog Island, Maine, or Connecticut. This program is also supported by the income from an endowment fund, created in December, 1986, for this project. Thanks to the recruiting efforts of Dick Lee and additional donations to supplement the endowment income, 3 scholarships were awarded to excellent candidates this year, instead of only one.

Advocacy efforts have concentrated on campaigns to protect important natural environments and resources, including King Woods in Lorain, Sheldon Marsh, the Western Lake Erie Basin Congressional Act, the Great Lakes Compact state legislation, the federal bill to clean up the Great Lakes, and advocacy for the protection and restoration of wetland areas. These activities have included attendance at community meeting and correspondence and meetings with local, state and national elected representatives including Marcy Kaptur and Betty Sutton. In these efforts we have joined activists from other environmental organizations including National Audubon, Audubon Ohio, and the Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

At the heart of all operations of Black River Audubon is our monthly publication, September through May, called "Wingtips" where news and notices of all programs, field trips, educational events and advocacy issues are published. For 25 years, from 1958 through 1983, Perry Johnson was the editor. For all that Perry did for this organization; we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. To other editors who followed a vote of thanks goes to Carol Leininger, Roberta Wendel, Ken Reed, Ritta Morgan, our current editor, Harry Spencer, who added color, and to John Koscinski, whose outstanding portraits of birds have graced the covers of Wingtips for the last two years. For our beautifully designed Web page, a recent additional area of communication, our thanks go to Dave Bragg and Arlene Lengyel.

Last but certainly not least, the financial stability of this organization, which allows for the range of the activities I have described, is due to the establishment over the years of four trusts: the Camp Scholarship Trust, the Conservation Trust, the Audubon Adventures Trust and the Gunther Pfeifer Trust. Dividend income from each of the first three is dedicated to the programs in the name (scholarships, conservation, and Audubon Adventures). Some years ago, the Pfeifer Trust Fund was established for bequests from the wills of individuals who wanted to make gifts that would keep on giving, now and forever. This trust fund

is named for Gunther Pfeifer, who left a bequest of \$70,000 to support current operation and special projects related to the Society's mission. Since its establishment, this trust has received another bequest and also other donations.

Black River Audubon has many outstanding programs planned for the years ahead, as well as expansion of existing programs that have clearly met a need, and all will require financing. In this year of our 50th anniversary, an appeal is going out to all of our friends, members, partners and others to make donations or to remember these trust funds in their wills. Any gift will be gratefully received and put to good use. Black River Audubon Members at Various Events.