

WINGTIPS



CEDAR WAXWING photo by Debbie Parker

OCTOBER 2020

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October 2020 Virtual Program

Tuesday, October 5, 7 p.m.

Via Zoom & Facebook

Richard “Buster” Banish Presents the Bird Nerds



Buster Banish and the “Bird Nerds” on the Magee Marsh boardwalk during the spring of 2019.

Buster Banish was first introduced to birding as an adult more than 25 years ago when his wife’s aunt invited him on a bird walk. Instantly hooked, he has repaid that favor many times over since then. A few years after his introduction, the Cleveland schoolteacher began to promote birding at East Clark Elementary. Out of that effort came the self-proclaimed Bird Nerds, a continuing group of middle schoolers, whose enthusiasm and growing expertise has captured the attention of northern Ohio Birders.

Buster, along with a few of his students, will discuss the group’s success and its attractions for teens during our October Zoom program. To take part, be sure to register your address well ahead of time with BRAS. You can do so at www.blackriveraudubon.org. Just scroll to the bottom of the first page to register. You will later receive an invitation to take part in the meeting.

The program will also be available on Facebook Live. This method does not require a Facebook account. You simply “tune in” to the website from a link in www.blackriveraudubon.org.

Lorain County's Newest Nature Sanctuary

The Oberlin Preserve

By Diana Steele

The lavender-pink spires of obedient plant glowed in the early light as I strolled the prairie at the newly opened Oberlin Preserve on a late-August morning. The 12-foot stems of the big bluestem grasses swayed gently in the breeze and a mowed path beckoned. A family of house wrens sprung from the bluestem and chattered at me as I wandered, and American goldfinches chirped their “potato-chip-potato-chip-potato-chip” call as they zipped overhead. I might have heard the gentle hooting of a great horned owl in the distance.

The paths meander in lazy arcs, beckoning onward as flowers dot the landscape: large swaths of yellow and black native sunflowers; stunning indigo ironweed, purple coneflower, and pink swamp milkweed.

Three years ago, I trod this same ground—then a vast, empty, former soybean field—looking for killdeer nests and flagging them so no one would step on the eggs, camouflaged as large pebbles lying directly on the ground. Oberlin College track team members, Environment and Society students, and community members spread the seeds of prairie plants and tromped around to sink the seeds into the damp earth.

When Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC) purchased the 63-acre property five years ago, associate field director Kate Pilacky had her eye on the 30-acre woods at the south half of the land. Historically known as the Oberlin Great South Woods, the wet woods are a remnant of aboriginal northeast Ohio landscape. Too wet to farm and obviously logged at one time, the woods still retain their character of tall mixed hardwoods, largely white oak. The woods are a bird magnet, drawing warblers and woodpeckers, owls and sandpipers.

After eyeing the property since the early 2000's, WRLC finally cobbled together the money to purchase and preserve the woods, but Kate wondered what they could do with the 30 acres of farm field.

A native plant aficionado, Kate had a vision of what the land could become as it transformed from soybean field to prairie. She envisioned what Ohio's prairies might have looked like 200 years ago, and what this field might look like a decade into the future.

With funding from Oberlin College's Green Edge Fund, and volunteer labor from the college and community, she began constructing her vision.

Over the next several years, funding from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allowed the land conservancy to expand the prairie planting to the edge of the woods. And in 2019, Black River Audubon obtained a grant

from the National Audubon Society to tap into the historical significance of the property, which once was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The Copelands, an African American family, farmed the land for 60 years; their son, John, was executed for his participation in John Brown’s antislavery raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859.

Audubon’s \$2,900 grant purchased 40 native trees and shrubs, and about 25 of them, like hardy pecan, sassafras, aronia berry, elderberry and hazelnut were planted in the Bird Friendly Underground Railroad Freedom Garden in the northeast corner of the prairie. Many of these trees and shrubs are similar to those fleeing slaves might have used to provide nuts and berries for sustenance or for medicinal use. A newly planted cherry tree pays homage to the Copeland family orchard. Now these trees and shrubs will provide crucial food and shelter for migrating and nesting birds and for humans to enjoy.

Monarch butterflies, Eastern bluebirds, and tree swallows have already given the prairie their stamp of approval. Monarchs flit among the blossoms, caterpillars chomp on milkweed, and the native birds have nested in half the boxes on a bluebird trail installed in fall 2019.

Although the pandemic has halted, delayed, and disrupted many things; for the Oberlin Preserve, it accelerated the opening. The land conservancy board members believed that people need access to open land now more than ever, and the preserve provides space to wander and connect with nature without running into other people. On August 6, WRLC held a “grand” opening with a small group of invited guests and members of the press.



The temporary sign at the preserve (Gina Swindell photo)

Adjacent to active recreation areas—the Lorain County Metro Park’s Splash Zone, City of Oberlin’s Recreation Complex, and the North Coast Inland Bike Trail—the Preserve beckons visitors to these areas to drop in to wander the paths, and enjoy the flowers, birds, and butterflies.

Now that it’s open to the public, others can see what Kate had in her mind’s eye in 2015—a vision celebrating the past, enriching the present, and providing for the future.

Editor’s note: The Oberlin preserve is located west of the Splash Zone and Recreation complex on West Hamilton St. at the south end of Oberlin.

CEDAR WAXWING

Bombycilla cedrorum

By Dale Preston

Who is that handsome masked fellow, striking quite a pose over there by the holly tree at the corner of my house? He’s not keeping very socially distant from others, is he? In fact, there’s quite a gathering going on. There is a dozen or more, chattering away. I heard them before I saw them: a high-pitched, thin whistle that turned my head. It is a convivial crowd, enjoying late afternoon cherry hors d’oeuvres from a very generous tree.

While I struggle to look good in a mask these days, the waxwings are stylish and attractive in theirs. Their narrow black masks have a thin line of white at the edge which highlights the contours of the face and makes them look attentive and focused. But what really stands out in the field is the waxwing’s distinctive shape -- a crested head rather like a cardinal but more dapper, swept back as if combed; along with an upright posture when perched, similar in angle to that of a kestrel.

Take a closer look, though, and it is hard to believe that such an exquisitely colored bird regularly graces our neighborhoods and parks. The head and shoulders are copper beige, the chest is cream fading into lemon-yellow on the lower belly. The tip of the tail is the bright yellow of fresh acrylic paint. And what are those strange brilliant-red dashes decorating the wings? Often described as “sealing wax” these are actually the tips of several wing feathers where the shafts (which are bright red) extend beyond the barbs. Hence the common name of “waxwing.”

I always find the scientific names intriguing, too. *Bombycilla*, the genus name, is from *bombux*, “silk” and *cilla*, “tail”. Although I’ve never felt one, they supposedly have a soft silky plumage. And *cedrorum* is Latin referring to cedar or juniper trees. Whether this is because cedar waxwings are often found eating the berries in these trees, or perhaps because cedars

and junipers also happen to have reddish-colored wood, I don't know. But I like the association in either case.

The first time I ever saw a flock of cedar waxwings was at Shaker Lakes in Shaker Heights, Ohio, during a Christmas Bird Count 45 years ago when I was a teenager! I was blown away that such a remarkable-looking bird existed right there in the Cleveland suburbs where I grew up, and yet I'd never noticed them before. My eyes opened to the fact that my mind also needed to be open and attentive to the possibilities around me.

The most recent time I saw cedar waxwings was earlier this summer. They surprised me then, too. It was a beautiful June day and I had the good fortune to be in my canoe in the early morning hours on the scenic-and-wild part of the Cuyahoga River in Geauga County. The river winds through verdant swamp forests and marshes. I had the river to myself. As I paddled silently along, I became aware of that distinctive high-pitched whistle sound. I looked up, and just overhead, in a tree branch stretching from the bank to mid-river, there were suddenly two dozen waxwings in perfect morning light. I could easily see their fine coloring in full detail. If I'd stood up in the canoe, I could have nearly touched them. And then they were gone.

Look and listen for cedar waxwings in your own neighborhood and surrounding parks this season, as they can generally be found throughout the year in this part of Ohio. As mentioned above, they are highly social birds. I don't think I've ever seen just one; they're always in groups. You will find them searching for berries and sugary fruit year-round, especially on dogwood, serviceberry, hawthorn, cherry, and crabapple trees, as well as holly bushes and, of course, the tiny cones on cedar and juniper trees. Happy birding!

References: audubon.org/field-guide/bird/cedar-waxwing; wikipedia.org/wiki/cedar_waxwing; wikipedia.org/wiki/waxwing.

COMMON SHELDUCK

Tadorna tadorna

By **Barbara Baudot**

The Ornithological Park of Pont de Gau in the Camargue, France is a resting place for thousands of migratory birds. There, walking beside a large lagoon, I was awe-struck by a most beautiful, oversized duck standing erect on an islet. Its duck-like appearance was challenged by its overly large body, suggesting it might also be a short-necked goose. Principally cloaked in white feathers, the wings of this pied species were brightly trimmed with brown, black, and green feathers; and its chest was

decorated with a broad band of rusty brown intersected by a wide vertical strip of brown-black feathers. Males and females look very similar.

I researched a bird guidebook. There it was -- the common shelduck, one of six species, of the genus *tadorna*. A wide-ranging Eurasian species, a rare visitor in North America, shelducks are plentiful along the European Atlantic, North Sea, and Mediterranean coasts as far west as Iceland and as far east as China. They also breed inland on the temperate steppes and semi deserts of Eurasia, near saline, brackish and freshwater rivers and lakes.

These large, gentle ducks are comedians. They roll their eyes in amusing ways and they get up on their hind legs and walk in erect posture, swaying their necks to chase a rival or impress a mate. They pair for life and share responsibility for finding a nesting spot underground in rabbit, badger and fox burrows, or tree hollows. The female incubates her many eggs while the male stands guard. Together they lead their hatchlings to the water to feed themselves by sucking up small aquatic plants and animals. After a few days the ducklings are gathered into “nurseries” guarded by a couple of adult ducks. Ducklings remain here while their parents and other breeders migrate to communal molting grounds, remaining there the 25 to 31 days until fledging. Thereafter they return to their regular habitats. Some northern shelducks winter in subtropical regions of North Africa.

In North America, shelducks are infrequently seen. A major event, however, occurred December 17, 2017, when three wild shelducks were sighted flying over a nature park near the north shore of the Bay of Fundy. They stayed for the winter. Dozens of birders from the U.S. came to Saint John to see these birds. Although shelducks are sometimes kept in zoos and private collections in the US, these young shelducks, in full plumage, were not escapees. Rather, they were thought to be wild ducks blown off their migratory course. They were not banded, and their single hind toes were intact—not the case for wild birds in captivity.

Shelducks have had a checkered history. Fossil records indicate this bird’s presence since the late Pliocene age. Much later, the ancient Egyptians considered shelducks one of their sacred animals as shown in their paintings and writings. They are featured in hieroglyphs where their good nature is symbolized as the gentle tenderness of a mother. Aristotle was focused on the clarity of their eggs, considering them superior to those of other ducks. From this fact historian Buffon concluded that the Greeks raised shelducks for their eggs. It was Pierre Belon (1517-1564), great zoologist of the Renaissance, who gave the name *tadorne* to this genus. *Tadorne* is the Celtic word for pied or mixed color. In France, the shelduck is called *Tadorne de Belon*.

In the 19th century the shelduck, no longer prized for its wonderful qualities fell prey, like many other finely plumed birds, to feather hunters and were shot for their unpopular habit of nesting in rabbit holes. Shelduck eggs were also harvested for the table, as was its “not-so-delicious flesh.” Throughout this century shelduck populations declined dramatically. Beginning in 1953, its populations recovered. Today shelducks are protected by a number of treaties including the Agreement *on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds*. The IUCN ranks the shelduck of least concern.

References: Belon, Le tadorne dans l’histoire de la nature des oyseaux; Countyde Buffon, “Le Tadorne” dans le volume IX Les Oiseaux; Wikipedia, Common Shelduck; Breeding Biology of the Shelduck in researchgate.net/publication/229875931; www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/saint-john-common-shelduck-1.3920750.

More Threats to the Environment

Once again, as monstrous hurricanes wreak havoc in the south while wildfires devastate the west and the Arctic ice cover is disappearing, the administration concerns itself with increasing oil production. It hardly matters that demand is low, as are prices, and that investment banks have pledged not to finance oil drilling in the Arctic, we still hear the demand for more production coming from Washington.

In a series of recent articles on its website, National Audubon announced that the Department of Interior had finalized its plans for oil and gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This included the first sale of land leases in the coastal plain, land sacred to Native Americans and important habitat for polar bears, caribou, and migrating birds. The article predicted the government would end protection of the old-growth forests of the Tongass National Forest, an area important to birds that also serves to store climate warming carbon in its old growth forests.

All of these developments and more come at a time when the administration is weakening the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), signed by President Nixon in 1970, that has enabled the environmental improvements of the last half century. National Audubon announced in August that it has joined a coalition of organizations to oppose the administration’s drastic weakening of the NEPA. Among other things, the current changes to the Act narrow the type of environmental effects that will be considered, weaken standards for relying on science in environmental decision-making, allow the industries involved to prepare their own impact statements, and shorten deadlines for public review and input.

National Audubon has promised that it and its partner organizations are just beginning the legal fight against the weakening of this keystone act of the environmental movement. Learn ways in which you can help at www.audubon.org.

References: “Audubon Takes the Administration to Court to Save America’s Arctic,” Audubon.org, August 26,2020; “Audubon is Going to Court to Save Fifty Years of Environmental Protection, Audubon.org, August 11, 2020.

October Bird Hikes at Sandy Ridge Metro Park

Sandy Ridge Reservation is still having its Wednesday morning bird hikes but with the usual public health restrictions. The upcoming hikes are scheduled to take place October 21 and 28 from 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Pre-registration is required through the Sandy Ridge Reservation section of the Lorain County Metro Parks website. Once there click on events and then programs to arrive at the registration page. The hikes are limited to 10 participants. Everyone must maintain the usual 6-foot social distancing rules. **Face masks are strongly recommended, as is frequent hand sanitizing.** Those who are sick are not permitted to attend.

BRAS Field Trips

As announced in the September Wingtips, BRAS will not have an October field trip. A decision will be made in October about field trips in the rest of 2020 and beyond.

Be Sure to Register Your Email Address with BRAS

Remember, for the foreseeable future Black River Audubon Society monthly meetings will be “virtual,” making use of Zoom and Facebook to present our programs. In order to receive directions regarding how to take part, you need to register your email address with Black River Audubon Society. To do so, simply go to www.blackriveraudubon.org and fill out the boxes at the bottom of the first page. Doing so, will also enable BRAS to get in touch with you and other registered members quickly.



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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
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Name _____

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Chapter Code S52, 7XCH8
Send your check to: National Audubon Society,
225 Varick Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10014
Attention: Chance Mueleck



Chasing the Vagrant Brown Booby

By Gina Swindell



Brown Booby Juvenile, (photo courtesy of Dan Wilson)

One of my favorite Facebook pages is Ohio Chase Birds. This is a site where people can report rare bird sightings, those that one would be willing to “chase.” But a brown booby in Ohio? I took another look and sure enough, someone had reported one – and not too far away!

This juvenile tropical bird, probably blown off course by a storm and never before seen in Ohio, was reported on August 26th at Nimisila Reservoir in Summit County. The phone notification came while I was at work. I quickly looked to see where this was. Too far for a weekday trip.

Saturday finally arrived and my husband and I were off chasing. Thanks to the directions in Facebook we made it there in an hour. As we stepped out of the car, we heard a high-pitched screech coming from our left. A beautiful osprey was sitting atop a nearby tree. What a great start!

Friendly birders eagerly pointed to the tree the booby was calling home. We were about 100 yards away, but it could be seen with a spotting scope that a birder was happy to share. Before catching a glimpse, we noted people chest-high in the water, under “the” tree. They were getting a great view and this bird did not mind their presence a bit.

A nice Amish lady told us that there was a path through the woods leading to an area where we would be able to get a closeup view. We stayed long enough to get a good glimpse and a few pictures, then made room for others to enjoy the view. We counted about 40 people by the time we left at 9 a.m. On our way out we saw trees loaded with Tent caterpillar nests as well as a cormorant rookery. What a fruitful trip!

We ended the morning with the best veggie omelet I’ve ever had at a local place called Woodies. On to the next chase bird. Happy birding!



COMMON SHELDUCK Photo by Barbara Baudot

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