

Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

September 2010



Great-crested Flycatcher/Dane Adams

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Photographer: John Koscinski

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Program

Tuesday, September 7, 2010, 7:00 p.m.

Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center

Andy Jones

William A. and Nancy R. Klamm

Endowed Chair of Ornithology
and Head, Department of Ornithology
Cleveland Museum of Natural History

Dead Birds Tell Many Tales: Ornithology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

Andy Jones last spoke to Black River Audubon in March 2008 but, due to icy weather, only 8 of our members attended. Since this was a talk not to be missed, Andy is back for a repeat performance. Andy has a PhD in ecology, evolution and behavior from the University of Minnesota. His current research interest is using museum specimens and DNA sequences to understand the evolutionary history of birds, including biogeography and taxonomy, with a focus on Appalachian and Philippine bird species.

Field Trip

September 18, 2010 (Saturday)

Sandy Ridge Reservation at 8:00 a.m.

Brief Financial Statement

(Extracted from Treasurer Steve Chavez's report)

July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010

Revenue	\$14,601	
Expenses	\$16,496	
Checking account balance June 30, 2010		\$10,977
Trust funds' value June 30, 2010		\$155,728

Odds and Ends

By **Harry Spencer**

Recording Birding Identifications on eBird: For the period July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, Black River Audubon members recorded 759 checklists with a total of 212 species. At an assumed 2 hour/checklist, which is realistic, we spent over 1500 hours surveying the birds in our area. By recording our observation on eBird we enlarge the data base that ornithologists use to monitor the changing status of our winged friends.



Margaret Peak Nature Preserve: In less than two summer months, Black River Audubon members have identified 72 bird species in the new Margaret Peak Nature Preserve on Butternut Ridge Road in Eaton Township. Perhaps the most notable identification is that of dickcissel, both adults and juveniles, indicating only the second nesting dickcissel recorded in Lorain County.

A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

I find birding fascinating, yet frustrating, too.

Fascinating: I like to think that some birds are unique and can actually 'follow a different drummer.' Take barn owls and ruddy ducks as examples.

Barn owls are in a different family from other owls. Like most owls they are nocturnal predators, with binocular vision, and acute sense of hearing, and have a habit of regurgitating pellets after meals. Unlike other owls they have a heart-shaped facial disk, smaller eyes, a square tail, and serrated claws on their central toes. (You have to be close to see this latter feature!) Barn owls are truly special.

Ruddy ducks are in a group separate from most other ducks. Like other ducks they are sexually dimorphic, have short tails, web feet, and flat, broadened bills. Unlike other ducks they have long, narrow, and stiff tail-feathers that serve as rudders in diving. When the birds are resting, these tails are often cocked upward in a fan shape, but, when the birds are swimming, their tails are laid flat on the water. During winter ruddy ducks congregate in large groups or rafts. Ruddy ducks are special.

Frustrating: Each bird has a common name and a binomial scientific name, so everyone knows which bird you are talking about. But the American Ornithological Union (AOU), which is a group of professional ornithologists, often makes important decisions regarding these names. They always seem to have good reason for making changes, but those changes can be mighty frustrating to birders who keep a life list!

Name Changes: The green heron was once called the green-backed heron, and before that the green heron. The present Baltimore oriole was once called the northern oriole and before that, the Baltimore oriole.

Lumping: The yellow-shafted flicker and the red-shafted flicker were once considered to be different species, but today they have been lumped together as the northern flicker. The myrtle and Audubon's warblers are now lumped together as the yellow-rumped warbler.

Splitting: A species once called western grebes is now thought to be two different species, the western grebe and Clark's grebe.

English names: There is American English and British English. The common merganser in America has the same scientific name, and is the same species as the goosander in Great Britain. The common loon in America is the great northern diver in Great Britain.

DNA: Some birds on the same page in a field guide may not be closely related according to their DNA. For example the turkey vulture and Andean condor are now recognized as closely related to storks and not to raptors. Some authors of bird books are starting to reorganize the families in their books. Originally all books used the same evolutionary order. Perhaps museums some day will collect vials of DNA instead of study skins!

All of these name variations are frustrating to life listers. What do we do when a bird on our list has a name change, or is lumped with another, or split from another? What is the true number of birds on our list?



Grasshopper Sparrow

By **Jack Smith**

On the next page is a striking portrait of a grasshopper sparrow, photographed by Dane Adams. A typical grasshopper sparrow is five inches long with a wingspan of eight inches. The Peterson Field Guide lists the species as uncommon, although it breeds in every Ohio county. Grasshopper sparrows are present spring through fall in almost every state of the nation except some southwestern ones.

This is a grassland bird that is very elusive and rather difficult to see. The little brown



Grasshopper Sparrow
Dane Adams



blob is very wary when disturbed. It flies in a zigzag pattern, drops down into the grass, and runs. Males sing in the spring from early morning to well into the night. The song is very much like the buzzing of a meadow grasshopper, pit-tuck-zee-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e. From this wiry, buzzy song, the bird got its common name, the grasshopper sparrow. The song is so highly pitched that it is inaudible to oldsters like me. Patient birders can be rewarded by view of a male popping up from grass with fluttering wings before landing on a clump of dead grass, a weed stalk, a

bush, a post or a utility wire. While on that perch, the bird may sing.

Dane's portrait shows identification markings very well. The crown has a pale median stripe between two dark brown streaks with a yellow lore on each side. The eye ring is also noticeable. The buff breast is apparent as another identification feature. Is this bird a male or female? The answer is that you can't tell because both sexes have the same outward appearance.

This sparrow migrates mostly at night from its wintering grounds in the southern states. The species arrives in our Cleveland area generally about mid-April. Most birds leave the area before late September, although a few hang on through October.

Grasshopper sparrows mostly eat insects and seeds. The birds forage while hopping or running on the ground, where they pick up items from the soil or plant stems. The birds forage individually rather than in groups.

Not much is known about its breeding biology, but some ornithologists believe that the female generally builds the ground nest very well hidden at the base of a weed, shrub or clumps of grass. Often the nest is built in a slight depression with the rim level with the ground. The construction is a bowl of dry grass lined with fine grass, rootlets, and sometimes animal hair. It may be partially domed.

A female lays generally four-to-five creamy white eggs with reddish brown and gray spots. Incubation lasts eleven to twelve days. The young fledge when about nine days old. Both parents feed the young. This relatively short cycle enables the pair to have a second brood before heading south in September. The sparrow is believed to be monogamous, but again not much is known.

The population of grasshopper sparrows declined in the twentieth century as former grasslands were transformed into cultivated fields to produce agricultural crops such as corn and soybeans. The species however does not seem to be immediately endangered. Harvesting hay destroys many ground-nests of grasshopper sparrows and several other meadow-nesting birds. However, I know of some conservation-minded farmers who wait to harvest hay after breeding season.

References: *Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley, *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman, *Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn, *Birds of the Cleveland Region* by Larry Rosche, *Peterson Field Guide to the Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson.

Addendum to the Grasshopper Sparrow Article

I remember my first encounter with the grasshopper sparrow in the spring of 1949, when I took a course in Field Biology conducted by Professor George Jones of the Botany Department of Oberlin College.

The class met for an early morning bird hike. When we approached a grassy meadow habitat he pointed out the “insect calls”, and he instructed us to wait quietly for the “insect” to reveal itself. Up popped a little bird to the top of a weed and we watched and heard him singing. At that time I had no difficulty hearing the very high pitched insect-like call.

That experience along with many courses under George Jones’ tutelage, set the course for a life-time avocation of natural history experiences for me.

Since that time and for many years after he retired, Professor George Jones would meet for a nature hike with anyone, student or otherwise at 2:00 p.m. Sunday afternoon in back of the Natural Science building. On many occasions I would join the group. The knowledge he carried with him concerning flora and fauna was more than impressive and the stories he told, some very humorous, were designed to teach. He met every Sunday until he was 96 years old when he decided he couldn’t do it anymore. He was very dedicated and a champion teacher!



H. Spencer