

Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

December 2009



Editors: Jack Smith and Harry Spencer
Photographer: John Koscinski
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Greater Black-backed Gull
John Koscinski

Program

7:00 p.m. December 1, 2008

Sandy Ridge Nature Center

(Note the location!)

Paul Barding

Environmental Scientist, Sherwin-Williams

In the Steps of Darwin:

Birds and Other Wildlife of the Galapagos Islands

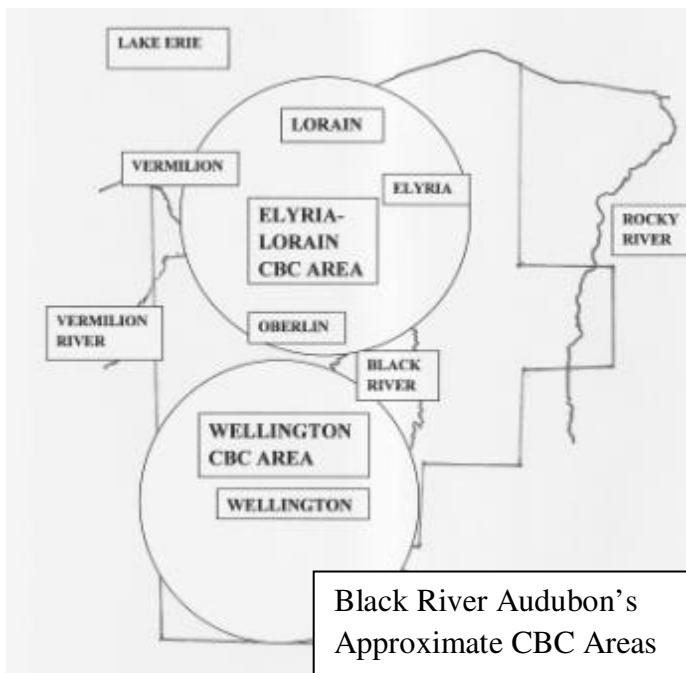
Paul Barding is an environmental scientist with degrees in environmental biology and zoology. He enjoys all aspects of nature and has been an avid birder for over 30 years and has birded in Alaska, Peru, Costa Rica, and the Galapagos.



Christmas Bird Counts

Nationwide tens of thousands of observers participate each year in this all-day census of early-winter bird populations. The results of their efforts are compiled into the longest running database that represents an unbroken set of data revealing trends in bird populations. The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is citizen science in action. The Black River Audubon Society conducts counts within two different areas.

You can join us in the field or count the birds coming to your feeder at home, if you live within one of the two count-circles. No experience is needed, and birders of all skill-levels are welcome. If you are new to birding or the CBC, we'll assign you to work with an experienced team of birders. You do not need to participate for the whole day. We'd be happy if you can join us, even if it is just for a few hours. Some areas in a count circle are best counted on foot and others are more suitable to be counted from a vehicle. We can accommodate birders of nearly all mobility levels.



Black River Audubon's
Approximate CBC Areas

Ways to obtain further information:

1. Come to the monthly chapter meeting, Tuesday, December 1, Sandy Ridge Nature Center, or
2. Contact one of the coordinators, or
3. Register online at

[http:// www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/index.htm](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/index.htm)

Select **Get Involved**.

The **Elyria-Lorain** count code is **OHEL**.

The **Wellington** count code is **OHWE**.

Elyria-Lorain CBC

Saturday, December 19, 2009

Coordinator: Jack Smith 440-322-0820

Wellington CBC

Saturday, January 2, 2010

Coordinator: Erik Bruder 440-808-1970 or erik.bruder@gmail.com

Come to the McDonald's in Wellington at 7:30 AM on January 2, 2010. We'll assign you to a count area at that time.

At the end of the day we will be meeting at the Oberlin Depot on SR58 across from McDonald's in Oberlin at 6:30 p.m. for a potluck dinner. We'll compile the results and share stories from the day's activities. Bring a dish to share. Soda, coffee, water, and tableware will be provided. You do not have to participate in the count to join us at the potluck dinner.

Field Trip: Carlisle Reservation, October 17

By **Harry Spencer**

The Equestrian-Center parking-lot was filled at the scheduled starting time of 8 a.m., yet vehicles continued to



Carlisle Reservation October 17
H. Spencer

arrive for a scholastic cross- country meet. Fortunately the trails used by the runners and the trails that we followed were mostly different, and the runners and spectators did not interfere with us as we crossed the bridge and proceeded up the hill to the Meadow Loop Trail.

Before we crossed the bridge, however, Nan Miller, Nan Shipman, Harriet Alger, Ken Austin, Dick Lee, and I searched largely unsuccessfully at the nearby pond-site. The



White-crowned Sparrow/John Koscinski

wetlands and woods across the river were somewhat more productive.

We identified twenty-three species including two water fowl, the ubiquitous Canada goose and mallard; three woodpeckers, red-bellied and downy woodpeckers, and northern flicker; blue jay and American crow; black-capped chickadee; both kinglets, golden- and ruby-crowned; two thrushes, eastern bluebird and American robin; and four sparrows, song, swamp, white-throated, and white-

crowned.

Additionally we identified red-tailed hawk, ring-billed gull, European starling, eastern towhee, northern cardinal, and red-winged blackbird.

When the overcast sky yielded a moderate drizzle, we headed for our cars. But in spite of the rain and the cool temperature in the forties, we enjoyed a pleasant birding walk.

The Great Black-backed Gull

“The Great Bully on the Block”

(*Larus marinus*)

By **Jack Smith**

On the front cover of this WINGTIPS issue is a photo of the largest gull in the world, a bird with a wing span of 5-5 ½ feet and length of 28-31 inches. With weights ranging from 2 1/2 to 4 pounds, this gull is a heavyweight. It is found in the northern parts of the world, northern Europe, Britain, and Russia and along the eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada. On our January 16th field trip to Lorain Harbor and Avon Lake, we will likely encounter this magnificent bird.



As winter sets in, these birds migrate from their coastal breeding grounds that stretch from Canada to Maine and down the St. Lawrence River to the Great Lakes. In increasing numbers they are seen along our Lake Erie shoreline but seldom are observed too far inland.

Linnaeus, an Eighteenth century botanist and the originator of the binominal system of scientific ordering of living organisms now called the Linnaean System, named the gull. Its genus name, *Larus*, is a Greek word meaning ravenous sea bird, and its species name, *marinus*, is a Latin word meaning of the sea.

Ravenous it most surely is, and of all the gulls it is probably the most ravenous. This bird is omnivorous and eats almost anything from carrion, fish, baby birds and eggs, mollusks, crustaceans, marine worms, insects, rodents and berries. It takes advantage of any source of food and throws its weight around by robbing neighboring nests of other species, such as smaller terns and gulls. The surviving parents flutter hopelessly above the carnage. Two great black-backed gulls sometime cooperate as a team to attack and kill victims. Sometimes a team attacks and kills a bird in midair. By all definitions it is a bully!

In some areas great black-backed gulls and Atlantic puffin both nest. But woe to a puffin that flies too closely to a black-backed gull. The gull can catch a puffin and swallow it whole. The “Bully” has a wide mouth and expandable gullet which allows it to eat one third of its body weight at one setting.

Anything dead that washes up on shore is a meal for the great black-backed gull. A dead whale is one of its delicacies. The birds follow fishing boats and frequently dine at garbage dumps and sewage outlets.

Black-backed gulls sometimes soar above rocky terrain and drop mussels on rocks below. Then the bird swoops down to feed on the tender morsels exposed by the shattered remains.

If this isn't some form of learning behavior showing a degree of intelligence rather than an innate behavior pattern, I am a monkey's uncle.

The great black-backed gull goes through a series of plumage changes each year until the fourth year when it assumes its breeding plumage of a white head, white breast and white tail, and yellow bill with a red spot on the lower mandible called the gonydeal spot. It has slate-black back and wings with the wings outlined by a narrow band of white. Pink legs distinguish great black-backed gull from the yellow legs of the lesser black-backed gull.

Male and female look alike and can't be told apart visually.

In the fourth and fifth year an adult bird is ready to breed. In North America nesting sites are located along the North Atlantic coast from Maine to Labrador and beyond. A site can be on the ground, or on a rocky ledge or an outcrop. The nest can be isolated or in a colony. A nest can be about two feet in diameter and built

up to a height of five to six inches. Feathers, dry plant-materials, such as moss, seaweed or grass are nesting materials. Both male and female take part in building the nest. The female lays two or three eggs that are colored olive-to-buff with brown blotches. The eggs are a little larger than a hen's egg.

Both sexes incubate the eggs, and at least one guards the nest at all times. The eggs hatch after 27-28 days and the young begin feeding on food regurgitated by the adults. I have heard speculation that an adult's red gonydeal spot acts as a guide for the nestling as it puts its beak into the parent's mouth. As the nestlings age, the parents simply lay the food in front of young and let them fight for the morsels. The chicks fledge after seven or eight weeks, and the young achieve independence shortly afterwards.

Some birds remain in parts of the breeding range year around; some migrate along the Atlantic Coast and as far south as Florida. And still others migrate down the St. Lawrence River to the Great Lakes and into our area.

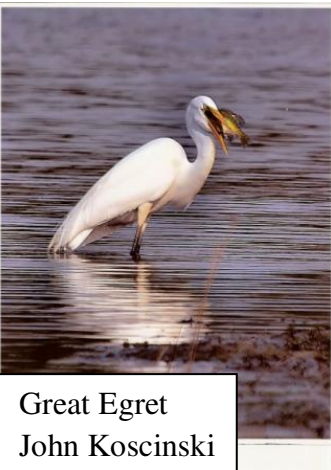
The population of great black-backed gulls does not seem to be in any jeopardy, as the numbers have been increasing since the 1930's as the breeding range expands southward along the Atlantic Coast and into some areas of the Great Lakes.

References: *Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley, *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman, *Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn, *Peterson Field Guides to Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres, *The Encyclopedia of Birds*, Volume 1 by Editorial Director- Laurie E. Lickoff

A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

One thing I've learned during my years of birding is that it helps to know the territory! I once took my nephew, PJ, to Florida when he was in grade school. We often enjoyed birding together. One day we stood by a ditch admiring a beautiful great egret about six feet from us, when, WHAM, the egret disappeared and a huge alligator floated to the surface with a smile on his face. At first we froze, and then we ran back to the car hoping that the alligator's hunger was satisfied by the egret. But just in case, we closed the car windows and locked the doors.



Great Egret
John Koscinski

Now as I look back on this event, I realize I should have remembered that we were not birding in Ohio or Pennsylvania, where alligators rarely pop out of nowhere. We were in somewhat unknown territory.

Another animal to look out for when leaving wonderful, safe, northern Ohio is a poisonous snake. I remember cautioning myself when traveling and birding in rocky areas to stay on the trail where you can see where you are about to step.

Yes, it helps to know the territory.

Caley Swans 2009

By **Harry Spencer**

Observing bird behavior intrigues me. Because of a preference for watching familiar birds in action rather than searching for rarities I wonder if my DNA includes a defective birding-gene, if such a gene exists. Watching trumpeter swans, North America's largest waterfowl, illustrates my interest.

For the last four years at Caley Reservation I have been following a pair of trumpeter swans that have spent spring and summer and significant parts of fall and winter in or near the Caley ponds, particularly the eastern ones. I presume that the same pair returns year after year, but I cannot visually



identify any particular individual. During those years the adults have raised to adulthood nine cygnets: three the first year, four the next, none last year, and two in 2009. A fourth cygnet perished, possibly because of snapping turtle predation, during the first year.

This year I have attempted to hike the trails of Caley at least once a week. Because of inclement January weather I only hiked once and spotted no swans. In contrast, however, during February, March, April, and the first week of May, two swans, always near each other, graced the eastern ponds. Then there was only one swan seen during a couple of visits, suggesting that the missing mate was on a nest incubating eggs. Because of a desire to leave the birds as undisturbed as possible, I did not search for the nest.



Caley Trumpeter Swan's
Dane Adams, May 2009

During the last week of May two cygnets, guarded by two adults, appeared.

The cygnets grew steadily to nearly adult-size by early fall. Early in October the four appeared in another pond. They had fledged.

The ponds were swan-free a week later. But as I was walking through a field separating the two eastern ponds on my homeward trek, I heard trumpeting. Above the field appeared a line of four huge swans, one of which was repeatedly trumpeting. They circled the northeastern pond in which they had spent the late spring and summer then

disappeared over the eastern tree line.

Before I reached the southeastern pond on my next-week hike, I heard a continuously repeated toot. It was a toot rather than a trumpet call. Four swans were swimming in a line in the pond. At each toot the line changed directions.

While I walked between the southeast and the northeast ponds, I heard the toots again, this time in the air. Over the trees came a line of four birds. Sometimes a toot preceded a direction change.

For a few weeks, I do not expect to see swans often, if at all, but my hopes for next year are high.



Northern Saw-whet Owl
Joe Strong



November Trail Sights

Photo Bulletin Board



Surf Scoter
Dane Adams
Wellington Upground Reservoir
November 2009

Barred Owl
Pat Ives
Carlisle Reservation
November 2009

