

# Black River Audubon Society

# WINGTIPS

March 2013



FEMALE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD photo by DIANE DEVEREAUX

Editors: Harry Spencer, and Cathy Priebe

Photographer: John Koscinski

Webmistress: Arlene Lengyel

## 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

Tuesday, March 5, 7 p.m.  
Carlisle Visitor Center

#### Barry Walker

Sex Life of Butterflies



Barry Walker, retired interventional radiologist and former associate professor of radiology, has been fascinated by butterflies since childhood and has never lost track of his lifelong passion with nature. In addition to his medical training, Walker received a MS degree with extensive training in entomology and ornithology and has traveled throughout the USA , Mexico , Costa Rica , Trinidad, East Africa and Canada photographing butterflies, birds and other wildlife.

“I have been intrigued by the complexities of love making among butterflies for many years, and I documented this through my photographs,” Walker explained. “I consider myself a lazy former birder, since butterflies are so much easier to pursue,” he joked.

### Field Trip

**March 16, 2013 (Saturday)**

Oberlin and Wellington Reservoirs, Findley State Park  
Chatham for pancakes  
Meet at Oberlin Reservoir, 9:00 a.m.

## Board Meeting

Tuesday, March 26, 6:30 p.m.  
305 West Avenue, Elyria  
The Jack Smith House

### Jack Smith Outstanding Speaker: Al Batt

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

### Red-winged Blackbird Adventures

(*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

By Cathy Priebe

On summer drives in rural Ohio, the number of red-winged blackbirds perched on fence posts, tall grass, and wires amaze me.

After a long, hard winter, the unmistakable blackbird call often is heard before the bird is seen. Some now claim that the red-winged blackbird has replaced the American robin as the harbinger of spring. During winter, many robins do not leave the local area or migrate long distances.



Recent studies of red-winged blackbirds indicate that many of these birds also do not migrate from their nesting grounds, and their identifications by sight or sound may not predict the arrival of spring.

The red-winged blackbird is a vocal and showy individual, especially during mating season and when defending its territory. Its preferred habitat is near marshy areas, wetlands, ponds, or scrubby fields. The species has also slowly moved to more suburban settings, where it feeds with more common backyard birds.

The shiny, mostly black male has brightly colored red and yellow-trimmed epaulettes that flash during flight, courtship, and territorial displays. Females little resemble males and often are described as large sparrows. As the above photo shows, the under parts of a female have brown streaks. Her back is mottled brown, and she has pale eyebrows.

Both sexes have multiple mates during breeding season, and a male can have more than ten females nesting in his territory, although he may not father all the chicks.

While hiking in a local wetland area, I once observed how important territories were to these marsh-loving birds. A loud ruckus caught my attention. I turned and saw an adult male pecking and squawking at the base of a cattail. I approached and flushed the bird only to discover a beat-up, partially drowned red-wing male hanging on for dear life.

Sometimes nature is not very pretty.

On January 20, 2013, expert birding guides Larry Rosche and Judy Semroc led a hike to Lime Lakes, a traditional blackbird roost site, in New Franklin Township, Summit County. They wanted to observe how many roosting blackbirds remained in the area. Because of the cold temperature and the season, they expected reduced numbers of birds.

“At 4:45 p.m. the first red-winged blackbirds showed up, and then a few more, and then all hell broke loose!” Rosche exclaimed. He estimated a total of 300,000 or 500,000 blackbirds of which half were red-winged blackbirds. “So much for getting the first-red-wing-of-year talk,” Rosche added.

Although the red-wings may not be far away during winter, I feel lucky to see these noisy, colorful blackbirds at my feeders in late February and early March. They are not picky eaters. Cracked corn and seed mixes from feeders supplement their diets until insects appear as the temperature warms.

I am always happy to see the red-winged blackbirds back. It usually means that spring is around the corner.

**References:** *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac; *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* by Donald and Lillian Stokes; *Birds of the Cleveland Region* by Larry Rosche; *Email field trip results* sent by Larry Rosche.

## **A Birder's Diary: Killdeer Displays**

By **Carol Leininger**

If you have been reading my diary for very long, you may have noticed that I rarely write about shorebirds including those short-legged little brown birds that run about on a beach or in a wetland. The smallest ones are called peeps, and I still find them difficult to identify. But those in the plover family are my favorites.

Almost everyone knows that robins are not considered the first sign of spring anymore. Some robins stick around all winter. The first signs of spring for me are rain (lots of it) and warmer temperatures. Then come the male red-winged blackbirds staking out their territories, earthworms all over the sidewalks as their burrows flood, and the sound of “*kill deeah, kill deeah, kill deeah*”. I usually hear the killdeer long before I see him, and that sound is a sign of spring for me.

An adult killdeer is a beautiful bird, brown on top and white underneath with two black necklaces and a lovely salmon colored rump visible when it takes flight. Of course, the bird is more inclined to run than to fly.

Its behavior is what attracts me the most. Many times, I have encountered a killdeer running away from me dragging one of its wings and calling a repeated *kill deeah*. This behavior is called distraction display. I stop immediately to look around. Soon I find a few eggs or young birds lying prostrate on the ground. The adult hopes that I will follow her before I step on the nest.

Killdeers nest in a scrape, a shallow depression on the ground. The eggs blend nicely with the gravel of a driveway or pebbles in a field, thus making it very easy for a person's foot to destroy the nest. If I were an adult killdeer, I would lay my eggs on a flat, gravel-like roof, typical of Lorain County Community College's campus. Thus, the nests would be less prone to disturbances, although the process of teaching the young to find food might be difficult.

If you encounter the distraction display, stop, back up, and watch carefully where you step. That step could destroy eggs or kill chicks.



## **Jack Smith's FORESIGHT**

By **Dick Lee**

Jack Smith was foresighted.

He was one of a small group of birders who formed the Elyria Birding Club. In the 1950's they met every Sunday morning in Elywood Park before the group formalized itself in 1958 as the Black River Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society.

Most Audubon chapters are dependent upon fundraisers to keep themselves financially stable, but Jack foresaw the need of a different financial underpinning for Black River Audubon. He led the effort to raise money to establish financial trusts that have served the chapter well over the years and ensure that the mission-oriented operation of the chapter will continue long after his lifetime.

Besides establishing the Audubon Adventures Trust, Jack was its primary financial donor. Audubon Adventures is an award-winning program produced by the National Audubon Society. It provides

environmental-education materials for grades 3-6, and tens of thousands of Lorain County students have learned about their environment thanks to the establishment of the trust fund.

A bequest became the Gunther Pfeifer Trust, the dividends of which fund general operations of the chapter. Another trust provides funds to send teachers and naturalists to summer camps devoted to learning new skills and knowledge useful for maintaining a healthy natural environment. Since 1988 this trust has sent twenty-eight educators to camps in Maine, Minnesota, and Washington state.

Another trust fund focuses upon conservation and reflects Jack's foresight in that field, the most notable project of which has been the establishment of bluebird trails. The chapter built nearly five-hundred bluebird nest-boxes and erected them in parks, nature preserves, nursing homes, cemeteries, and private residences. Jack purchased the materials and organized 'building' parties in which volunteers assembled fifty boxes in as little as two hours, thanks to Jack's skills and foresight in preparing all of the ready-to-assemble parts. Also he provided the needed tools and workshop. He supervised the placement of the boxes and trained volunteers in the proper techniques to monitor them for best success in raising bluebirds.

Jack was instrumental in leading a civic organization to fund the rehabilitation and remodeling of the Cascade Park pool house into a nature center where the city of Elyria now has a place for public environmental programs. Youth organizations, such as Girl and Boy Scouts, conduct summer nature camps there.

Jack's concern for providing green space and wildlife habitat led him to become involved with the Firelands Land Conservancy that later merged into the Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

To preserve additional public access to the Black River, Jack donated land along the river to the city of Elyria for use as a park. He wanted it named Black River Audubon Park.

The knowledge of the children he helped educate, the birds and wildlife he helped propagate, and the culture of giving that he helped cultivate are important parts of his legacy.

*"In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."* - Baba Dioum, Senegalese conservationist.

## **Norma Kraps 1923-2013**

By **Carol Leininger**

The loss of my loyal birding buddy is tough.

I first met her on the on a field trip. Somewhere I had heard that Black River Audubon Society was having a field trip to Butternut Lodge at the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, and I signed up to go. There I met Norma and many other friendly birders. We hiked the dikes, enjoyed the birds, performed assigned KP duties, and got to know each other rather well. The experience was great, and I've been an active member of the society ever since (about 35 years).

Norma was extremely active in the group, holding numerous offices over the years. I learned later that she was a founding member when BRAS was formed as a chapter of the National Audubon Society.

During a visit with her just prior to Christmas 2012, she told me that she met one of the other founding members of BRAS, Jack Smith, while birding in Elywood Park. He was there birding with a high school student, Joe Strong.



At meetings and field trips Norma was often the first person that new people met. She introduced herself, learned the visitors' names, where they came from, and how they got interested in birding. Then she patiently proceeded to introduce them to birds in the field and invite them to future BRAS events. Anyone on a bird walk with her will remember her, perhaps not by name, but as the friendly bird lady with the pink hat.

I suspect that Norma must have been enthralled with birds her entire life. Even after she started to lose her vision, she could tell what she had seen in the past at any particular location or during a particular time of year. In one of my 2011 WINGTIPS articles, *A Birder's Diary*, I wrote, "Once again in March one year Norma and I were birding along Krause and Stange Roads near the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge.

'There should be horned larks in these fields', she said. I saw a few birds ahead on the road, stopped, and sure enough we saw several horned larks walking about. As we started up again Norma said, 'There should be snow buntings here, too.' So I stopped again and, sure enough, a flock of birds flew across the road and back again just ahead of us. Their white bodies, with bits of brown and black, sparkled in the sun."

Norma will be most remembered for her eagerness to introduce others to the wonderful world of birding. I will always treasure her friendship.

## March Backyard Birds

By Angie Adkins

For over twenty years, I have been feeding birds and birdscaping my Strongsville yard. Recently I participated in the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas survey. I keep diligent records of birds as they fly in and out of my property each year. Here is a list of birds you may find in your backyard, suitable food, and how you can attract them: **common grackle**, **red-winged blackbird**, **cowbird**: *cracked corn*; **song**, **American tree**, **fox**, **chipping sparrows**: *blend of seed mixed into leaf litter*; **eastern towhee**: *blend of seed mixed into leaf litter*; **pine siskins**: *thistle seed*; **purple finch**: *mixed seed, suet*; **northern flicker**, **pileated woodpecker**, **red-and white-breasted nuthatch**: *peanuts, suet, sunflower seed*; **Carolina wren**, **eastern bluebird**: *mealworms, suet, peanuts*; **golden crowned kinglet**: *mixed seed, nearby pine trees*; **American robin**: *raisins, grapes, berries*; **rose-breasted grosbeak** (late March, rare): *sunflower seed*.

Platforms, suet or tube feeders, and the ground are suitable feeders. Make sure you have a water source (birdbath). Check your local nursery for native plants that birds like. Finally, sit back and enjoy!

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH photo by  
JOHN KOSCINSKI





BROWN THRASHER photo by DANE ADAMS

## **BROWN THRASHER: SPECTACULAR SINGER**

*Taxostoma rufum*

**By Jan Auburn**

“So special is the thrasher that he was featured in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not* back in 1981. Who would have believed that a songbird with its pea-sized brain could have such an immense vocabulary?” (Quotations in this essay are from *The Singing Life of Birds* by Donald G. Kroodsma.)

The brown thrasher is one of our best and most spectacular singers. His song is spectacular. He lives in the lower levels of trees and dense shrubbery, except to sing, when he mounts a conspicuous perch where he devotes himself to his song, pouring out his loud, spirited concert, like a vocalist singing a solo.

The song is made up of a long series of short, sparkling phrases given rapidly, mostly repeated in quick succession, but as the song goes on it displays a great variety of phrases. It is an inventive song. He is consistently improvising, and often there is suggestion of mimicry as the song wanders on. Some say it is rare to

recognize the true source of mimicry.

Early one spring morning I distinctly heard a white-eyed vireo, and upon further searching, I actually witnessed a thrasher singing a perfect white-eyed vireo song.

“Amazing... is it possible the thrasher is so skilled and so versatile that he can hear another male sing and repeat it instantly? I shake my head in disbelief, because I know of no other songbird with this ability. I now believe he is highly skilled at acquiring new songs for his performance. Some songs are no doubt improvised at leisure as he sings along from the treetops.”

Brown thrashers sing frequently upon arrival in our area in late April through May when pair-bonding occurs. Then the birds become silent and inconspicuous.

Among the three related species, northern mockingbird, brown thrasher, and gray catbird, the thrasher sings for the shortest period. Singing constantly from his arrival late in April, he sings far less after he convinces a female to pair with him. Rarely do thrashers sing late in May, and they become silent and inconspicuous soon thereafter.

*The Singing Life of Birds* chronicles the brown thrashers’ song repertoire that numbers in the thousands. A thrasher’s brain controls the airflow through his two voice boxes to produce this typical song: “*sun’s up sun’s up, yeah yeah, great day great day, listen up listen up, here I am here I am, look ladies look ladies, settle here settle here.*”

A thrasher is especially at home on the ground, spending most of its time, walking, running, or hopping. It forages using its strong bill to toss leaves and debris to find insects and invertebrates. If necessary, a thrasher can run quite fast to catch insect prey. When disturbed, it spreads its long tail, makes a short low flight, and disappears in the shrubbery or glides over the top and swoops down into cover, dodging skillfully through the tangles to escape.

Birders often identify thrashers at Carlisle, Caley and Bacon Woods Reservations, among other Lorain County sites.

Early last spring I frequently observed a brown thrasher singing from the treetops in a bushy hedgerow adjacent to the east side of Peak Preserve. This year I hope to visit once again, and attentively listen to the unique song of this amazing songbird.

**References:** *The Singing Life of Birds* by Donald G. Kroodsma; *The Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn; *Sibley Field Guide to Birds* by David A. Sibley; [www. birdsbybent.com](http://www.birdsbybent.com).

## **National Audubon Granted \$3.5 million by Toyota**

Toyota has approved a grant of \$3.5 million to support the Toyota **TogetherGreen** program, a partnership between National Audubon and Toyota, and one of the most important ways that Audubon engages new audiences in conservation. Five years ago, Toyota pledged \$20 million to Audubon to create **TogetherGreen**, and the new grant extends the program into its sixth year.

The original \$20 million was the largest donation Toyota ever gave and the largest grant that Audubon ever received.