

# WINGTIPS



PEREGRINE FALCON, photographer Debbie Parker, Lorain Harbor

MAY 2021

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**May 2021 Virtual Program**  
Tuesday, May 4 at 7pm, Via Zoom  
**The Ohio Prairie Story**  
**John Blakeman**



Ohio is generally regarded to have been a wooded state, originally, with forests stretching from border to border. In fact, Ohio had several very large areas of tallgrass prairie, equivalent to those in Illinois and Iowa. In pre-settlement times, about 4% of Ohio was prairie. In this presentation, with colorful photos, Ohio prairie expert John Blakeman will tell the remarkable biological story of these unique ecosystems, their ecological history, and biological components.

John, who presented his program **Hawks and Men** to Black River Audubon Society this past February, is a retired biology teacher and an experienced Ohio prairie researcher. He planted one of Ohio's first restorations in Erie County in 1973 at BGSU Firelands at Huron, using native seeds collected from local prairie remnants and isolated plants in ditches and hedgerows.

He helped form the Ohio Prairie Association and served as its president. He has presented papers at both state and national prairie conferences and is regarded as an expert in the history of Ohio's tallgrass prairies. As proprietor of Meadow Environments LLC, he professionally designs, installs, maintains prairie restorations and landscapes at educational, and commercial, and park sites across Ohio. At NASA's Plum Brook Station, he is restoring up to 3,000 acres of the original Firelands Prairie.

***For this and future Zoom meetings, go to [blackriveraudubon.org](http://blackriveraudubon.org) and register at the bottom of the first page under Subscribe. A Zoom link will be sent to you.***

## **Black River Audubon Society Seeking New Board Members**

Black River Audubon Society (BRAS), which serves the Lorain County area, is seeking passionate and energetic board members to help protect all wildlife and their habitats through science, education, advocacy, and conservation.

The BRAS board meets bi-monthly but board members are expected to take an active role in our various committees that provide birding and nature speakers, conservation projects, wildlife field trips, and other opportunities to its members and the community.

Potential board candidates should have a passion for birds and conservation that is expressed actively. Skills that BRAS is looking for in board candidates could include strong community connections and knowledge in fundraising and event planning. Previous nonprofit or board experience is also helpful.

If interested, please contact [blackriveraudubon@gmail.com](mailto:blackriveraudubon@gmail.com) or send a text to 440-610-8626 for a Black River Audubon Society Board Member Application.

BRAS welcomes applicants of all races, ethnicities, religions, nationalities, genders, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities who wish to make a difference in our community, our state and the world. For more information about BRAS, visit [www.blackriveraudubon.org](http://www.blackriveraudubon.org) and like our Facebook page.

### **Hog Island Summer Camp Will Open in 2021**

National Audubon's historic summer camp at Hog Island, Maine, was forced to cancel its entire camping schedule in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic but plans to reopen in 2021 with major restrictions on the number of camps and participants. All the usual social distancing requirements and health precautions will be in place.

With the uncertainty regarding the status of the camp, BRAS did not take new applications for scholarships this year. Instead, last year's recipients were offered the chance to attend this summer and two accepted – Dr. Lara Roketenez will attend the *Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week* camp and Helena Souffrant, of Ohio Young Birders, will attend the *Monhegan and Hog Island: Birding for Teens* camp. Richard "Buster" Banish, Cleveland schoolteacher and director of the *Bird Nerds* program for birding youth, will also attend the *Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week* on a BRAS scholarship.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, BRAS will offer new scholarships for Hog Island camps in 2022.

## **Future BRAS Plans in an Uncertain Time**

As it has for the past year, the BRAS board has canceled field trips through this summer due to Covid concerns. However, as the majority of Americans are expected to be vaccinated by mid-summer, we hope to return to a regular schedule of in-person field trips and monthly meetings by September.

## **Whiskey Island's Record Holder**

By **Jim Jablonski**



**New ring-billed gull age record holder**

(photo by Chuck Slusarczyk, Jr., Whiskey Island, Cleveland)

There seem to be two camps among birders regarding gulls. Many, if not most, have little interest in the rambunctious flocks of black, gray, and white birds. On the other hand, more experienced birders develop a keen interest in gulls, recognize their beauty, and devote much of their birding time to studying them.

You can count Chuck Slusarczyk, Jr., among the latter. “I just find them fascinating,” he said recently. “They’re hardy and opportunistic, and studying their behavior is a good thing to do, especially in the winter.”

Slusarczyk’s interest in gulls paid off this past winter. While examining a flock of ring-billed gulls at Cleveland’s Wendy Park at Whiskey Island on January 9 of this year, he noticed a bird with a band on its leg. A strong advocate of banding, Chuck took the time to photograph the bird

repeatedly in hope of seeing the code number, especially since it appeared to be an older band.

He later sent the photos to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory in Patuxent, Maryland. “Every time I’m birding, I look for bands and report them. That’s why we band them after all and it’s interesting to know where they come from. The colored bands used today make it easy to identify them,” Slusarczyk explained.

This old band was more difficult. The USGS experts had to look at several photos to clearly read the code number for Chuck’s gull. When they finally determined it, they were very surprised. The bird was banded June 18, 1992 in Toronto, Canada, even before it was able to fly – **28 years and 7 months previously!**

Nearly 29 years old, Chuck’s bird is officially the oldest recorded ring-billed gull. The previous record was 27 years, 6 months. And that bird never got older since it was dead when found. The USGS issued the certificate below to Chuck with his bird’s details after the record age was accepted.



**USGS certificate recognizing the age of the gull.**  
(Photo by Chuck Slusarczyk, Jr.)

A ringed-bill gull pushing 29 years of age is amazing for a species that has a typical life span of 7-8 years. “It really makes you wonder how many other long-term survivors are out there that we just don’t know about,” Chuck added.

Perhaps due to “Wisdom,” Midway Island’s 70-year-old Laysan albatross, the media and public have become very interested in the age of birds. After the record of his gull was announced, Chuck was interviewed by National Audubon, the Columbus Dispatch, and Cleveland’s Channel 3 news.

## PEREGRINE FALCON

*Falco peregrines*

By **Barbara Baudot**

Soaring above the canopies of trees and hills, and perching on rocky crags of cliffs, peregrine falcons live a royal life when undisturbed by dreaded man. Their life is exquisitely described in *Peregrine*, by J.A. Baker, who studied the life of peregrines on the wetlands of eastern England. Baker’s spellbinding, prize-winning book, a diary of six months in the life of a pair of peregrines, is recognized as one of the finest contemporary writings in natural history.

Peregrines are unique birds of prey, populating, as do pigeons, almost every corner of the earth except Antarctica. Northern residents are migratory and many others in moderate climates are year-round residents. Migrants are strong flyers and can cover 15,000 miles in a round-trip from the northern tundra to the southern hemisphere.

With eyes eight times more powerful than humans, they can spot prey a half mile in the distance. Their blue/black wings feature long, pointed primary feathers for speed and agility and broad secondary feathers for strength and ballast. Their barred, buff undersides shine in the sunshine as they mount air currents and glide for variable stretches searching for flying prey. Peregrines’ preferred meals are ‘birds on the wing,’ be they pigeons, ducks, starlings, gulls, or songbirds.

Spotting prey flying below, peregrines pitch downward in a ‘stoop’ or sharp dive. With their round black heads pointed downward, legs outstretched and drawn up to the height of their breastbone, they knock their prey from the sky as they dive. Their speed reaches in excess of 240 mph, faster than any other bird or animal on earth.

These birds are obviously built for speed. Their eyes are shielded by third membranes enabling moistening and cleansing. Their nostrils are equipped with boney tubercles or baffles deflecting air flow, allowing them to breathe easily during a dive. Their hooked beaks feature a tomial tooth, a sharp triangular-shaped ridge lining the outer edge of the upper mandibles, that is paired with dents in the lower mandibles. With these ‘teeth,’ peregrines sever the spinal cords of prey in the clasp of their talons.

Peregrines are large birds, comparable to crows or ravens. Body lengths are between 1 and 2 feet and wingspans vary from 2 to 4 feet. These differences reflect sexual dimorphism: females are usually 30% larger than males, which are at times referred to as ‘tiercels’, meaning a third smaller. Otherwise, males and females are indistinguishable.

Peregrines are territorial and mate for life. They meet each year at their habitual nesting sight, or ‘eyrie.’ The site, at least a kilometer away from another pair, is usually a grass or earth covered ledge of a cliff, quarry, or other inaccessible, undisturbed location. Today, top windowsills of tall buildings house peregrines attracted by flocks of feral pigeons.

After mating display acrobatics, the couple mate, and the female builds a nest. Using her chest and legs, she fashions a shallow scrape of earth and debris in which to lay 3 or 4 eggs. The pair remain together for the 4 months it takes for chicks (or eyas) to learn to fly, hunt, stoop, and handle prey in flight. Peregrines do not mate before the ages of 2 or 3.

Legends about peregrines date back thousands of years. In Egypt in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, B.C., Ra, the greatest of gods, had a human body and the head of a falcon coiffed with a disc of the sun. Ra, the creator of the world, was the god of sun, kings, and sky.

Falcon symbolism in the US is rooted in the prehistoric Mississippian culture of Mound Builders. Many Indian tribes retain elements of this culture according to which the falcon resides in the upper world with spirits of the sun, moon, and stars.

Nomads of central Asia initiated the practice of falconry 3,000 years ago. Since the middle ages, falconry has been practiced throughout Eurasia by aristocrats and gentry. Today the activity is widely practiced by others.

The esteem once showered on falcons throughout history barely survives today. Like other raptors, such as bald eagles, they were almost driven to extinction by 1970 because of widespread use of DDT. Legislation forbidding the use of this chemical has allowed peregrines to make a comeback. However, they still face a precarious future. Many falcons are shot as pests by farmers and pigeon fanciers. But thanks in part to the attention brought to their plight by Baker’s book and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* our fields and forests, mountains, deserts, and cities are alive with peregrines.

In a final note Baker sadly reminds his readers that; “*No pain, no death, is more terrible to a wild creature than its fear of man.*”

**References:** Baker, J.A., *The Peregrine*, New York Review of Books, 1967; Peregrine Falcon Identification, [alaboutbirds.org/guide](http://alaboutbirds.org/guide); Panko, Ben, *Peregrine Falcon*, [smithsonianmag.com](http://smithsonianmag.com), February 3, 2017; [thespruce.com/types-of-birds-of-prey-](http://thespruce.com/types-of-birds-of-prey-); *PeregrineFalcon*; *Peregrine Falcon* in Wikipedia;



# Phone Apps for Birding

By Charlie Weil

The smartphone has become our in-hand computer for quick searches and identification of bird species. It has replaced the need to carry along a field guide and several of them now contain software to compare and identify an image or stored photograph. We will explore four of these apps.

If you are interested in identification of bird species or just want to know more about various species, you might want to investigate the following three applications: Merlin Bird ID, Picture Bird, and Audubon Bird Application.

Merlin is a program from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, powered by the eBird software. Launched in 2014, the app can be downloaded to your smart phone for free. The Apple store customer satisfaction survey rates this the highest of the three programs with 5 stars.

Once Merlin is on your phone you download a regional pack that contains specifics for the birds in your area along with bar charts that indicate the time of the year that a species is most likely to be found there. The app user can identify an unknown species of bird by one of two methods. The first is to answer the following three questions: Size of the bird? What are the main colors? What was the bird doing? The software then returns pictures of the most probable species that fit these criteria, taking into consideration the region and time of the year.

The second Merlin method of identification is by analysis of a picture of the unknown species. This can be either a picture you have just snapped or one that is stored in your phone's album. The software analyzes the image and, again, in conjunction with the region and date, makes the most probable identification. Once the bird is identified it can be easily reported in eBird.

The Merlin software also allows you to explore a field guide of all the bird species in the region with multiple pictures of each species, bird songs, and calls, and a range map where the species can be found during breeding, migration, or wintering. Merlin contains a library of 20,000 songs and calls.

A second birding identification app is Picture Bird. The basic app is free, but a Premium version is available for \$29.99/year. This app scores 4.5 stars for customer satisfaction at the Apple store. The basic app identifies birds either by taking a picture at the moment or through analysis of a stored image. I do not have enough experience with this app to judge its accuracy but its close cousin "Picture This," which uses the same approach for identification of flowers and plants, is particularly good. The



program does not have an alternative approach of questions and answers to identify birds.

The third available app is the Audubon Bird app which is also powered by eBird and is available for free from the Apple store. Scoring 4 stars for customer satisfaction, this app can be used to identify a bird species by answering a series of questions similar to those in Merlin. You can also browse the field guide which contains 800 species of North American birds. The software does not offer identification by comparison to a photo.

Finally, there is the eBird application, which is not used for identification but can be used to track your own personal list as well as to report species you have seen. You can also use the explore option which will show you a map of local hot spots. By clicking on the hotspot, it will list all the species that have been identified at that location.

You are carrying the phone anyway. Now you have four more ways to make use of it!

## Awesome Audubon Quiz

1. Weighing less than 0.2 ounce, the ruby-throated hummingbird has to beat its wings more than \_\_\_\_\_ times a second to hover in front of a flower.
  - a. 12
  - b. 32
  - c. 52
  - d. 72
2. True or false? A vulture's stomach acid is so corrosive that it can digest anthrax-infected carcasses?
3. Considered the most dangerous bird in the world, the \_\_\_\_\_ can kill its enemy with one kick.
  - a. Emu
  - b. Cassowary
  - c. Sandhill crane
  - d. Ostrich
4. The American kestrel is often referred to as the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. What is the most common owl in the Americas?
  - a. Great horned
  - b. Saw-whet owl
  - c. Screech owl
  - d. Barn owl

**Quiz answers can be found at the bottom of the next page.**

**Black River Audubon Membership only  
(but including Wingtips) is \$15/Year**

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**“The mission of the Black River Audubon Society  
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.”**

**National Audubon Membership Application  
(Includes membership in Black River Audubon  
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**New York, NY 10014**

**Attention: Chance Mueleck**

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To pay online, go to *[blackriveraudubon.org/membership](http://blackriveraudubon.org/membership)*  
and select the type of membership you prefer.

Answers to quiz: 1) c, 2) true, 3) cassowary, 4) sparrow hawk, 5) great horned

# Black River Audubon Society Spring Raffle

## Proceeds to benefit Audubon Adventures

Black River Audubon will be selling raffle tickets for two bird-themed prize packages April 1-30. Tickets are \$10 with the proceeds benefiting expansion of our Audubon Adventures program for children.

The packages feature fun things like bird seed, *A Season on the Wind* by Kenn Kaufman, bird houses, *Monty and Rose* documentary DVD, a bird lamp, and the popular *North American Life List* book. (Please check online on April 1 for the complete list of prizes.)

The winning tickets will be drawn on May 8, 2021, International Migratory Bird Day. The tickets will be sold only at [www.blackriveraudubon.org](http://www.blackriveraudubon.org).



A sample of the prizes. Full list available April 1 at [blackriveraudubon.org](http://blackriveraudubon.org).

## About Audubon Adventures

Audubon Adventures is an environmental education curriculum product created by the National Audubon Society for grades 3 - 5. Developed by professional environmental educators, Audubon Adventures presents standards-based science content about birds, wildlife, and their habitats. It can be used in classrooms, home schools, after school programs, ESL classes and more.

Audubon Adventures introduces young people, their families, and their teachers to the fundamental principles by which the natural world functions. The print publications and website offer an exciting, science-based exploration of those principles at work anchored in nonfiction reading and outdoor and classroom activities that help kids to care for our planet by helping birds and other wildlife.



RING-BILLED GULL, photographer Chuck Slusarczyk, Jr., Whiskey Island, Cleveland



## **BLACK RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY**

*"Birding Since 1958"*

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