

WINGTIPS

DECEMBER 2014



NORTHERN CARDINAL photo by Dane Adams

Program
Tim Fairweather
Naturalist, Lorain County Metro Parks
15 Years at Sandy Ridge,
But Who's Counting
December 2, 2014, 7 p.m.
(Note Location)
Perry F. Johnson Wetland Center,
Sandy Ridge Reservation



Tim and daughter on Brockway Mountain, Upper Peninsula

Tim is well known to all local birders and nature lovers. After all, he has been a naturalist with the Metro Parks since 1989.

Beginning as a seasonal employee, he became a full-time naturalist at French Creek in 1990. He worked with that park's major exhibits, including a veritable menagerie of animals such as alligators, stingrays, kangaroo, sharks and what he describes as "all manner of creepy-crawly things." His favorite was the greater roadrunner on loan from the Cleveland Metro Parks Zoo

When Lorain County Metro Parks' Sandy Ridge Reservation was nearing completion in 1999, Tim was hired as the Park Manager/Senior Naturalist. He's been at the park ever since and is very grateful for the opportunity. So are Lorain County birders, wildlife enthusiasts, hikers and the general community as the reservation has developed into one of the most popular birding and wildlife sites in northern Ohio under his watch.

His program on December 2 at the Reservation's Perry Johnson Wetland Center will celebrate the fifteen years Sandy Ridge has been open to the public. Tim will focus on the continually growing bird list at the park but will also look at the other wildlife that reside there. And he will provide us insight into what it takes to manage a wetland restoration park.

Tim also manages Columbia Reservation and credits his staff members, Josh, Sean and Jack for the success of both parks.

Tim and his family are part-time "Yoopers" as they head to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Wisconsin three times a year. As he says, "A lot of people plan on retiring down south. We're planning on retiring up north."

Field Trips

Saturday, December 20, 2014

Elyria Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, January 3, 2015

Wellington Christmas Bird Count

Call 440-225-7601 for further information.

October 18, 2014: Field Trip to Sandy Ridge

By Marty Ackermann

The morning dawned windy and cool with intermittent rain. Nonetheless, eight intrepid birders gathered at Sandy Ridge Reservation, and their optimism was rewarded with a rain-free, though blustery, walk of nearly three hours.

As expected, water fowl and other birds attracted to water were well-represented: Canada goose, double-crested cormorant, mallard, pied-billed grebe, wood duck, ruddy duck, American coot, American black duck, gadwall, northern shoveler, green-winged teal, great egret, great blue heron, ring-billed gull, belted kingfisher, and bald eagle. We also encountered one shorebird, a greater yellowlegs that we struggled to identify due to the distance until it flew and gave its characteristic three-note call.

Sparrows were another major theme of the day with 6 species represented – song, chipping, swamp, white-throated, white-crowned, and Lincoln's. Unfortunately, not everyone got to see the Lincoln's. The only warblers were yellow-rumps but both golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets made appearances.

Our last sighting of the day was a late-migrating hermit thrush, bringing our total for the day to 43 species, which we considered a good number given the weather and time of year.



A Birder's Diary: Birds, Arsenic and Rice

By Carol Leininger

"Rice in the United States constitutes the most bird-compatible, mass-produced crop in the country," according to Paul Baicich in "*Birds and the Rice Connection*," an article in the **Bird Watchers Digest** (July-August 2013). Not only do waterfowl, long-legged waders, and shorebirds flock to the rice fields of the southern U.S. but now the rice farmers are beginning to establish a wonderful relationship with birders that even includes a *Yellow Rails and Rice Festival* in Louisiana. This sounds like a really great place to go birding!



Then I read an article entitled "*A Trace of Arsenic*" in **Discover** (October 2013) by Deborah Blum. For many years scientists have been concerned about harmful ingredients in the foods we eat. Arsenic has been found in baby foods, apple juice, and now rice. Brown rice syrup often replaces corn syrup as a sweetener. "Arsenic in baby rice cereal sold in the United Kingdom exceeds safety levels for drinking water."

Much of the rice grown in the U.S. is in the south where the soil is already contaminated by arsenic from pesticides used years ago by cotton farmers trying to protect their crops from boll weevils. Scientists have learned that rice plants take in much more arsenic than any other grains. Apparently rice plants confuse arsenic with silicon and phosphorus, which are essential for the plant's structural health. The arsenic accumulates in the outer layers of the rice grain which means polished white rice has less than brown rice. And I always thought brown rice was healthier than white!

So, if we in the U.S. and U.K. find this alarming and plan to be more cautious in what we eat – what about all the people in less-developed countries where rice is all they eat every day? And, if consuming rice is a problem for humans, what is its effect on the populations of birds flocking to the rice fields to feed? Has anyone checked to see if bird populations are declining because of the rice consumption?

Editor's note

Carol's article inspired me to do some Internet research on her questions. A rather quick Google search failed to turn up anything on wild birds but did provide some interesting information on arsenic.

The chemical element is naturally widespread in ³ the environment even without human help. Well water has varying concentrations of arsenic around the world, but activity like oil-extraction through "fracking" may raise its levels. Naturally occurring levels in soil can be raised in a variety of ways, including the chemical's use as an insecticide.

Rice tends to concentrate arsenic since it is grown in standing water. And most of the arsenic is in the husk, so white, polished rice is considered safer.

But, since rice is often used as poultry feed in the U.S., chickens tend to have very high levels of the contaminant. Even more surprising, arsenic is often added to feed to fatten chickens more quickly, fight infections, and make cutlets pinker, giving a seemingly healthier, fresher appearance. As a result, rice farmers at times blame poultry-farm chicken-waste runoff for raising arsenic levels in their fields.

But the situation is complicated even more by rice farmers who add chicken manure to their fields as a fertilizer. Some rice-growers in Arkansas claim lack of knowledge that the manure was contaminated, and they are suing their manure suppliers. **JJ**

References: "*Are Chickens to blame for High Arsenic Levels in Your Rice*" in TakePart; "*Arsenic poisoning*" in Wikipedia.

NORTHERN CARDINAL

Cardinalis cardinalis

By **Jim Jablonski**

Each May I make my annual trek to Magee Marsh along with what seems like every birder in northern Ohio. One year as we were scanning the trees for parulas and prothonotaries, a northern cardinal unexpectedly dropped among us onto the boardwalk railing.



Of course, as skilled birders or wannabes, no one said anything. Nonetheless, all watched the magnificent backyard bird for at least twenty seconds before looking away sheepishly. No one said a thing. After all, experienced birders don't want to sound like they are gushing over "just a cardinal."

But let's be honest. Even though the northern cardinal may be the first bird recorded on our lifetime lists and is seen easily at our feeders, it always brings a thrill when we spot one. Is there anything more pleasing on a sunny, snow-covered early March morning than hearing the clear "cheer, cheer, cheer" of the cardinal high in a distant tree?

Maybe because cardinals do not migrate, we consider it "our bird", as seven states in a band from Illinois through Ohio to North Carolina have declared by naming it their official bird. Not only has it become a truly "northern" bird over the last half century by expanding its range, the cardinal, both the bright red male and the plainer female, is as beautiful as any of those fancy warblers that pass through each fall and spring.

And it is endearing in other ways. The cardinal seems to have a spousal loyalty that humans admire more than emulate. Everyone enjoys watching the male of our backyard couple feeding his mate. And I'm pretty certain that I have seen females do the same. And, although males don't build their nests, they help out quite a bit by foraging and feeding the females throughout incubation and feeding the young while she is preparing a second nest. Also males bring nesting materials to females. A male-female pair keeps in touch through song as the female also sings and its voice is considered sweeter while its calls are longer and more complex

Human admiration pays off for the cardinal. More than any other bird, cardinals are probably responsible for the increase in numbers of backyard feeders over recent decades. Everyone wants to see the spectacular red birds out their window. The result has been a steady movement northward and what was once essentially a southeastern species has a range that extends from Belize to southern Ontario.

Cardinals, like humans, are generalists both in diet and residence. Willing to eat just about any insect, spider, centipede or snail, they still consume seeds and berries as adults. Hatchlings need protein, however, and the parents wisely feed them insects.

Suburban backyards, open woodlands, woodlands are likely habitats for cardinals. Their range even connects with their cousins – the pyrrhuloxia – in the desert southwest.



Male cardinal enjoying a sunflower seed at a backyard feeder. Photo by Jim Jablonski

Despite their hard work and adaptability, cardinals have a low rate of breeding success with fewer than forty percent of nests fledging at least one young. The adult birds make up for this by working hard at up to three and even four nests a year. Cardinals breed from March to September. And despite their brightness, that would seem to make them easy prey, the adults have a high survival rate, probably due to being non-migratory. The oldest recorded lived fifteen years.

Their longevity, climate change and possibly human feeders have allowed the northern cardinal to increase its population to a global estimate of 120 million. They have grown in numbers every year from 1966 to 2010 according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, which assigns a rating of “least concern”.

It seems the cardinal, probably the favorite songbird of most Americans, will be around for quite a while.

References: *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman; “*Why So Red, Mr. Cardinal?*” by Jason Martin and Robyn Bailey in The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *All About Birds*; “*Northern Cardinal*” in The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *All About Birds*.



AMERICAN WIGEON photo by Dane Adams

AMERICAN WIGEON

Anas americana

By **Cathy Priebe**

Every fall the bird population in my backyard begins to stabilize as the late migrants move to warmer habitats. A few new winter visitors trickle in and generally, they too, move on after a short respite. But, wait, there are still plenty of new birds just waiting to be discovered and one of the best places in Lorain County to view them is Sandy Ridge Reservation!!



Sandy Ridge is famous for attracting all kinds of avian species, and fall and early winter is the best time to see migrating waterfowl all in one handy location, usually visible with scope or binocular after a very short woodland hike from the parking lot.

As I have said previously, waterfowl watching is wonderful as the birds generally stay in one place and allow extended looks. Identification is usually a snap. One species that stands out among the flocks is the American wigeon.

My first encounter with this handsome species was at Sandy Ridge. Nicknamed by hunters as “Baldpate” (because of its white forehead and crown), it also claims the title of “whistling duck”. (McCormac in *Birds of Ohio* states that “wigeon” is French, meaning “whistling duck”.) Males have a very happy, three syllable whistle that stands out amongst the crowd.

The American wigeon has a short body, with a large, roundish head and sloping forehead and short silver gray beak. The tail is long and pointed (pintail-like), extending beyond the wings. Breeding males have a whitish crown and a green stripe behind the eye along with a white wing patch and cinnamon/rust breast and sides. The female has brown under parts and grayish head.

Although it is a common winter migrant here, favoring lake edges, ponds and shallow wetlands, it is an uncommon nester in Ohio. The nest is generally on dry ground in tall grasses far from any water. American wigeons have been documented nesting in western Lake Erie marshes.

Some fun facts about the American wigeon:

They are puddle ducks, but prefer not to upend themselves very often to feed. They tend to graze on the surface of the water.

They are very nimble on land and feed there, also.

Described as “an artful klepto or avian pirate”, wigeons will steal food from diving ducks to satisfy their appetite for submerged vegetation.

Their vocalization has been described as a shortened version of a wolf whistle, very identifiable.

According to the Ohio Cardinal, the species was reported in 58 Ohio counties in 2013 and 300 American wigeons were reported at Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area in March 2013.

Sandy Ridge Reservation, Oberlin Reservoir, and Wellington Upground Reservoir are good locations to see this bird in Lorain County. Check your local birding web sites for other locations near you!

References: *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac; *Ohio Cardinal*, Vol. 36 No. 3 Spring 2013; *Pete Dunne’s Essential Field Guide Companion* by Pete Dunne.

Bird Friendly Coffee

Most birders are aware that many North American migrants such as warblers, wood thrushes and others have been in serious decline in recent decades.

According to Bridget Stutchbury, a former presenter at the BRAS Jack Smith Outstanding Speaker series, this decline is happening despite the regrowth of habitat in the Northeast.

“What does that tell you,” Stutchbury asks in a quote in an article in *All About Birds*. “Must be a problem on their wintering grounds.”

The problem is likely Central American deforestation caused by large corporate-owned, sun-grown coffee plantations. As a result, shade-grown coffee, usually considered superior coffee, raised on small family-run farms has declined.

Shade-grown coffee is an environmentally sustainable form of agriculture that yields slower-grown, superior coffee while maintaining the habitat for wintering North American birds.

Bird-friendly, shade-grown coffee lacks the economies of scale of the large sun-grown plantations making it more expensive. However, many birders are willing to incur the added expense but are unsure if their coffee qualifies since “shade-grown” labels are not regulated.

In its blog article “*Making Sense of Coffee Labels: Does your Coffee Support Wintering Warblers*” *All About Birds* gives the specifics about the labels.

The “**Bird Friendly**” label of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, shown below, certifies the coffee is organic and meets strict requirements for shade and forest type where the coffee is grown. The farms growing this coffee and the forest canopy “merge into a single habitat,” according to the article.

There are other coffee labels denoting different types of criteria for shade cover. To learn more read The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *All About Birds* blog article “*Making Sense of Coffee Labels: Does your Coffee Support Wintering Warblers.*” **JJ**

