

Black River Audubon Society

WINGTIPS

February 2010



Harlequin Duck in red-boat reflection at Cape May, NJ/Dane Adams

Editors: Jack Smith and Harry Spencer

Photographer: John Koscinski

Webmistress: Arlene Lengyel

Board Meeting

Tuesday, January 26, 6:30 p.m.
304 West Avenue, Elyria

Program

Tuesday, **February 2**, 7 p.m.
Visitor Center, Carlisle Reservation

An Evening of Loonacy: Studies of Loon Behavior, Conservation, and Management

Jay Mager

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Biological and Allied Health
Sciences, Ohio Northern University

Jay Mager has a PhD from Cornell University in the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior where he studied loon vocalization. He teaches general biology, zoology, ecology, and ornithology. His research interests are in avian behavioral ecology, conservation, and management, and he has spent over fifteen years studying loon behavior throughout various locations within the northeastern and central United States.

Field Trip

February 13-14

(Saturday and Sunday)

Castalia Pond and Killdeer Weekend

Meet at Castalia Pond 9:00 a.m.

Elyria-Lorain Christmas Bird Count

Count Year 110

On a near-freezing Saturday, December 19, 2009, twenty-three birders counted or estimated 33,007 birds of 69 species in the Elyria-Lorain circle of 15-mile radius. They reported the following numbers of birds of each species:

Waterfowl: snow goose 7, Canada goose 1,775, tundra swan 2, wood duck 1, gadwall 2, American black duck 5, mallard 360, blue-winged teal 1, canvasback 1, ring-necked duck 3, lesser scaup 12, white-winged scoter 50, bufflehead 1, common goldeneye 3, hooded merganser 12, red-breasted merganser 5,715, ruddy duck 16, common loon 1, pied-billed grebe 2, double-crested cormorant 2, American coot 5.

Birds of Prey: bald eagle 3, northern harrier 5, sharp-shinned hawk 2, Cooper's hawk 6, red-shouldered hawk 2, red-tailed hawk 11, American kestrel 10.

Gulls: Bonaparte's gull 316, ring-billed gull 18,136, herring gull 163, lesser black-backed gull 2, great black-backed gull 4.

Woodpeckers: red-headed woodpecker 7, red-bellied woodpecker 43, downy woodpecker 50, hairy woodpecker 11, northern flicker 6, pileated woodpecker 5.

Chickadee and Allies: black-capped chickadee 136, tufted titmouse 50, red-breasted nuthatch 5, white-breasted nuthatch 32, brown creeper 1.

Sparrows and Allies: eastern towhee 1, American tree sparrow 64, song sparrow 18, swamp sparrow 1, white-throated sparrow 24, dark-eyed junco 155.

Finches and Old-World sparrow: purple finch 1, house finch 52, American goldfinch 138, house sparrow

395.

Other Species: wild turkey 8, rock pigeon 153, mourning dove 161, great horned owl 1, belted kingfisher 2, Carolina wren 4, ruby-crowned kinglet 1, eastern bluebird 58, American robin 159, European starling 4145, cedar waxwing 24, northern cardinal 142, common grackle 6.

Outstanding Speakers Series

Jointly sponsored by
Black River Audubon and Lorain County Metro Parks

March 13, 7 p.m., Carlisle Visitor Center

Letters from Eden

Julie Zickefoose

Nature Artist and Writer



April 10, 2 p.m., Carlisle Visitor Center

Roger Tory Peterson: Yesterday and Today

Jim Berry

President, Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History



A Birder's Diary

By **Carol Leininger**

Not all birders are alike. An old story about British and American birders illustrates differences:

One day a group of American and British birders were surrounding a large bush inside of which a bird was hiding. Both the Americans and British were determined to see the bird. After a lengthy wait, the Americans grew impatient and one of them pushed. Up popped the bird that all could see clearly. The delighted Americans marked it on their checklists as the disappointed British looked at the bird and walked off knowing they could not count it as a tick because the bird did not appear on its own.



I don't know if this is a true story or not, but after spending one spring birding in England and Wales, I must say the story is believable.

The most exciting bird I saw resulted from a birding hot line. Our birding leader wore a beeper that

vibrated whenever a new sighting was added to the hot line. Birders all over the UK flocked to see a rare bird. Of course, the UK is small enough in area for anyone to be within one day's travel of any UK birding site. Here in the USA, an Ohio birder might require multiple travel days to see a rare bird sighted in Colorado. And the bird would not wait patiently for the Ohio traveler.

One day the beeper beeped, and we drove off in hot pursuit. I wondered how we would know where to go because no specific directions were given. Not to worry—we knew immediately that we were at the right place because twenty cars were parked along the road with only farmland all around. At the top of a hill overlooking a dark brown, recently plowed field stood twenty birders, each with a spotting scope, lined in a row. As we approached all were silent. We looked where the scoped-birders were looking, but saw nothing. Finally our leader whispered that there was a small brown bird in the middle of the brown field. At last we saw it.

Back in our van, our leader explained that the bird was an oriental pratincole, not found in our European field guide, and the individual that we had seen was only the third seen in the UK. Its normal range is Asia and Australia!!

The best part is that we located quietly the bird by ourselves. In the US such a sighting would be pointed out and loudly described in detail by our leader.

White Water Specialist: Harlequin Duck

(Histrionicus histrionicus)

By **Jack Smith**

The harlequin duck is named after the male's striking pattern of white stripes and spots against a background of dark chestnut sides and a blue-gray back and tail. Apparently this striking appearance reminded an early observer of a harlequin, an Italian masked comedy actor dressed in multicolored triangulated tights. Both its identical genus and species scientific names are derived from the Latin *histrionicus*, a stage player dressed in a multicolored costume.



In mid February about thirteen years ago I saw my first harlequin duck in the fast, turbulent waters of the Sault Saint Marie Straits in Ontario. I was with a group on a weekend field trip sponsored by Black Swamp Bird Observatory and led by Tom Bartlett. As I recall, we saw about 25 birds in close formation swimming upstream against the current and diving in unison and then swimming down stream only to repeat the process again upstream.

Often this species is found in small flocks seeking food in fast moving frigid waters, even whitewater. In the winter they like rocky coasts with heavy surf generated at rocky shelves, reefs and jagged sunken rocks. In search of prey they dive and walk along the bottom, even against a current, much like the American dipper in the West. In shallow water, harlequin ducks, similar to mallards, feed by dipping their heads. In fresh water their food consists of larvae of caddis flies, May flies, stone flies and beetles, and in ocean water the ducks tear out periwinkles, mussels and other shellfish attached to underwater rocks.

The invertebrates that the ducks seek for food survive best in waters with high oxygen content provided by the turbulent water. This bird is well equipped for its ecological niche. It has a heavy-duty bill used to lever shellfish from underwater rocks and webbed feet set well to the rear of the body enabling it to power its way through turbulent white water.

Swimming upstream against turbulent waters requires frequent rest breaks and much energy. To obtain this energy, ninety-eight percent of its diet consists of animal matter, high in protein and fat.

A harlequin duck is a small-to-medium size duck, 15-20 inches long with 24-28 inch wingspan. A female weighs about 1¼ pounds and the male somewhat more, about 1½ pounds.

This bird is classified as a short-medium migratory bird. Major populations are found in Alaska, northwest Canada, Labrador, southern Greenland, Iceland and northeastern Siberia. In North America it winters along the Atlantic coastal waters from South Carolina north. On the Pacific Coast the species winters in the turbulent waters of Southern Alaska south to the Northern California Coast. In the spring the ducks migrate up rivers and streams to the turbulent waters of the Rocky Mountains. In Canada and Alaska the birds migrate to mountain streams. In the east the ducks populate waters and potholes of the far north. As they migrate both in the spring and early fall, the birds often fly in close formation hugging the rivers and streams and avoiding open land. At their breeding areas, several males begin their courtship by surrounding a female on the water. The male mating ritual consists of raising and lowering its tail, accompanied by neck-stretching and ritualized head-bobbing.

The female usually selects a nesting site in a shallow depression and lines it with grasses, leaves and down. The male defends her from other males until she lays her clutch of five to seven cream colored eggs, then leaves. She incubates the eggs, covering them with down when she leaves for any purpose. After 27-29 days the eggs hatch. The precocious young feed themselves insects found on the surface waters. Soon they start diving for food. At night the female continues to brood the young while they are small with little protection from the cold. After 35-42 days the young birds fledge, after which the female adult leads them to the sea and to their independence.



Harlequin Duck
John Pogacnik

The harlequin duck population is stable in the northwest, but has declined in eastern North America over the last century.

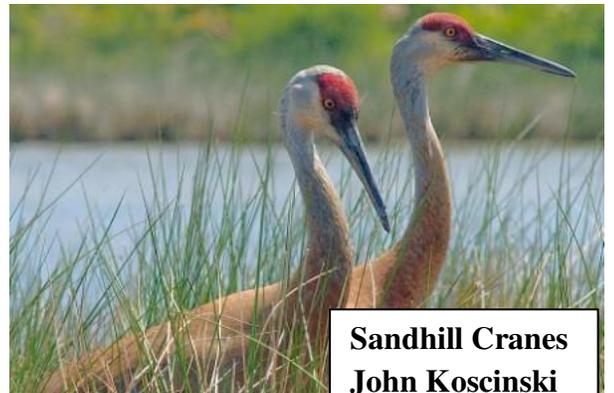
In our area the harlequin duck is rare and accidental. However, three years ago on January 20, 2007, while on a Black River Audubon Field Trip, we encountered a first winter male at Spitzer Marina in Lorain.

References: *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres; *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman; *Encyclopedia of Birds*, Laurie Likoff, Editorial Director; *Birds of Ohio* by Bruce G. Peterjohn

Sandhill Crane Migration Focus of 40th Annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

The 40th annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration will be held March 18-21, 2010, in Kearney, Nebraska. Organized by Audubon Nebraska and the Nebraska Bird Partnership, the conference gathers together nature enthusiasts from across the country to witness the migration of over half a million sandhill cranes, millions of waterfowl, and other birds through central Nebraska. Events include guided field trips, workshops, a family fun room, and daily visits to river blinds operated by Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for up-close views of cranes roosting on the Platte River.

Local and national speakers will present information on a variety of wildlife and conservation topics. Main speakers are Scott Weidensaul, author of more than two dozen natural history books, including *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist; Mike Forsberg, nature photographer and author of *Great Plains: America's Lingerin Wild*; Ron Klataske, executive



Sandhill Cranes
John Koscinski

director of Audubon of Kansas; and Chris Wood, eBird Project Leader, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. More than twenty local environmental organizations will have information booths and hands-on activities on Saturday.

The celebration is open to the general public. Registration materials can be found at www.nebraska.audubon.org. Or contact Audubon Nebraska to be put on the mailing list: Nebraska@audubon.org; 402/797-2301. Rowe Sanctuary has information about viewing the sandhill crane migration, 308/468-5282; www.rowesanctuary.org.

Bird Habitat and White-tailed Deer

From *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds* by Scott Weidensaul (North Point Press, 1999, p. 357)



White-tailed Deer/John Koscinski

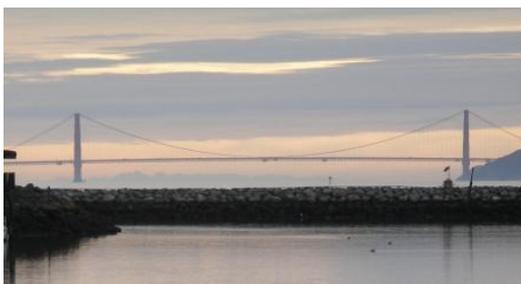
One major problem for forest-nesting birds isn't a predator at all, but a plant-eater. All but exterminated by forest destruction and uncontrolled shooting in the nineteenth century, white-tailed deer quickly recovered in the twentieth, becoming, by the 1930s, the most common large mammal in North America. Today, densities of more than twenty or thirty per square mile are normal in many regions. Wildlife managers are only now coming to grips with the profound effect that so many deer have on their environment.

Whitetails are browsers, feeding on woody twigs and seedlings, as well as on softer plants like wildflowers and grasses. After nearly seven decades of high deer populations, many forests in the East, Midwest, and Great Lakes states have been drastically altered. Tree reproduction is low or nonexistent, and the shrub layer found in healthy, mature forests is often absent or severely reduced, while overall plant diversity is limited. Ecologists refer to such woods as "fern parks," blanketed by endless expanses of inedible fern—the only thing that can grow within a whitetail's ravenous reach. Nest sites for mid-canopy birds like least flycatchers and yellow-billed cuckoos are absent, and so are the birds. Studies in the Allegheny National Forest of Pennsylvania show that, at deer densities above twenty per square mile, both bird abundance and species richness begin to decline sharply.

Christmas in Berkeley

By **Harriet Alger**

Every Christmas I spend a week or more with family in Berkeley, CA. Since no one has an extra bedroom, I stay in a hotel at the Berkeley Marina, from which I can see the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco skyline from my room, when the fog lifts. This time of year, the migration of waterbirds and shorebirds plus the many resident species of birds make it a birder's paradise.



Golden Gate Bridge/Harriet Alger

After many years experience, I know the likely habitats for some of my favorites. I was not disappointed this year with some great views and pictures of a burrowing owl, a black-crowned night heron, and the usual treat of snowy egrets on the rocks, yellow feet fully visible. Some favorites defied picture-taking attempts: bushes full of hyperactive bushtits and hovering great white-tailed kites. Some waterfowl dived or stayed too far away for good photos: buffleheads, common goldeneyes, western grebes, horned grebes.

After years of seeing only western gulls, I finally spotted a California gull but failed to get a picture before it flew. Seeing flocks of flying black oystercatchers and black turnstones was a new experience. I always see willets on the rocks in Chavez Park where I walk every day. This time one flew and gave me a full view of the amazing white markings on the wings of this species.

Most shorebirds were too far away for my camera but I shot some pictures of whimbrels that gathered at low tide. I identified two avocets in breeding plumage, beautiful even at a distance.

On the San Francisco side of the bay were common loons, surf scoters, double-crested cormorants, and brown pelicans. On the Berkeley side were ruddy ducks and greater



Snowy Egret/Harriet Alger

scaup (the most common scaup here). In the Marina area I saw pied-billed grebes, great blue heron, great egrets, least sandpipers, American coots, western gulls, and mallard. Near the hotel and Chavez Park were hundreds of white-crowned sparrows, a golden-crowned sparrow, black phoebes, American crows, Brewer's blackbirds and California towhees. In Tilden Park above Berkeley, we heard a great horned owl and saw an Anna's hummingbird, red-tailed hawks, a turkey vulture, song sparrows, yellow-rumped warblers, black-capped chickadees, chestnut-backed chickadees, rock pigeons, mourning doves, a flock of Canada geese, and a hermit thrush. In residential Berkeley we saw the usual house finches, American goldfinches, European starlings and house sparrows plus a downy woodpecker.

Fifty-one species was my grand total.



Black-capped Night-Heron/Harriet Alger



Bird of Paradise/Harriet Alger



Bald Eagle/John Koscinski