

Ohio: The Biggest Week in Birding

May 10-17, 2024 | Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



With guides, Dan Donaldson and Kent Skags and participants: Sharon and Richard, Donald and Donna, Roxanne, Patrice, Robert, Janet and Dave



Wed., May 10

Arrivals Cleveland | Local Patch Birding

Everyone arrived by 2:00 p.m., giving us time for some afternoon birding. We headed to nearby Rocky River Reservation, a Cleveland Metropark. This park is famous for its Cleveland Shale formations that produce many fish fossils, most notably Donklosteous, a large, shark-like fish that swam the shallow seas above what is now Ohio 300 million years ago. We walked several loop trails along the Rocky River and oxbow wetlands, quickly tallying 33 species including some standouts that we'd likely not see in the Magee Marsh area: Yellow-throated Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and great looks at Pine Warbler. Next, we headed to a small neighborhood park where the Rocky River flows into Lake Erie, appropriately named Rocky River Park. Situated high on a bluff, the small park offers great views of Lake Erie and the birds flying along the shoreline. Here we



saw a nice flock of Chimney Swifts, Barn, Tree and Rough-winged Swallows, Baltimore Orioles and great looks at Northern Flickers (Yellow-shafted). Our last stop before dinner was at Wendy Park on the banks of the Cuyahoga River where it flows into Lake Erie. Yes, there's a theme here. These river outlets are fantastic birding spots along Lake Erie. Thankfully, most communities have set aside habitat in these areas. Here we picked up Herring and Ring-billed Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants in the River. The small woodlot here can hold quite a few birds, and we found White-crowned Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows and Gray Catbirds foraging along the edge along with Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Dinner was at the Harp, our local favorite Irish Pub. Upon returning to our hotel right across from the airport, we got out of our van and heard American Woodcocks calling in the open field next to us. It was dark, and we never saw them flying, but they were very close.

Thurs., May 11 Cuyahoga Valley National Park | Cleveland Birding

Today was dedicated to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. While not as well-known as Yellowstone or Rocky Mountain National Parks, Cuyahoga Valley is nonetheless one of the most visited. We started by heading to the Station Road area of the park. Here our quest bird was the Yellow-throated Warbler, a floodplain specialist. We quickly located one among the sycamore trees that line the Cuyahoga River here. A small wetland area produced wonderful looks at Prothonotary and Northern Parula Warblers. A short walk along the Ohio-Eire Canal towpath took us through a variety of habitats with lots of edges to bird. We had great comparison looks at Orchard and Baltimore Orioles here along with Warbling Vireos, Carolina Wren, Eastern Phoebe and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Forty-eight species at our first stop. Not too bad! Our second stop was at a heron rookery on Bath Road. Here we saw 30+ Great Blue Herons nesting in large sycamores near the road. We spent 20 minutes here photographing the rookery and picking our songbirds along the road before heading to the CVNP's Beaver Marsh trail head.

The walk at Beaver Marsh took us along a section of the canal towpath where remnants of the canal still hold water and the old sandstone canal locks can still be found. The still waters of the canal are more wetland-like now, providing close looks at painted turtles, Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats. Arriving at the beaver



marsh, we were greeted by a pair of Eastern Kingbirds that chattered on for most of our visit. We witnessed an amazing interaction between a pair of Red-winged Blackbirds and a Great Blue Heron that wandered too close to the blackbird's nest in the nearby cattails. First the blackbirds were harassing the heron, then the heron responded by aggressively jabbing at the blackbirds. We had lunch in the canal-port village of Peninsula, then headed back north to Cleveland to do a bit of afternoon lakefront birding. The Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve, once a river dredge impoundment, is now a naturalized green spot on the shore of Lake Erie that has become a favorite local birding spot. We immediately picked up a flock of Wild Turkeys from the parking lot, not uncommon here, but always fun to see.

We picked up 40 species at the preserve including, Chimney Swifts, our first Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Spotted Sandpiper, Willow Flycatchers, Wood Thrush, Savannah Sparrows and Northern Waterthrush. Our last stop of the day was at Lakeview Cemetery, Cleveland's Cemetery of record that operates more as a formal garden/arboretum than as a cemetery. Among its famous residents are Elliot Ness, President Garfield, and many other Cleveland notables. The birding was a bit light here, but we added to our growing trip list with Solitary Sandpipers, Barn Swallows, Chipping Sparrows and Green Heron. From the cemetery it was a short drive to Cleveland's Little Italy neighborhood, where we had an amazing dinner at La Dolce Vida.

Fri., May 12 Maumee Bay | Magee Marsh

The weather overnight was perfect for migration, so we headed straight to the Magee Marsh Boardwalk to see what had arrived on the winds. It was a great day of birding that started as soon as we got out of the van. In fact, we had to pull people away from birding in the parking lot to get a group picture at the entrance of the boardwalk.

There were so many birds it took us about an hour to walk the first hundred yards of the boardwalk. Warblers were plentiful, low and close. Chestnut-sided, Blackburnian and American Redstarts were here in great numbers, and the group got wonderful photographs. We spent some time staking out a Canada Warbler that eventually popped out right in front of us for wonderful looks. A pair of Prothonotary Warblers nesting in the handrail of



the boardwalk put on quite a show. In all we had 19 warbler species on our first boardwalk outing: Golden-winged, Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Tennessee, Nashville, American Redstart, Cape May, Northern Parula, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Palm, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Canada, and Wilson's. This was in addition to many Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Sandhill Cranes, Vireos and Flycatchers: 61 species in all.

We arrived at Maumee Bay State Park and Lodge in time to check into our rooms and relax a bit before dinner. The Biggest Week in American Birding Festival was already in full swing, and the lodge was very busy with vendors, displays and a free snack buffet. We enjoyed our first meal at the Maumee Lodge, reviewed our bird list for the day and discussed our plan for the next day.

Sat., May 13 Ottawa NWR Driving Tour | Howard Marsh

This was our first full day in the area, and we took some time to familiarize ourselves with many of the locations we would visit during our week together. Our first stop was Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, located right next to the Magee Marsh Wildlife Area. With hundreds of acres of managed wetlands, field and woodland habitats, and a fantastic driving tour providing access to the many dikes and woodland roads.

Our focus here was on waterfowl and shorebirds, and we had a very productive morning. Not far along the drive, we spotted many Trumpeter Swans (an Ohio wildlife reintroduction success story), Canada Geese, Mute Swans, paired-up Wood Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Mallards, and Pied-billed Grebes. We stumbled on a large gathering of Virginia Rails that were literally running around and calling just outside our open van doors. Sandhill Cranes were seen and heard often when we'd leave the vans to scope the vast wetland vistas here. Large flocks of Dunlin were often seen darting between the wetland pockets.

The woodlands here were productive too. We had great encounters with Willow Flycatchers and Warbling Vireos. Cliff, Barn and Tree Swallows and Purple Martins were present in good numbers, feeding on the millions of midges that emerge from the lake and marshes at this time of year. Song and Swamp Sparrows were common along the drive, and we had great looks at a cooperative Lincoln's Sparrow.



Lunch was at the locally famous Black Berry Corners. If you've ever read the term "lifer pie," this is where it came from as local birders, some now famous, celebrated life birds with a slice of pie from Black Berry Corners. That afternoon we spent about an hour at nearby Howard Marsh, a Toledo Metropark that, with the help of Ducks Unlimited and other funding sources, converted a 2,000-acre grain farm into an amazingly productive wetland that has become a very popular birding site. We found the expected waterfowl here and were happy to see a small flock of Ruddy Ducks along with Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Ducks. Common Gallinules, Pied-billed Grebes and American Coots were all well represented. We returned to Maumee Bay Lodge to rest before dinner.

Sun., May 14 Maumee Bay State Park | Ottawa NWR

We took advantage of the Biggest Week in American Birding Festival and scheduled the group for some celebrity birding this morning. After an early breakfast, we started our day with Holly Merker at the Maumee Bay State Park Nature Center. Holly is a professional birding guide, writer and educator who has a background in art therapy. Today she focuses on birds and nature to achieve similar goals, delivering nature-based wellness programs that she calls "Ornithotherapy" for people of all ages.

Our walk and mobile lecture took us around a short loop through the Maumee Bay State Park wetlands and boardwalks. It was a very nice two-hour walk, and a great way to set the mood for the rest of the trip, with 10 American White Pelicans, several Red-headed Woodpeckers, two roving flocks of Cedar Waxwings and countless Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, Prothonotary Warblers and Eastern Kingbirds. Based on the previous night's weather and our review of the BirdCast report, we decided to return to the Magee Marsh boardwalk the next morning. And it was! We found 12 species of warblers in a 90-minute walk with Bay-breasted being the highlight. We also picked up our first Ovenbird, bringing our total for the day to an impressive 18 species of warblers. Late in the afternoon, we received a report that a Kirtland's Warbler had been seen at Ottawa NWR. We staked out the area for an hour, but we were never able to locate it. We did see 29 species of birds, including Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Hooded Mergansers and hundreds of Purple Martins. We returned to the lodge in time to enjoy some of the festival activities before dinner, including hors d'oeuvres, vendor displays and drinks.



Mon., May 15

Pipe Creek Wildlife Area | Catawba Point | Magee Marsh Boardwalk

After breakfast at the Curtis HyFlash Diner, we drove east to Sandusky and the Pipe Creek Wildlife Area. While small, Pipe Creek contains 50 acres of constructed wetlands, upland forest and meadow habitat. Oddly enough, one of the best birding areas is right at the parking lot, which has a thick understory and borders the open waters of Sandusky Bay. We found many active and vocal Tennessee Warblers. Shorebirds were here in good numbers, along with Soras, Common Gallinules, American Coots, Black-bellied Plovers (very cooperative), Least and Spotted Sandpipers and Dunlin. We also had our first good looks at Black-crowned Night-Herons here. Great-crested Flycatchers were plentiful and vocal in the wooded areas, as were Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Cedar Waxwings. We also had wonderful looks at Lincoln's Sparrow on the rocky shoreline of the bay. Next, we drove to Catawba Island and had lunch at Rudder's Café that offers good food served up by super nice people. Afterwards we walked Catawba Point Preserve, a small natural area on the northern-most tip of Catawba. Birding was light, but we did find, Canada, Chestnut-sided, Palm, Wilson's and several Magnolia Warblers as well as Indigo Buntings.

On the way back we stopped for some late afternoon/evening birding on the Magee Marsh boardwalk. The late afternoon sun made for some spectacular lighting conditions for viewing and photographing along the boardwalk, providing perhaps our best looks at warblers for the trip. Birds were actively fueling up in preparation for the night's migration. Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Yellow, Black-throated Blue and Bay-breasted Warblers were all low along the boardwalk, so intent on feeding that they completely ignored the throngs of people standing just feet away from them. It was a wonderful outing that for many, especially those that came on this trip specifically for eastern warbler species, won't soon forget.

Tues., May 16

Oak Openings | Magee Marsh | Maumee Bay SP

This would be our last full day of birding together. After breakfast, we headed to the Oak Openings area of Northwest Ohio, a unique location near Toledo where the prairie/oak savannah habitat was formed by the many continental glaciers that once covered northern Ohio. Here the glaciers were thousands of feet thick and during



periods of melt, the lake that is now Lake Erie was much bigger, leaving behind a large sand dune/wetland mosaic area that has now become the oak openings. The mature oak forests provide perfect habitat for Pileated, Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. We also found Blue-winged Warbler, Lark Sparrow and Philadelphia Vireo, but the star of the show was a Kentucky Warbler that appeared to be defending a territory just a short walk from the nature center. This usually quiet, often elusive bird was very vocal, perching prominently for all to hear his piercing song. Not to be outdone, a male Hooded Warbler put on a show of his own, and Lark Sparrows were found in sandy prairie areas, their preferred habitat. Our farewell dinner was at Toledo's famous Beirut Restaurant.

Wed., May 17 Departure Day

After our final breakfast together, we loaded the vans one last time and said goodbye to Magee Marsh as we departed for the Cleveland Airport. Contact information was exchanged, and last-minute photos shared, then we said our goodbyes and wished each other safe travels, wonderful memories of the spectacle of spring songbird migration in northern Ohio and the Biggest Week in American Birding fresh in our minds.

Photos: Group Photo (Dan Donaldson - DD), American Redstart (Sharon Boranyak - SB), Great Egret (Kent Skaggs - KS), Yellow Warbler (SB), Purple Flowers (SB), Blackburnian Warbler (KS), Rocky River Nature Center (KS), Group at Cuyahoga Valley National Park (KS), Great Blue Heron (DD), Peregrine Falcon (KS), Great Blue Heron Rookery (KS), Eastern Whip-poor-will (KS), Prothonotary Warbler (KS), American Woodcock (KS), Group at Magee Marsh (KS), Chestnut-sided Warbler (KS), Melanistic Eastern Garter Snake (KS), Black-necked Stilt (DD), Common Gallinule (KS), Canada Warbler (KS), Group (KS), Bay-breasted Warbler (KS), Northern Parula (DD), Oak Openings (KS), Magnolia Warbler (DD), Eastern Screech Owl (KS), Kentucky Warbler (KS), Greater Yellowlegs (SB), Hooded Warbler (KS)