

**Black River Audubon Society**

# **WINGTIPS**

April 2013



BALTIMORE ORIOLE photo by DANE ADAMS

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## Mission Statement

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.

### Help Preserve Wildlife and Wildlife Habitats!

**Charitable giving through planned gifts to the Black River Audubon Society helps make sure that the Society's mission to conserve habitats for wildlife and educate the public about birds continues to thrive. No gift is too small and every gift is welcome. All are deductible.**

**Black River Audubon Society sets aside all sizable bequests, endowments, and other planned gifts in various available trusts in which only the income generated is used for support of the organization or designated programs. Benefactors thus leave this world with a feeling that they made a gift that keeps on giving in perpetuity.**

## Program

**Harvey Webster**

Cleveland Museum of Natural History

### Of Mast and Men:

#### **The Life, Times, and Demise of the Passenger Pigeon**

Tuesday, April 2, 7 p.m.

Carlisle Visitor Center

Webster, Director of Wildlife Resources at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and a nationally known conservationist, oversees educational programs and the museum's Ralph Perkins Wildlife Center. He also helped facilitate the recovery of the bald eagle. The museum was the first institution in the world to use artificial insemination to successfully breed eagles and introduce the young to existing wild nests. But the plight of the passenger pigeon has always been one of his pet interests, according to Webster.

"Approximately 200 years ago, the passenger pigeon was possibly the most numerous species of bird on earth, with a population of 3.5 billion," Webster explained. "Frontier descriptions of flock size defy imagination. Flocks darkened the skies for days-on-end in migration. Nesting colonies could occupy 50 square miles. And yet by 1914 the species was extinct."

Join us for an overview of the history of this remarkable species, the nature of its extraordinary numbers, current thoughts on the causes of its extinction, and the lessons for landscape ecology. Webster will also explore how the passenger pigeon's demise sparked the modern conservation movement.

## Field Trip

**April 20, 2013 (Saturday)**

Charlemont Reservation at 9:00 a.m.

Parking Lot, New London Eastern Road

Search for Wilson's snipes

## Jack Smith Outstanding Speaker: Al Batt

### Stories by Al Batt, Naturally

Saturday, April 27, 2 p.m., Carlisle Visitor Center

Batt, who hails from Hartland, Minnesota, is a man of many talents. Along with storytelling and speaking at festivals all over the United States and Canada, Batt is an author and a monthly columnist for Bird Watcher's Digest. He also contributes nature articles to weekly newspapers, hosts radio shows and is a nationally syndicated cartoonist.

His quirky laugh-out-loud humor about nature and birding escapades will leave you with a newfound appreciation of birds and the world we live in.

This program is free to the public. For more information contact the Lorain County Metro Parks at 1-800-LCM-PARK or visit [www.metroparks.cc](http://www.metroparks.cc). For more information about the Black River Audubon Society visit [www.blackriveraudubon.org](http://www.blackriveraudubon.org) or call 440-225-7601.



# Jack Smith and Homing Pigeons

## Rock Pigeons

*Columbia livia*

By **Harry Spencer**

This tribute to the late Jack Smith focuses upon two of his long-time interests: homing pigeons and the scientific explanation of their homing skills.

In the February 2008 issue of WINGTIPS, Jack wrote, “A January 2008 article in *Discover* magazine brought back memories of racing homing pigeons. During 1942 through 1945 my brother Tom and I raised and raced homing pigeons while we were high school students. We, and about a dozen others, were members of the Elyria Pigeon Club.

Our club cooperated with clubs in Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis, New York City, and perhaps others. Members of the Elyria Pigeon Club competed with each other in any given race, the objective of which was to determine the pigeon that arrived home first. If the Chicago club was cooperating with us on a race, we shipped our birds by railroad to Chicago. There members of the Chicago club met the train bearing our birds, took the birds to the starting point, and released them.”

In July 2012 Jack verbally expanded on that long ago activity. He told his niece, Stacy Shields, brother-Tom’s daughter, and me a story about how he had dramatically educated some of his high school classmates about the homing skills of his pigeons.

To fulfill a request, Jack took one or more pigeons to class and talked to the students about the skills and behavior of the birds. When he finished his talk, Jack threw the birds out an open window. Jack assured the students that the birds would be waiting at home.

He told Stacy and me that he had encountered recently one of those former classmates, who remembered the dramatic demonstration.

Jack would have been thrilled and skeptical, perhaps, to read a recent scientific study and explanation of the pigeon’s homing ability (*Journal of Experimental Biology*, **216**, 687-699, 2013). The author, J. T. Hagstrum of the U.S. Geological Survey, concluded that the birds use very low frequency sound. These frequencies are well below the detection range of human ears.

## Brown Creeper

*Certhia americana*

By **Diane Devereaux**

I first noticed this bird on trees near the Black River and quickly became intrigued by its small size and interesting behavior. Since that first sighting, I have been trying to get a good photograph, but it is difficult due to its very effective camouflage and constant motion.

This tiny little scrap of mottled brown and white resembles a nuthatch in body shape but has a long, slender, down-curved bill, and long, stiff tail feathers that taper to a point. Its upper body is brown with white and tawny streaks, making it almost impossible to distinguish from tree bark unless the bird is moving. Its under body is cream colored with a pale reddish under tail. From tip-of-beak to end-of-tail, a bird is approximately 5 ¼ inches long, half consisting of tail. There is no distinction in the coloring or patterns of male and female plumage. The male is larger. Juveniles are similar to adults but with paler markings.

The brown creeper uses its rigid tail feathers to support itself as it climbs from the very bottom of a tree trunk nearly all the way to the top of the tallest tree in a jerky, spiraling motion. Then it drops down to the base of another nearby tree and begins the process all over again. With its decurved bill, it forages under tree bark

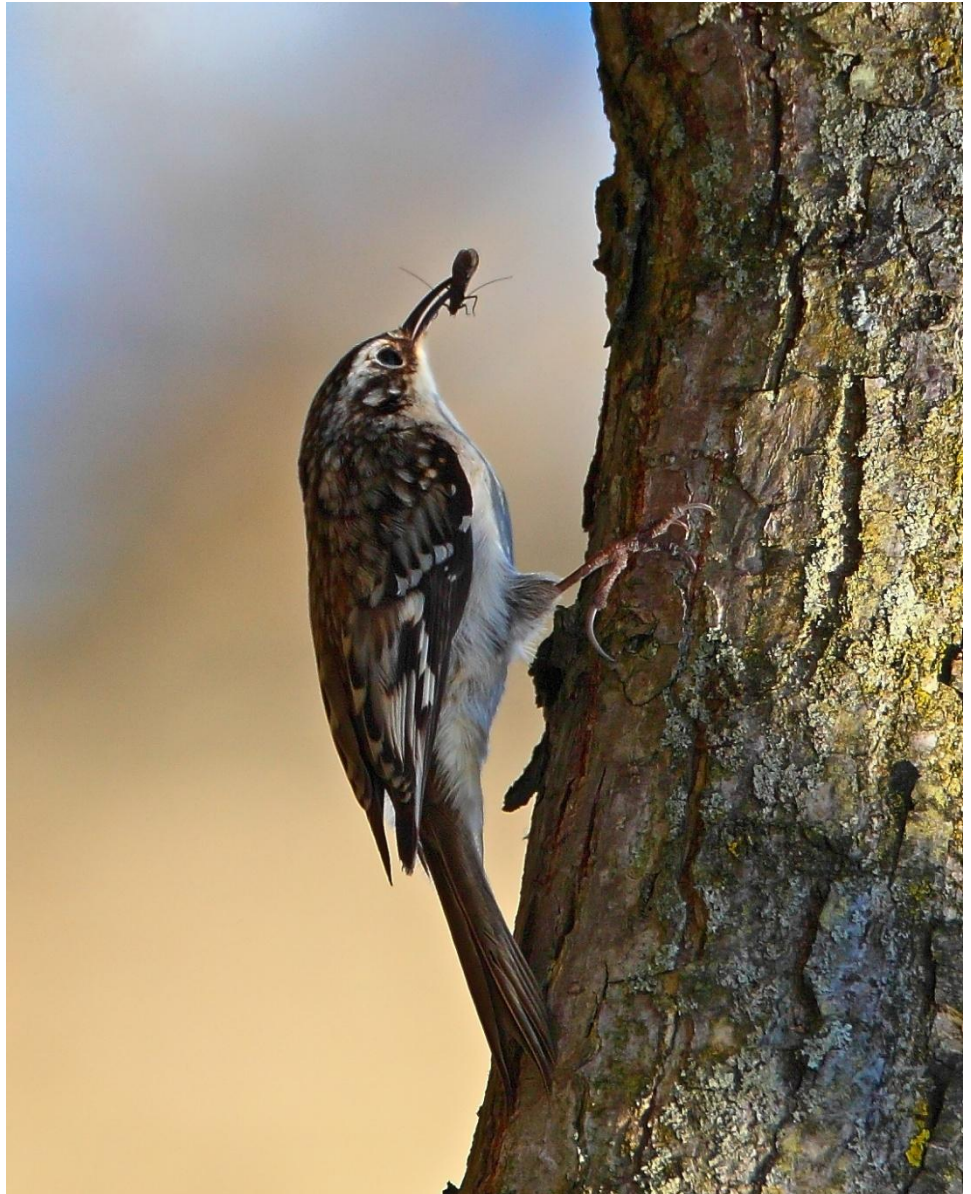
and in cavities for insects and larvae, thereby eliminating some of the smaller insect pests overlooked by other birds.

It is, generally, a solitary bird, which may be another reason why it often goes unnoticed. It prefers old growth forest and dead trees, particularly along riparian corridors. In winter, however, creepers eat seeds and other vegetable matter in the company of nuthatches, chickadees, titmice and kinglets. If you see one, do not be afraid to approach it. They are, generally, quite preoccupied with their foraging and somewhat tolerant of observers.

Brown creepers range from Alaska and southern Canada through the eastern Great Lakes. In Ohio, the species can be seen anytime during the year. They are widely distributed across the U.S. in winter. During migration, they often travel in loose groups all the way from Alaska to Mexico and farther south.

Breeding season begins in April and peaks in May, June & July. Females build nests, sometimes in cavities but usually under peeling tree bark. A nest is hammock-shaped, anchored to a tree with twigs and other nesting materials. Lined with feathers, lichens and spider cocoons, it is generally 5 to 15 feet above the ground. The female lays 5 to 7 cream-colored eggs, sometimes lightly speckled with brownish spots. The chicks fledge in 15 to 17 days and both parents help to feed the young.

When it comes to bird music, this little songbird's music is angelic. Listen for a pure, delicate, high-pitched "see seeedsee sideeu" or "see ti wee tu wee" and you may spot this delightful little bird.



BROWN CREEPER photo by DANE ADAMS

**References:** *holdenarb.org*; *allaboutbirds.org*; *nationalgeographic.com*; *Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by David Alderton; *Bent Life History*, Smithsonian Institute

## **A Birder's Diary: Tram Riding at Sandy Ridge**

By **Carol Leininger**

At my age, sit-down birding is a welcome activity, and I thoroughly enjoy birding-by-tram at Sandy Ridge, where I have made many wonderful sightings over the years. A great time to see and hear many songbirds is the month of May during peak migration. Ducks, geese, waders, and shorebirds are abundant as they pass through, dressed in their most colorful breeding plumage. They are very vocal, also.

Many birds nest in our area and provide wonderful views. I have many favorites. Woodcocks lurk amongst leaf litter on the forest floor. Young great horned owls sit on their nest and peer down at me. Bald eagles perch or soar over the wetland. Soras run across tunnels through the bulrushes. A hummingbird incubates eggs on its tiny nest. Red-headed woodpeckers actively move among the tall dead snags. Sandhill cranes feed along the trail. Killdeer eggs and young occupy gravel scoops beside the trail. Bitterns slowly stalk their prey. A swooping harrier hunts over the wetland.

While singing and feeding, rose-breasted grosbeaks brighten the dark woods. Young wood ducks and mallards follow their parents. Pervasive down feathers and nesting debris from Canada geese decorate the entire area. An eastern bluebird and a prothonotary warbler share multiple nest cavities in the same dead snag. Tree swallows skim over the water as they feed before returning to their nests in bluebird-nest-boxes. Baltimore-oriole nests hang from branches above the trail. Eastern kingbirds dart from their perches to catch insects before returning to their perches. Cedar waxwings sit on skinny toothpick-like twigs sticking out of the water. Indigo buntings and vireos sing their hearts out. Green herons patiently fish. In a patch of sunlight, a scarlet tanager sits on a dead log and feeds. Belted kingfishers rattle as they fly on fishing expeditions. Song and swamp sparrows sing from their perches.

Sandy Ridge also is home to other wildlife. Snapping turtles and frogs cross the trail. Raccoons peer from a hollow tree. Muskrats and mink swim about. Dragonflies soar, and butterflies flutter. Painted turtles sun on floating logs. A snake curls in a nest of goose eggs. White-tailed deer browse in the woods. A fawn even sleeps beside the trail.

On any single tram ride, passengers would not see all of these bird and wildlife sights. Sightings vary with location, habitat, and season. This is especially true of plant life. In the early spring the trees leaf out and the woods are alive with wildflowers—may-apple, trillium, cut-leaf toothwort, wild geranium, and jack-in-the-pulpit, to name a few. Later in spring, blue flag and squawroot appear. As summer progresses, crown vetch, clover, oxeye daisies, and birds-foot trefoil are abundant. Pond lilies, rushes, pickerelweed, milkweed, and swamp roses bloom. In fall, golden rod and tickseed sunflowers are everywhere. Even the cattails go through changes as the season progresses. And in the dark, cool forest, fungi of all kinds can be seen on dead wood.

Nature has so many enjoyable surprises. Check them out!



# BALTIMORE ORIOLE

*Icterus galbula*

By **Cathy Priebe**

One spring I saw my first Baltimore oriole when it landed on my hummingbird feeder. Immediately I was hooked. I had to have this bird in my yard. For five springs, I placed numerous orange slices on tree limbs in my yard. I filled special oriole feeders with orange nectar and placed them on hooks. My efforts attracted no orioles.

My husband commented that at least the yard looked festive, decorated in bright shades of orange. I told him that if the food was unavailable upon their arrival, the birds would go elsewhere. He laughed and let me continue my mission each year.

About 12 years ago, early April was warmer than usual. I diligently put out my oriole buffet with no takers.

When an unexpected cold snap with dreary, rainy skies arrived, one oriole began eating from a soggy orange, and my spirits lifted. Soon it seemed as if the sky had started raining orioles. They dropped into my yard by the dozens. Before the week was over, I was feeding nearly 100 Baltimore and orchard orioles! We even constructed a table, by placing a piece of plywood over a wheelbarrow, to support double-sided pet dishes filled with orange fluid. I traveled all over town hunting for oranges. It was crazy, but so much fun, too!

I invited anyone and everyone who would believe me to come over and see this spectacle, which lasted for two weeks. I later learned that this event, popularly called fallout, does not happen very often, especially in someone's backyard!

From that moment, my relationship with orioles has continued. Spring brings at least three dozen oriole visitors to my yard, most of them spreading out and nesting in our neighborhood. My oriole buffet includes oranges, nectar in feeders and the very popular grape jelly. Grape jelly also attracts catbirds and the occasional raccoon.

Removal of the jelly feeders at night controls the raccoon plundering. Wasted jelly is costly.

My yard is like an oriole flyway in the summer. All of the birds come from wherever they are in the neighborhood to eat at my buffet. Every two or three minutes an oriole visits my yard. I have had the privilege of removing by hand a couple of immature orioles from under our patio.

Orioles like suburban areas and open deciduous forests, orchards and parklands. They eat some fruit and glean bugs high in the tree canopy.

My place is a one-stop shop for orioles, because I place many pieces of twine around the yard. Female orioles use these pieces of twine, grass, and plant stems to construct hanging pouch nests. Each bird lays four or five pale-gray-to-bluish-white eggs in the nests. She incubates her eggs for about two weeks.

A male, as seen on the cover, is a gorgeous orange and black, and the female is a pale copy of him. These handsome birds are members of the blackbird family.

I highly encourage bird lovers to feed orioles. Start placing orange slices out in early April and wait. If you do not feed them, they will not come!

Good luck!

**Reference:** *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac

## April Yard Birds

By **Angie Adkins**

April is here, and the trees, shrubs and flowers are waking up. The bird activity in the yards is increasing. Migration is underway, and you can expect new visitors. Some will stay for the summer, but others will stop to eat before continuing their journey. Here is a list of birds, favorite foods, and frequent habitats.



**RUBY-** and **GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLETS** – found in pine trees; **BROWN CREEPER**-suet and bugs from tree trunks; **HERMIT THRUSH**-bugs under leaves on ground; **WOOD THRUSH**-feeds in wet areas; **NORTHERN FLICKER, PILEATED WOODPECKER, and YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER**-fruit, suet, peanut, tree sap, bugs; **WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH**-suet, mixed seed, peanuts; **RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH**-suet, peanuts-pine trees; **CAROLINA WREN**- suet, peanuts, bugs in leaf litter and tree crevices; **HOUSE WREN**-suet, bugs under leaves and tree crevices; **BLUE GRAY GNATCATCHER**- bugs-high in tree canopy, usually near water; **CEDAR WAXWING**- berries-trees and shrubs; **BALTIMORE** and **ORCHARD ORIOLES, GRAY CATBIRD, NORTHERN MOCKING BIRD, and AMERICAN ROBIN**-fruit, oranges, grapes, grape jelly, raisins, suet, worms; **EASTERN TOWHEE**, bugs under leaves and bushes; **SONG, FIELD, CHIPPING, FOX, WHITE-THROATED, and WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS**-mixed seed and bugs on ground and under leaves; **PALM, YELLOW-RUMPED, and YELLOW WARBLERS**-bugs on ground and in trees and bushes-attracted to water; **RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS**-flowers, small insects, and nectar from feeders.

## **Citizen Science: Results of 16th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)**

In late February 2013 National Audubon released preliminary results from the February 15-18 GBBC event indicating the largest worldwide GBBC ever. Audubon, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Bird Studies Canada jointly sponsor this citizen science program.

Citizen birders from 107 countries and all continents, including Antarctica, submitted more than 129,000 checklists. Most checklists came from the United States followed by Canada. Birders counted more than 27 million birds of more than 3200 species.

Audubon urges birders to continue counting birds and reporting their observations on eBird.org so that research workers at Cornell and Audubon can understand better various characteristics of wild birds.