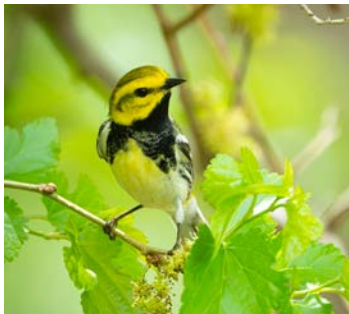


Ohio: Biggest Week in Birding May 14-21, 2025 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Dan Donaldson and Bryan Calk with Kathy, Cynthia, Mike, Amy, Ron, Meg, Lynn, Toni, Judith, and Eileen



Wed. May 14

Arrivals in Cleveland | Rocky River | Wendy Park

Once everyone arrived in Cleveland, the group gathered for an afternoon of birding in and around some of the metro area's well-known hotspots. The first stop was the Rocky River Reservation Nature Center, where broad trails wound through a canopy of bright lime-green foliage. The fresh flush of deciduous leaves painted the landscape in spring color, while the woods rang with the songs of Yellow Warblers, Tufted Titmice, and Carolina Wrens.



While bird activity kept ears tuned and binoculars busy, Dan, the lead guide, layered in the first of many natural and cultural history lessons for the week. The story of northeast Ohio, he explained, begins around 360 million years ago when the area lay beneath a shallow inland sea teeming with armored fish like Dunkleosteus. By 300 million years ago, tectonic uplift brought an end to new sedimentation, leaving the region with no dinosaur-era rocks and a fossil record dominated instead by ancient marine life and Ice Age mammals.

Outcrops along the trail revealed Black Shale and Sandstone, evidence of sediment washed from the once-mighty Appalachian Mountains, which may have rivaled the Rockies in height before erosion wore them down. Ohio's forests once stretched nearly unbroken across the state, but by 1900, most were gone. Today, forest cover sits around 30–40 percent, though modern threats come in the form of invasive pests. Emerald Ash Borer, Gypsy Moths, and Beech Leaf Disease have left their marks.

Human history here runs just as deep. Long before European settlement, this area served as neutral ground between Native tribes like the Shawnee. After the American Revolution, Connecticut claimed what's now northeast Ohio as the Western Reserve, shaping the region with New England-style town layouts. As the group passed along the lakefront, massive Coke Piles and Ore Docks marked Cleveland's industrial roots. A manmade cut reshaped the shoreline here into what functions like an island. Great Lakes Freighters still haul Iron Ore from Minnesota, fueling Steel Mills that once powered America's industrial growth.

On one of our last trails here, we rounded a bend and found an American Beaver right beside the trail, calmly browsing on a clump of fresh vegetation. It was surprisingly large up close and completely unfazed by our presence, offering a rare chance to watch one of these iconic animals going about its routine in broad daylight. Later in the afternoon, birding continued at one of Cleveland's most iconic migrant traps Windy Park, perched right on the edge of Lake Erie. Surrounded by warehouses and shipping lots, the park offers a sliver of green in an otherwise industrial stretch. For migrating birds, that sliver is critical. As storm systems moved through and southerly winds slowed, the trees were alive with movement. A single tree could host a revolving cast of warblers like Magnolia, Bay-breasted, and Palm flitting in and out in near-constant motion. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher made a timely appearance, and there was never a moment without something to watch. The spectacle offered just a first taste of the famed warbler migration that sweeps through the Great Lakes each spring.

The evening wrapped up downtown with dinner at a cozy Irish pub—good food, welcome warmth, and easy conversation after a strong start to the week.

Thu. May 15 Cuyahoga Valley National Park | Station Road | The Ledges

We started the morning at the Station Road Bridge area of Cuyahoga Valley National Park, walking the Towpath Trail along the historic Ohio & Erie Canal. This section of the park preserves a glimpse into the 19th-century transportation era, when canal boats, pulled by mules, traveled the waterway between Lake Erie and the Ohio River. Today, the old towpath offers a tranquil route shaded by riparian hardwoods and lined with wetlands and remnants of the canal's stonework.

Birding highlights here included a singing Cerulean Warbler, a species that prefers mature deciduous forests with tall canopy structure - exactly the kind of habitat at this stretch of the valley. Indigo Bunting and Red-headed Woodpecker were also active, the latter flashing through the canopy near the locks. Along the river, we crossed over one of the many truss bridges that span the Cuyahoga, offering a glimpse into the region's blend of industrial history and nature. We even took a minute to stop at a roadside Great Blue Heron rookery watching the birds come and go with nearly grown chicks in the nests.

Next, we stopped at the Ira Road Beaver Marsh, one of the most iconic wetland spots in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The boardwalk trail cut right through a lush marshscape full of life and activity. Nesting Tree Swallows zipped back and forth overhead, flashing iridescent blue as they brought food to nest boxes and cavities. A pair of Baltimore Orioles called from the treetops, and a Virginia Rail weaved through the reeds just off the boardwalk, allowing exceptional views. Down below, the marsh was alive with movement. Common Snapping Turtles surfaced near the boardwalk, and a Muskrat glided through the open water disappearing into the vegetation. It was one of those stops where there was always something to look at, the whole scene buzzing with spring energy.



Later in the day, we explored the Ledges Trail near the Happy Days Lodge—an area known as the Ritchie Ledges. Here, the trail winds through a dramatic corridor of Sharon Conglomerate rock, a sandstone formation deposited over 320 million years ago when this area was a steamy swamp. Erosion has since carved the towering walls and narrow crevices that make the ledges such a striking geological feature, dotted with shards of quartz. This unique environment fosters a cooler, moister microclimate than the surrounding forest. Eastern Hemlocks grow in the ravines, remnants of a post-glacial era that support lush vegetation and help create ideal conditions for species like Hooded Warbler. We finished our time at the Ledges just taking in the incredible geology and the deep green landscape. Mosses and ferns cloaked the stone walls protecting the fragile soil slopes below them, while Scarlet Tanagers and Blue-headed Vireos provided the soundtrack. With perfect spring weather, it was a beautiful way to end the afternoon. After returning to the hotel, we had some downtime, followed by our first group checklist session to review the day's sightings and dinner at another local favorite spot.



on the southern shore of Lake Erie. The boardwalk winds through coastal wooded wetland habitat and provides close-up views of migrating songbirds in May. Magee Marsh is managed by the Ohio Division of Wildlife and is home to the Black Swamp Bird Observatory (BSBO), a key player in bird conservation efforts across the region. BSBO runs the adjacent banding station and is one of the primary organizers of the annual Biggest Week in American Birding festival.

As we started down the boardwalk, winds were swirling from every direction, which had the birds hunkered down and scattered rather than concentrated. Still, the birding came in waves of quiet stretches broken by bursts of activity. We had great looks at Magnolia Warblers, and a highlight was a pair of Prothonotary Warblers shining bright yellow as one fanned its tail and gave close, charismatic views. We also saw both Red-eyed and Warbling Vireos up close, and an Eastern Screech Owl tucked into the crook of a tree. Other sightings included Northern Parula and Canada Warbler, and in the wetlands below we spotted a few Blanding's Turtles, an endangered species in many parts of its range due to habitat loss and slow reproductive rates.

After reaching the end of the boardwalk, we spent some time at the vendor booths and optics tents, chatting with reps and learning some tips and tricks for using our binoculars and camera gear. We then headed to lunch at a local dive before exploring trails on the east side of Maumee Bay State Park, which offered more shelter from the wind.

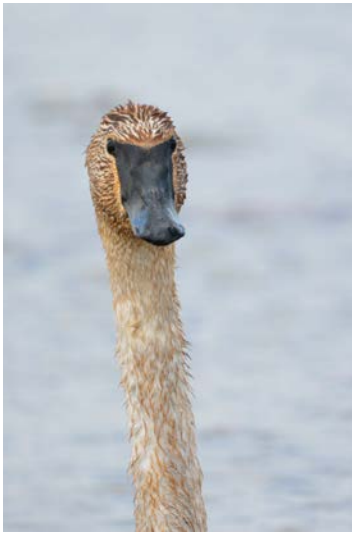
Once again, things started slow but picked up quickly. We had excellent views of both male and female Blackpoll Warblers, as well as stunning Bay-breasted and Blackburnian Warblers. Just before we wrapped up, a brilliant adult male Cape May Warbler was catching bugs and singing from eye-level right beside the trail. Normally a high canopy species, seeing one up close like this was a real gift to end the birding day.

In the evening, we attended one of the official festival keynote talks, focused on Snowy Owls and recent research from the Arctic. We learned that Snowy Owls are the fourth-largest owl species in the world, and among the most fierce - capable of defending their nest sites against Arctic foxes and even wolves. A surprising and memorable detail was how they stockpile lemmings around their nests when prey is abundant, sometimes creating a perimeter of food to help feed their young through the short Arctic summer.

After the keynote, we reviewed our daily checklist, swapped highlights from the field, and headed out for dinner at a local restaurant.

Sun. May 18

Oak Openings | Metzger Marsh



We started the day with another hearty breakfast before heading west to Toledo's Oak Openings Preserve. This preserve is one of the most unique natural areas in all of Ohio as it sits at the intersection of sandy oak savannas, wet prairies, and forested wetlands. This rare combination of habitats supports a high diversity of plant and animal species, including some that are found almost nowhere else in the state. Oak Openings is especially known for its mix of White Oak, Black Oak, and Scarlet Oak trees, which give the area its name and its distinctive ecology. The preserve itself was beautiful, with sandy trails winding through tall trees and open, grassy areas.

As we started down the trail, we spotted a Veery hopping along the edge of the path—an elegant little thrush with its soft brown back and spotted chest. We heard the loud teacher-teacher-teacher song of an Ovenbird echoing from deeper in the forest, and a little farther on, we had good looks at a Lark Sparrow, always a fun find with its bold facial pattern. Blue-winged Warbler also made an appearance, and then we had two showstoppers: a glorious male Scarlet Tanager singing from the treetops, and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak belting out its sweet song nearby.

After lunch, we headed to Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area, one of the rich wetland habitats along the western Lake Erie shoreline. This preserve includes a mix of coastal marsh, woodlots, open water, and grassy dikes, all managed to support a diversity of waterfowl, waders, and migrating songbirds. It's a great example of restored wetland habitat in this region and an important stopover point during migration. The birding was excellent right from the start, with loads of Trumpeter Swans very close to the road. They were giving great views, calling loudly with their deep trumpeting vocalizations echoing across the marsh. In another part of the wetland, we had good views of Sandhill Cranes, stained a rusty orange from the iron-rich water, something you don't see in the winter when they're clean gray.

There were also several shorebirds moving through, including a gorgeous pair of Black-necked Stilts, flashing their sharp black-and-white contrast and bright pink legs. Dunlin were also present in good numbers, many in striking breeding plumage with black bellies and warm rufous tones across their backs. Back in one of the woodlots, we picked up more migrant passerines, with lots of Blackpoll Warblers continuing. One of the more interesting sights of the afternoon came from a wetland section across the road. The conservation team here had floated out some old decommissioned pontoon boats to create artificial nesting platforms for Common Terns, which don't have many natural nesting spots in the region. It was clearly working as a huge swirl of terns in the air above the pontoons, hundreds of them calling, circling, and interacting in what looked like a thriving breeding colony.

It was then time for a short break before meeting again to run through our checklist of species for the day and head to dinner at a local spot known for its fresh Lake Erie fish!

Mon. May 19

Kelleys Island | Glacial Grooves | Ruff Chase



We started with a morning ferry to Kelleys Island, crossing over the limestone bedrock that forms much of the region. The island is known for its unique alvar habitats - rare ecosystems with thin soils over flat limestone that support a distinctive mix of prairie and boreal plants. The geology alone made the place feel special, even before the birds. Our first stop was Jones Preserve, where we had the chance to observe bird banding up close. The station, operated by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, had just netted an Ovenbird and a Magnolia Warbler, and seeing them in the hand was unforgettable. Detailed views of their plumage, facial patterns, and structure gave a new appreciation for birds we usually see darting past.

Next, we explored the Glacial Grooves Geological Preserve, home to the largest and best-preserved glacial grooves in the world. We walked alongside massive, 400-million-year-old limestone striations etched deep enough to stand inside, with grooves stretching up to 15 feet deep and 35 feet wide. While walking through the area, we stumbled into a warbler flock moving through the low, stunted trees that made viewing incredibly easy. With the canopy at eye-level, the birds were right in front of us. Highlights included fiery male Blackburnian Warblers, richly marked Bay-breasted Warblers, and a Northern Parula buzzing through the branches. The combination of striking birds, fascinating geology, and lakeside scenery made this one of the most memorable stops of the trip.

We had lunch at the Village Pump, a local restaurant overlooking the marina, then returned to the preserve for more birding and a walk down to the shoreline. The lake was calm, with waves rolling in against the limestone shelves. We searched among the rocks and found fossils of ancient corals and bivalves washed up along the shore. Red Columbine bloomed brightly in the cracks of the stone, and the air was full of warbler song. After catching the ferry back to the mainland, we made an evening stop at Barnside Creamery, a roadside ice cream stand with a surprise... beautiful bird-filled wetlands stretching out behind it. A Ruff had been reported in the area, and we got to work scanning through hundreds of Dunlin in sharp breeding plumage. Eventually we found the Ruff, a standout even among the crowd, and had excellent scope views. A Wilson's Phalarope also gave great looks, calmly feeding in the shallows.

Back at the lodge, we wrapped up the evening with our checklist routine and enjoyed dinner together - tired but happy after another full day of birds, fossils, and lake island adventure.

Tue. May 20

Magee Marsh | Ottawa NWR | Howard Marsh

Our last full day of the trip started with strong winds and cooler weather as a front pushed through the region. We made the most of it by heading straight to Magee Marsh Boardwalk for one more pass through this iconic birding hotspot. The conditions had stirred up some activity, and we quickly found ourselves among a mixed flock that



included several Bay-breasted Warblers giving absolutely incredible, eye-level views just feet from the boardwalk rails. It was one of the best looks at this species we'd had all trip. From deeper in the marsh, we heard the clear, emphatic call of a Connecticut Warbler, one of the more elusive migrants, singing unseen. We also picked up an Alder Flycatcher calling from the brush, adding to our list of empids for the week.

After the boardwalk, we moved over to the Crane Creek Estuary Trail, a lesser-known gem within the Magee Marsh complex. This trail winds right along the Lake Erie shoreline before curving back through protected woodland and marsh habitat. The estuary itself was stunning with shallow, winding channels of Crane Creek feeding into the lake under a shifting sky, with scattered Bald Eagles perched and patrolling the area. A flock of Purple Martins danced overhead, and the shrubs and trees around the wetlands held a light scattering of migrating warblers moving through. This estuary habitat, where freshwater wetlands meet the open lake, is ecologically vital. These borderlands provide stopover cover for songbirds, foraging grounds for shorebirds and waterfowl, and nesting space for raptors and marsh birds. The patchwork of phragmites, cattails, and lake-edge willows created a calm, protected feel even in the wind, and we soaked it in.

For lunch, we stopped at Tony Packo's - a Toledo institution known for its spicy Hungarian-style hot dogs and pickles. This cult-classic restaurant brought a touch of local flavor and some humor to the middle of our day! In the afternoon, the group split up with some returning to the lodge for a bit of rest and packing, while others kept birding with a visit to Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. We took the auto-tour loop, stopping along the way for some fantastic photography opportunities. Several Trumpeter Swans in full, crisp breeding plumage were standing just off the road, allowing for close, unobstructed views. We also had a number of Great Egrets, bright against the marsh grasses, and a nesting pair of Bald Eagles perched in a massive stick nest high in a leafless tree.

From there, we made one final push out to Howard Marsh Metropark, a recently restored wetland complex that has quickly become a must-visit site for regional birders. We began at the main marsh and found multiple shorebird species feeding in the shallow pools. Black-necked Stilts gave us our best looks yet, so tall, elegant, and active. A Semipalmated Sandpiper gave us a nearly side-by-side comparison with Least Sandpiper, helping everyone sharpen their peep ID skills. Caspian Terns stood sentinel along the shoreline, looking huge and prehistoric with their thick red bills. At the west end of the marsh, we scanned from the overlook near the parking area and picked up a few late-day highlights: an immature Common Loon still resting on a migration stopover pond, a handful of new waterfowl for our list, and American White Pelicans soaring overhead on wide, wind-buoyed wings. Among the emergent vegetation, we also found Common Gallinule and American Coot moving through the reeds.

After a great final outing, we returned to the lodge to pack up and gather for one last checklist session. We capped off the day with a celebratory dinner at The Beirut, a beloved Toledo institution serving authentic Lebanese cuisine in a cozy, welcoming atmosphere. The restaurant's extensive menu featured dishes like shish kebabs, grape leaves, and baklava, offering a delightful culinary experience to end our trip.

Wed. May 21

Farewells

Our final morning began with a more leisurely pace, a welcome change after a full week of bird-filled early starts. We gathered for a relaxed breakfast at the lodge restaurant, enjoying made-to-order meals with panoramic views of Lake Erie stretching out beyond the windows. The water was calm, the sky soft with morning haze, and a few swallows darted past just outside as if giving a last nod to our week of migration.

Over coffee and conversation, we reminisced on the week and how it felt to be immersed in spring's movement, to witness these places pulsing with life, and to share it all with others who understood the excitement of birdsong in the trees and silhouettes in the sky. What began as a group of individuals quickly grew into a small community shaped by shared curiosity, early mornings, muddy boots, and the quiet thrill of finding birds together.

As the bags were loaded and final checklists tucked away, we said our goodbyes with full hearts and a few new friends to carry forward into the next adventure. Whether it was a lifer seen, a story shared, or simply the beauty of these wetlands and woodlots during peak migration, everyone left with something to treasure.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Black-throated Green Warbler (BC), Indigo Bunting (Ron Logan - RL), Prothonotary Warbler (BC), Red-breasted Merganser (BC), Beaver (Violette Wood - VW), Chestnut-sided Warbler (BC), Common Snapping Turtle (BC), Virginia Rail (BC), Cuyahoga Valley National Park (BC), Hooded Warbler (Cynthia Nassim - CN), Bald Eagles (VW), Blanding's Turtle (BC), Prothonotary Warbler (BC), Cape May Warbler (BC), Blackpoll Warbler (VW), Sandhill Crane (RL), American Copper (BC), Black-capped Chickadee (BC), Trumpeter Swan (BC), Glacial Grooves (BC), American Robin (leucistic) (BC), Magee Marsh (BC), Bay-breasted Warbler (BC), Trumpeter Swans (BC), Tree Swallow (VW)