

# Ohio: Biggest Week in Birding

## May 6 – 12, 2025 | Trip Report by Dan Donaldson

### With Naturalist Journeys



**Guide(s) Dan Donaldson & Kent Skaggs and participants John, Gary, Sue, Susan, Loretta, Madeleine, Diane, and Melissa**



### **Tues., May 6 Arrivals in Cleveland | Downtown Lakefront Birding**

Arrival day! And by early afternoon, we were all here and settled in at our hotel. We met up at 3:00 PM for introductions and some afternoon birding before dinner. Rocky River Metropark was just a 10 minute van trip from the hotel. We started off in the nature center where Dan used the exhibits to review the natural history of the region. The window on wildlife provided our first bird encounters. Of course we had to first find the Black-capped Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse for our west coast participants. White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, and an inquisitive Veery were nice pickups here.

Next we walked the trails that took us up a very long staircase to the top of the gorge the Rocky River flows through. It's forested here and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers noisily fed above us. Warbling Vireos, Wood Thrush, and Baltimore Orioles were noted here as well. Walking back down another staircase we found ourselves on flat floodplain wetlands. Yellow-throated Vireos were calling loudly from high in the forest edge but were never





located. The open wetland habitat provided open viewing for Great Blue and Green Herons, Red-headed, Red-bellied, Downy, and Pileated Woodpeckers. Swamp and Song Sparrows stayed low in the wet vegetation, while the Eastern Bluebirds hawked insects from the dead branches of flooded out trees. We saw 36 species here.

Next we were off to Lake Erie and Whiskey Island/Wendy Park. This is a famous local patch with a small woodlot along a section of industrial shoreline of Lake Erie. This is also the confluence of the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie. Well ... the woodlot was amazing this afternoon! Warblers tend to get stuck for the day in this woodlot and we quickly

picked up American Redstart, Northern Parula, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Palm, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. The bird of the day, especially for us east coasters, was a beautiful Western Tanager that caused quite the commotion for the locals.

From Wendy Park, it was a quick drive to a local Irish pub, The Harp, for dinner. Back at our hotel, we did our checklist and made our plans for more local birding tomorrow.

## **Wed., May 7      Cuyahoga Valley National Park | Lake View Cemetery**

After a hot breakfast at our hotel we were off to head to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Our goal this morning, besides visiting this amazing place, was to pick up a couple birds we were not likely to encounter in the Magee Marsh areas. Our first stop was Station Road Towpath Trail. The Tow Path is where the horses pulled boats along the Ohio-Erie Canal. It is now a hike and bike trail stretching from Cleveland, 90 miles south, through Akron and beyond. We were met in the parking lot by Common Mergansers flying over, circling a section of the river. We had 39 species on our walk along the towpath, its wetlands, floodplains, and forests. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds fed on the Jewelweed growing and wetter areas were where we found our target Yellow-throated Warblers singing high in the mature Sycamore trees. Eastern Phoebe, Great-crested Flycatcher, and Eastern Kingbirds were actively feeding and calling here as well. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were nesting very near the trail and we spent quite a bit of time watching them bringing nesting material to the nest site. Golden-winged Warbler was an unexpected treat along the path as well. We managed 39 species here this morning. It was time to move to our next spot.



Back in the vans we made our way to the famous Heron rookery. This rookery is nearly 40 years old now and the mature trees are slowly dying off, providing less and less area for nesting sites, but there were still 30 pairs this year with new nests being established farther down river about a mile or so. We enjoyed 30 minutes of wonderful, close up looks and photographs of nests with as many as four chicks in them.

We rounded out our morning with a stop at Ira Road Trail Head, where we walked about a mile along the towpath, past 200-year-old canal locks to a large beaver marsh. Tree Swallows were active over the marsh, picking out nesting cavities in the many dead trees in the flooded areas. Swamp Sparrows sang from perches above the marsh vegetation. Northern Flickers (eastern yellows), Downy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers were also seen here. Wood Ducks already had their chicks with them as they worked their way along the beaver dam's edge. Cooper's and Red-tailed Hawks were seen, along with Turkey Vultures soaring in the late morning thermals.

Lunch was at Fisher's Diner located in Peninsula, Ohio, a canal port town, also located along the Tow Path. Afterwards we made a quick visit to the Conservancy for the Cuyahoga Valley National Park gift shop and headquarters. Before we left the Cuyahoga Valley, we had one last stop, The Ledges. This park is along the valley wall where cool water seeps out of Sandstone cliffs that cause a more northern microclimate along the valley rim. Dan discovered nesting Hooded Warblers here a couple years back and it has been a reliable spot for these trips since. It wasn't long before we started hearing their calls as we walked down the trail. Soon we had fantastic looks at a couple males that had set up territories along the trail. Further down the trail we hiked along stunning sandstone formations with crevasses we could walk through. It even had a bat cave that is gated off to protect the hibernating bats. We climbed a long staircase to get back on top of the valley where we were greeted by Blue-headed Vireos, and Swainson Thrushes. It was getting late in the afternoon, so we headed back to the hotel to freshen up for dinner and one last birding stop before we ate at La Dolce Vida, a premier Italian restaurant in the Little Italy neighborhood of Cleveland. Our birding stop was at Lakeview Cemetery. This is Cleveland's historic cemetery where many of the industrialists that built Cleveland now reside, along with President Garfield. His remains are housed in the James A. Garfield Memorial, which is a prominent landmark within the cemetery grounds. The grounds and gardens are amazing here and we birded for about 40 minutes before heading to nearby Little Italy. Cape May Warblers put on quite a show for us in the trees along the pond and we spotted a Wood Thrush, Baltimore Orioles, Palm Warblers, and Gray Catbirds in the woodlots. It was a quick outing but we tallied 30 species. Dinner at La Dolce Vida was amazing and the best food of the trip. We arrived back at the hotel a bit late, so we called it a night.

## **Thurs., May 8      Cleveland Birding | On to Maumee Bay State Park Lodge**





Today we packed our luggage and headed off for an early departure. We headed straight to downtown Cleveland and the Erie Street Cemetery, one of Cleveland's first cemeteries, a small green oasis among the concrete and office buildings downtown. We spend about an hour walking along the old stone fence that surrounds the property. It wasn't long before we started picking up warblers: Black-throated Blue, Palm, Yellow-rumped, and Black-and-white, as well as Blue-headed Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglets along with a Red-breasted Nuthatch. We had a nice Cooper's Hawk flyby, but the bird of the patch was the great looks we had of a brilliant Blackburnian Warbler.

Our next stop this morning was the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve. Once a Cuyahoga River dredge disposal area that juts out into the lake, it eventually was abandoned and vegetation took over. Its prominent location on the lakeshore attracted the birds and the birds attracted the birders who eventually convinced the Cleveland Port Authority to open it up. The birding here is pretty amazing during migration and we had a great morning of birding. The swallows were here in good numbers and we picked up Bank, Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Barn, and Cliff Swallows, as well as Purple Martins (many resting in the same branches of a dead tree). Chimney Swifts were here in great numbers and we quit counting at 100. Baltimore Orioles were a constant presence here as were the old nests hanging in the Cottonwood Trees. Walking along the old dikes, that are now the trails, we added a couple new species of warbler: Northern Parula, Black-throated Green, Common Yellow, and American Redstarts. Ovenbirds were heard calling deep in the vegetation but never located. Orchard Oriole was a nice surprise along the trail, as was a Lincoln's Sparrow working a mud puddle at the bottom of the trail. 56 bird species at this stop this morning.

We had to pull ourselves away from Cleveland's birding scene to make our two-hour drive to western Ohio and the birding regions around Magee Marsh. As we neared the Maumee Bay Lodge area we took some back roads and stopped at Meinke Marina parking lot. This spot overlooks a small grain field and marina area. Today the farm field was not holding water but it was still birdy. Six Bald Eagles were resting in the field, perhaps feeding on a nearby roadkill deer. Horned Larks were flitting back and forth along the road and Purple Martins and Barn Swallows were active overhead. Much to our delight, American Pipits flew in to the gravel parking lot we were birding from and gave us some great looks at this species that we don't often get on this trip.

We arrived at Maumee Bay State Park and Lodge in time to get into our rooms and get back out for some late afternoon birding. We decided to head to the nearby Magee Marsh Boardwalk. There wasn't too much warbler activity here, but we did get great looks at Sandhill Cranes, Brown Thrashers, American White Pelicans, and typical woodpeckers and flycatchers in the woods along the boardwalk.

Our first dinner was at the lodge and we did two days of checklist before turning in for the evening.

## **Fri., May 9      Magee Marsh Boardwalk | Ottawa NWR | Metzger Marsh**



We used today to orient ourselves to the Western Lake Erie marshes and birding scene by doing a sampler of the Magee Marsh Boardwalk and Causeway, Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, and Metzger Marsh. These are the three major birding areas here and we visited them several times during our time here.

We started our morning at the Magee Marsh Boardwalk. We took our time driving the causeway out to the boardwalk, picking up waterfowl along the way. Canada Geese are here of course, some with chicks already, Northern Shovelers, Great Blue Herons, and Great Egrets were well represented and we watched several Double-crested Cormorants feeding in the canals along the causeway. We assembled at the boardwalk entrance, had a quick meeting, and started our slow walk into the woodlot. It was only about 40 feet before we started getting birds and birders. Warblers feeding low alongside the trail caused a bit of a backup on the boardwalk and there was usually something to see at every backup along the way. This time it was Black-throated Green Warblers, working the vegetation just off the trail. Warbling Vireos were calling overhead and Northern Waterthrushes were calling from deep in the ground vegetation. We spent two hours making our first full loop around the boardwalk, picking up 14 warbler species: Prothonotary, Orange-crowned, Nashville, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Cape May, Northern Parula, Magnolia, Blackburnian (stunning looks and photographs), Northern Yellow, Black-throated Blue, Palm, and Black-throated Greens. A great representation of the first migration wave of warblers.

Next we were off to Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge where we stopped at the visitor center/gift shop, before heading out for a quick walk on their trails. We'd be back tomorrow to drive the refuge impoundments. Our quick walk along their boardwalk and woodland trails gave us great looks at Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Spotted Sandpiper, more American White Pelicans, Veery, and Hermit Thrushes. The many Purple Martin colonies they have here had large numbers of nesters already.

Metzger Marsh is adjacent to Ottawa and they share a couple impoundment walls. We drove the causeway and tallied 50+ Trumpeter Swans (they nest here), Wood Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Common Gallinules, American Coot, and a cooperative Sandhill Crane. Our first of many Marsh Wrens was heard along the drive as well. At the end of the causeway there is a small two-acre woodlot that often acts as a warbler trap, but today we found only Palm Warblers here, however we scored great looks and photos of an American Bittern! We'd be back.

## **Sat., May 10      Magee Boardwalk | Ottawa Driving Tour**

Last night's winds were from the northwest so we figured it might be the best day of the week for migration. So we were right back at the Magee Marsh boardwalk first thing in the morning. We weren't disappointed as the birding was fantastic. Blue Jays were moving in the crisp morning sun and we counted over 500 over the course of 20 minutes. American White Pelicans were on patrol as well, with 30 flying overhead. Prothonotary Warblers were actively singing and excavating nesting cavities along the board walk. One pair actually nested in a post of the guard rail of the boardwalk. Bay-breasted Warblers appeared to have arrived overnight along with more Chestnut-sided, Nashville, and Black-throated Green Warblers. Least Flycatchers and Eastern Kingbirds worked





the tops of the vegetation and Sparrows (Swamp, Lincoln, White-throated, and many Song) worked the ground below them. It was a great morning with 48 species (14 warblers).



After Lunch we were back at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge for the self-driving tour. The tour took us through five miles of impoundments and Rough-leaved Dogwood forests. Bald Eagles are numerous here and we saw many nested pairs, usually by one of the many nests visible from the road. We also saw, and constantly heard, over 15 pairs of Trumpeter Swans. Wetland impoundments that were drawn down held shorebirds; Killdeer, Semipalmated Plovers, Solitary Sandpipers, Dunlin (our most numerous shorebird in these parts), and tiny Least Sandpipers. Common Terns nested nearby and we had several hunting the canals along the drive. Several Northern Harriers were up over the marshes and we had distant looks at males and females as nearby Marsh Wrens serenaded us from the nearby cattails. The winds kept a lot of the passerines down in cover, but Brown-headed Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds, Swamp and Song Sparrows still ventured out.



We decided to do some birding this evening, so after dinner we headed back to Magee Marsh. **KIRTLAND'S WARBLER ALERT!** Upon getting out of the van we heard about a Kirtland's Warbler showing out on the nearby Estuary Trail. Our excitement grew as we walked along the trail passing people returning from the sighting letting us know that it was still there, and we wouldn't miss it with all the people there. Sure enough, we found the

gathering of people at the end of the trail quietly waiting for it to reappear. After a couple minutes wait, he popped up into a bush adjacent to the trail. He was in bright sunshine and gave us quite a show. He was banded with additional color bands, so was most certainly a study subject of a researcher in Grayling, Michigan. Fully satisfied with our observation, we birded our way back to the parking lot, and poked into the boardwalk for a while before the sunset.

**Sun., May 11      Oak Openings Area | Howard Marsh | Woodcock Watch**



This morning, after an early breakfast at the Hi-Flash (the local diner we use for quick breakfasts) we headed west past Toledo to the Oak Openings region of Ohio. This region is a very interesting habitat made up of oak savannahs, ancient sand dunes (now vegetated), and wetlands, providing a very unique habitat for birds that often can't be found elsewhere in Ohio. Our first stop was the Buehner Center where they had a wonderful window on wildlife where we watched titmice, nuthatches, and chickadees feeding along with Eastern Red and Fox Squirrels. Then we headed to Tornado Alley, where in 2010 a large tornado wiped a mature forest clean for a couple mile stretch. Today the alley is a scrub/shrub corridor with miles of mature forest edge that is prime Yellow-breasted Chat habitat. This morning we had our Chat, along with Blue-winged, Tennessee, Northern Parula, and Yellow Warblers. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were numerous here, as were Indigo Buntings. Red-headed Woodpeckers were the dominant species of woodpecker here, and we saw many. Next, we were off to Girdham Road, one of Ohio's few Lark Sparrow nesting habitats. With some determination and patience, we spotted our Lark Sparrow in a short pine tree.

On our way back to the lodge from Oak Openings, we stopped at the famous Tony Paco's for lunch (hot dog buns!...if you know, you know). Then we were on to Howard Marsh, a large wetland restoration project that took 400 acres of corn fields and restored it to open water wetland habitat. The wildlife responded to the newly created habitat immediately and it has now become a "must bird" spot for the region. Black-necked Stilts started breeding here several years ago and today we saw two pairs at nesting sites. Large flocks of Dunlin moved throughout the wetland in large flashing flocks. Black-crowned Night Herons, Osprey, and Long-billed Dowitchers were wonderful additions to our trip list. Upon leaving the parking lot we stopped in the road for a nice flock of Bobolinks that gave us quick looks and a couple buzzy calls before disappearing in the farm fields.

After dinner tonight we headed out into the fields around the lodge to spot some American Woodcocks. We were never able to see one but we had several calling and flying nearby this evening. Trumpeter Swans calling in the darkness was a nice nightcap.

## **Mon., May 12 Magee Marsh Boardwalk | Pearson Metropark**

Today was our last full day of birding for this trip and we spent most of the day birding at Magee Marsh Boardwalk. It was a beautiful sunny morning and we enjoyed many new overnight arrivals. Black-billed Cuckoo, Red-eyed Vireos, Black-and-white and Golden-winged Warblers, and Scarlet Tanagers. We had 17 species this morning, what a way to wrap up a trip! Blue Jays were still migrating through, with hundreds counted overhead along with more American White Pelicans and Bald Eagles. From there we made a stop at the festival's optics tent to see what was new in the binocular and spotting scope world. Lunch was back at the Maumee Bay Lodge.

We then headed to Toledo Metroparks Pearson Creek, with its remnant Black Swamp forest. Here, Swamp White and Pin Oak forests tower above the wet woodland floor. We walked several of the trails searching for



thrushes without luck but Great-crested Flycatchers and Red-eyed Vireos kept us looking up. Northern Flickers (yellow) worked the more open patches of forest along with Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers. It was a great walk to wrap up our last day of birding.

We conducted our last checklist before dinner at The Beirut Restaurant in Toledo, a perennial trip favorite.

## **Tues., May 13                      Departure Day**

Today was departure day and we had to head back to the Cleveland airport right after breakfast to make our early afternoon flights. Departure days are always a bit melancholy. We were tired but we also reflected on our week of activities and the new friends we'd made. There were already conversations about birding/traveling together in the future and trips everyone would be taking next. At the airport we said our last goodbyes, made sure we had good contact information for each other, and made our way to the flight counters. Hope to see you all on the birding trail again.

*Photo Credits: Group, Kent Skaggs; Rocky River Nature Center, Kent Skaggs; CVNP, Kent Skaggs; CVNP Beaver Pond, Kent Skaggs; CVNP Ledges Trail, Kent Skaggs; Swainson's Thrush, Kent Skaggs; Northern Parula, Kent Skaggs; Yellow Warbler, Melissa Cummins; Prothonotary Warbler, Don Simborg; Red-bellied Woodpecker, Melissa Cummins; Indigo Bunting, Susan Joy; American Bittern, Kent Skaggs; Group at Breakfast, Susan Joy; Bald Eagles on Nest, Kent Skaggs; Kirtland's Warbler, Kent Skaggs; Group on Boardwalk, Kent Skaggs; Black-throated Green Warbler, Kent Skaggs.*