

Ohio: Biggest Week

Trip Report | May 13-20, 2026

with Naturalist Journeys

by Bryan Calk



Guided by Dan Donaldson and Bryan Calk

Our group included Sandy, Bob, Maureen, Vince, Judith, Rebecca, Diane, Susan, Lynn, Miriam and Joan

Wednesday, May 13 – Rocky River Preserve | Wendy Park

The first full day in Ohio began at Rocky River Reservation, part of the Cleveland Metroparks system, often called the "Emerald Necklace." Established in 1917, the Cleveland Metroparks protect more than 25,000 acres of forests, wetlands, and river corridors surrounding the city. Forested ravines, rushing water, and mature hardwood forests of Sycamores, Oaks, and Sugar Maples provided a beautiful setting for our introduction to eastern woodland birding. Wood Thrushes, Red-eyed Vireos, Blue Jays, and Northern Cardinals filled the forest with song. Bay-breasted and Blackburnian Warblers fed high in the riverside canopy, while Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers visited the nature center feeders alongside both gray and black Eastern Gray Squirrels. Eastern Chipmunks were common along the trails, and one of the morning's highlights was a cooperative Veery feeding quietly beside the path.

The morning also became a geology lesson. Northeast Ohio sits on the glaciated Appalachian Plateau near the Allegheny Escarpment. Beneath the forest lies sandstone deposited when the region was covered by shallow tropical seas roughly 400 million years ago during the Devonian, home to trilobites,





Ohio's state fossil, and the enormous armored fish Dunkleosteus. Repeated glaciations over the last million years carved today's valleys and river systems, while the nearby continental divide sends water either north through the Great Lakes to the Atlantic or south toward the Gulf. We also learned about Ohio's canal era, when mule-drawn boats traveled the towpaths that helped drive the state's early economy.

In the afternoon we visited Wendy Park, a well-known migrant trap at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River where small woodlots concentrate birds arriving after crossing Lake Erie. Wilson's, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, and Palm Warblers, American Redstarts, and another Wood Thrush were among the many migrants present.

The day ended with a walk to the end of the peninsula, where we watched a lift bridge rise for a passing boat while a brilliantly colored Magnolia Warbler fed nearby at eye level. Dinner at a local Irish pub wrapped up a day that combined migration, geology, Ohio history, and our first immersion into Great Lakes birding.

Thursday, May 14 – Cuyahoga Valley National Park | The Ledges

The second full day was spent in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which protects the forests, wetlands, rivers, and historic canal corridor between Cleveland and Akron. Rather than preserving remote wilderness, the park reconnects fragmented habitats within a heavily urbanized region, making it an important refuge for both wildlife and people.

The morning began at Station Road Bridge Trailhead along the Cuyahoga River. Sycamores, Cottonwoods, wetlands, and riparian forest created excellent migration habitat. We also learned about the region's colonial history as part of the Connecticut Western Reserve, where New England settlers influenced the area's towns and culture. The nearby Ohio & Erie Canal and towpath illustrated the valley's importance as a nineteenth-century transportation corridor linking Lake Erie with the Ohio River watershed.



Next was Bath Road, where a large Great Blue Heron rookery filled towering Sycamores with constant activity. A pair of Scarlet Tanagers and two Bald Eagles added to the morning's highlights.

At Beaver Marsh, we followed the historic Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath to a wetland created by beaver activity. Tree Swallows, Chimney Swifts, and Red-winged Blackbirds were abundant, while an exceptionally cooperative Virginia Rail gave prolonged views. Baltimore Orioles, Cape May Warblers, and a singing Rose-breasted Grosbeak rounded out the stop.

After lunch we visited The Ledges, one of northeast Ohio's premier geological sites. Massive sandstone outcrops and cool, fern-filled ravines preserve layers deposited hundreds of millions of years ago. The hike produced excellent views of Hooded and Black-throated Green Warblers in beautiful deciduous forest.

The day concluded with a return to Station Road Bridge Trailhead, where warmer afternoon conditions produced outstanding, close-range views of Yellow-throated Warblers singing and foraging along the river. After returning to the hotel for the daily checklist, the group finished the evening with dinner at a local Italian restaurant.

Friday, May 15 – Cleveland Lakefront | Magee Marsh Wildlife Area

The morning began at Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve along the shore of Lake Erie. Originally constructed from dredge material removed from the Cuyahoga River shipping channel during the mid-1900s, the site began as a confined disposal facility for industrial harbor sediments. Over time, vegetation naturally colonized the area, and what was once essentially an artificial landfill slowly transformed into valuable wildlife habitat. Today the preserve protects grasslands, shrublands, ponds, and lakeshore woodland directly adjacent to downtown Cleveland and serves as an important stopover site for migratory birds moving along Lake Erie.

The morning birding there was almost nonstop. The preserve was downright noisy with Yellow Warblers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Baltimore Orioles, and countless other migrants singing continuously. Indigo Buntings glowed electric blue from exposed perches while warblers moved constantly through every level of the habitat, some high in the canopy and others feeding nearly at eye level.

Among the more memorable migrants were Bay-breasted Warblers, Blackburnian Warblers, Cape May Warblers, female Black-throated Blue Warblers, and Nashville Warblers. An Alder Flycatcher sang repeatedly from dense brush while waves of smaller migrants seemed to pass through continuously all morning. At one overlook, a Bald Eagle appeared out over the lake carrying a fish. The bird flew directly toward the group, giving spectacular looks as it crossed the shoreline with the water and Cleveland skyline behind it.

After leaving Cleveland, the route followed the Lake Erie shoreline westward through northern Ohio toward Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, one of the most famous spring migration locations in North America. Lunch was taken along the drive before arriving at the Magee Marsh Visitor Center, where time was spent exploring the exhibits and learning more about the ecology and migration importance of the western Lake Erie marshes.

From there, the group headed out onto the legendary Magee Marsh Boardwalk for a first introduction to the area. Although there was only limited time available that afternoon, the boardwalk immediately lived up to its reputation. Birds seemed remarkably tame and concentrated in the narrow strip of lakeshore woodland between the marsh and Lake Erie. A Black-and-white Warbler fed extremely close to the boardwalk while Bay-breasted Warblers and several additional migrants moved through the trees





overhead. Even with only a brief visit, it was already clear why birders from across the continent travel here every spring. The afternoon functioned almost like a teaser for the birding to come the next day.

Late in the afternoon the group continued to Maumee Bay Lodge and settled into rooms overlooking the marshes and Lake Erie shoreline. After the daily checklist review, everyone headed out for dinner at a local restaurant before returning to the lodge for the evening. Some members of the group spent a little extra time birding around the lodge grounds at sunset, enjoying the quiet marsh atmosphere and fading light over Lake Erie before finally turning in for the night.

Saturday, May 16 – Magee Marsh Wildlife Area | Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge | Maumee Bay Lodge

Breakfast at a small local diner would quickly become part of the routine during our stay along western Lake Erie. The café captured the feel of rural Ohio, but during migration season it was also filled with birders from around the world, blending local culture with the excitement of spring migration.

From there we headed to Magee Marsh Wildlife Area and spent the morning on the famous boardwalk. Birders naturally spread out, and despite the crowds, the atmosphere was remarkably collaborative. People eagerly shared sightings and celebrated each bird together, making the experience feel communal rather than competitive. And the birding lived up to its reputation. Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Blackburnian, Magnolia, Black-and-white, Cape May, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, and Prothonotary Warblers were all seen well, with Prothonotary Warblers giving exceptional close views. American Redstarts, Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, Philadelphia Vireos, several flycatchers, and nesting Tree Swallows rounded out the morning. Activity came in waves, with quiet stretches suddenly erupting as fresh migrants dropped into the trees.

At midday we enjoyed a picnic lunch at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge before attending a shorebird identification workshop hosted by Black Swamp Bird Observatory, where we learned techniques for identifying shorebirds by structure, behavior, and proportions. The afternoon included time in the Biggest Week optics tent comparing binoculars and scopes with company representatives. Even around the vendors, migration continued, highlighted by a Mourning Warbler feeding low in the brush alongside Bay-breasted and Blackburnian Warblers. Later, we attended a presentation by Kenn Kaufman exploring the history and cultural significance of bird names.

After an early dinner at Maumee Bay Lodge, we returned to the Magee Marsh Boardwalk for evening birding. The species mix had shifted, with an Eastern Whip-poor-will roosting beside the boardwalk, Scarlet Tanagers, Canada and Tennessee Warblers, and active mixed flocks feeding through the woods. The day ended with a walk onto the Lake Erie beach, where another Mourning Warbler, Blackburnian and Chestnut-sided Warblers, and Common Nighthawks flying overhead at sunset provided a memorable finish to a day immersed in both migration and the welcoming birding community that makes Magee Marsh so special.

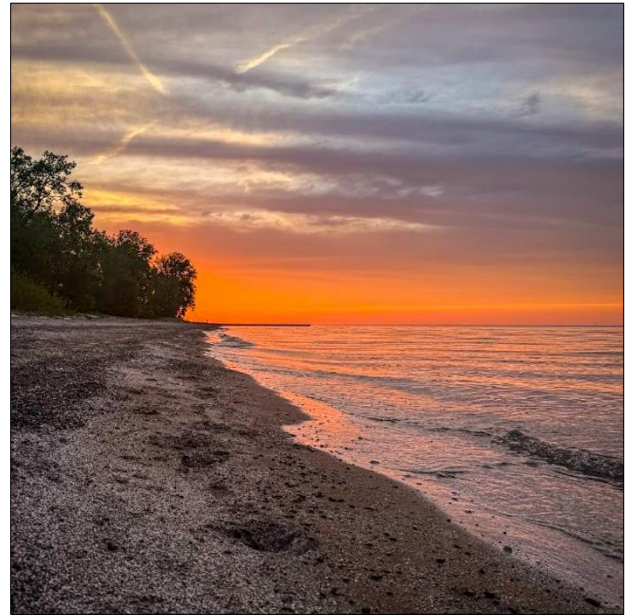
Sunday, May 17 – Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area | Oak Openings Preserve Metropark | Magee Marsh Wildlife Area

A few members of the group started before dawn with a visit to Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area, where Black Swamp Bird Observatory conducts a spring morning flight count along Lake Erie. We met morning flight counter Gautam Apte, who explained how visible migration works as birds that landed overnight resume flying after sunrise. He demonstrated how birds are counted by silhouette, behavior, and flight calls, contributing to long-term migration research.

The marsh was active with Black Terns, swallows, and other migrants, but the highlight was nearly 200 Blue Jays lifting from nearby cottonwoods to attempt a lake crossing before turning back overhead when conditions proved unfavorable. Hearing the rush of hundreds of wings as they returned to the trees was an unforgettable example of visible migration.

After breakfast, the group headed inland to Oak Openings Preserve Metropark near Toledo. Formed on sandy deposits left by glacial Lake Warren, a predecessor to modern Lake Erie, Oak Openings protects





one of the Midwest's rarest ecosystems: a mosaic of oak savanna, prairie, pine forest, wetlands, and mature deciduous woodland. Walking through the preserve, it was striking how each habitat supported its own unique bird community. Hooded Warblers and Red-headed Woodpeckers occupied the mature forest, while a mixed flock feeding in blooming Oaks included Bay-breasted Warblers and a stunning singing male Cerulean Warbler high in the canopy. In the open savanna and shrubby areas, Blue-winged Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Yellow-breasted Chats, and Lark Sparrows replaced the forest birds, showcasing the remarkable diversity packed into a relatively small area.

Lunch at Tony Packo's Cafe, a Toledo institution with Eastern European roots, provided a taste of local culture before returning to Magee Marsh Wildlife Area. Afternoon birding produced Canada and Magnolia Warblers along with the familiar mix of migrants seen throughout the week. An unexpected Red Fox lingered beside the boardwalk.

Back at Maumee Bay Lodge, the group completed the daily checklist before dinner. That evening several of us searched the lodge grounds for displaying American Woodcocks. The timing was perfect as males called with their nasal "peent" before spiraling into the sky on display flights, their wings producing the characteristic twittering sound overhead. Checking things out through a thermal scope provided an unusual view of the displaying birds heat signatures, as with nearby White-tailed Deer.

Monday, May 18 – Kelleys Island | Glacial Grooves Geological Preserve | Marblehead Lighthouse

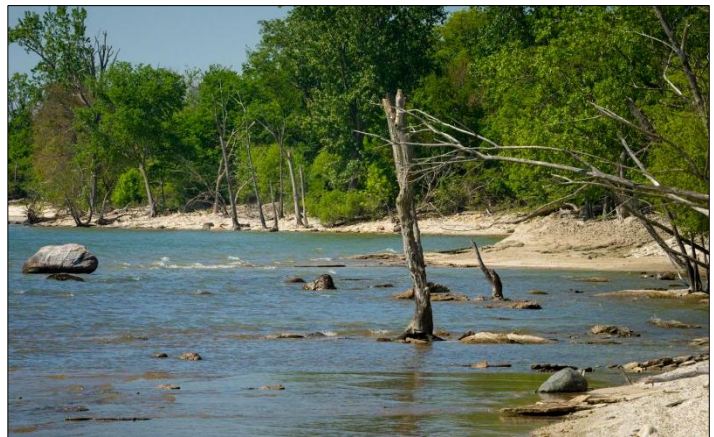
After several days exploring the mainland marshes of Lake Erie, the group boarded a ferry to Kelleys Island, one of the largest and most important migration stopover islands in the western basin. Kelleys Island also has a rich geological and cultural history. Indigenous peoples used the island for fishing and travel long before European settlement, while later residents built industries around limestone quarrying, commercial fishing, vineyards, and tourism. Ecologically, the island provides critical habitat for migrants crossing Lake Erie, concentrating birds into its forests and lakeshore habitats after overnight flights.

The first stop was Jones Preserve and its migration banding station. Migration was exceptionally busy, allowing everyone to see birds in the hand while researchers demonstrated aging, sexing, molt, and banding techniques. Highlights included Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Hooded Warbler, and Swainson's Thrush. Outside the banding station, the preserve was equally active with warblers and vireos moving constantly through the trees.

A walk to the lakeshore revealed beaches covered in Zebra Mussel shells, prompting a discussion about their introduction through ballast water from transoceanic ships and the dramatic ecological changes they have caused throughout the Great Lakes.

After lunch at a local island restaurant and time to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of Kelleys Island, the group visited Glacial Grooves Geological Preserve in Kelleys Island State Park. Carved roughly 18,000 years ago as the Wisconsin Glacier retreated, the grooves are among the finest examples of glacial erosion in North America. Some extend nearly 400 feet and clearly show the direction of ice movement across the limestone bedrock. Although nineteenth-century quarrying nearly destroyed the formation, the remaining grooves are now protected and offer one of the best places to visualize the immense power of the glaciers that shaped the Great Lakes.

Birding continued around the quarry and wooded trails with Yellow-billed Cuckoos and scattered warblers before returning by ferry to the mainland. A final stop at Marblehead Lighthouse, first lit in 1822 and the oldest continuously operating lighthouse on the Great Lakes, provided another chance for migrants, including Philadelphia Vireos, while learning about the lighthouse's role in Great Lakes navigation.





Towering storm clouds built rapidly over the lake during the drive back to Maumee Bay Lodge, and the group arrived just before a major thunderstorm swept through. Dinner, the daily checklist, and stories from another memorable day of migration, geology, and island ecology wrapped up the evening.

Tuesday, May 19 – Magee Marsh Wildlife Area | Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area | Howard Marsh Metropark

The final full day began back at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area. With the Biggest Week festival over, the boardwalk was much quieter. Overnight, a major arrival of Blackpoll Warblers transformed the morning. One of the last major target species of the trip, they were suddenly abundant, singing and feeding at eye level. Blackburnian, Magnolia, Tennessee, and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, vireos, thrushes, and flycatchers rounded out another excellent morning, with migrants constantly moving between the boardwalk woods and the Lake Erie shoreline.

After brunch at the now-familiar local diner, the group continued to Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area, part of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. Once diked and heavily altered, the marsh has been extensively restored to reconnect it with Lake Erie, creating outstanding habitat for migratory birds. Trumpeter Swans, Glossy Ibis, Dunlin, and Stilt Sandpipers were highlights on the open wetlands.

The wooded grove at the end of the dike provided one of the day's best migration spectacles. Swarms of emerging midges attracted a frenzy of feeding birds, with Blackburnian, Blackpoll, Magnolia, and Tennessee Warblers, American Redstarts, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, flycatchers, and several vireos all feeding together in a remarkably concentrated fallout.

Next was Howard Marsh Metropark, another restored wetland featuring shallow marshes, mudflats, and floating nesting platforms built to support breeding Common Terns. Despite increasing winds, shorebirding was excellent with Dunlin, Black-necked Stilts, and Semipalmated Sandpipers, providing a chance to put the week's shorebird identification lessons into practice.

The final birding stop was Pearson Metropark, one of the last remnants of the historic Great Black Swamp. Towering Cottonwoods and Silver Maples shaded the trails while cottonwood fluff drifted through the forest. Several Swainson's Thrushes fed along the road, offering prolonged, close views in the quiet swamp habitat. The day concluded back at Maumee Bay Lodge with the daily checklist, a final group dinner, and conversation reflecting on a memorable week of migration along the Lake Erie shore.

Wednesday, May 20 – Magee Marsh | Departures

Overnight, weather had changed dramatically. Storms had moved through the region, temperatures had dropped, and shifting winds off the lake made the morning feel noticeably colder than the previous few days. Those changing conditions brought a sense of anticipation as everyone headed one final time to Magee Marsh Wildlife Area and the famous boardwalk to see what fresh migrants might have arrived overnight.

The boardwalk once again delivered. Migrants moved actively through the lakeshore woods despite the chilly conditions, and birders lined the trails searching every opening in the foliage for movement. Warblers flashed through the trees while vireos, thrushes, flycatchers, and other songbirds continued their steady northward push. Even after several days there, the experience still felt exciting and unpredictable, with every new section of trail offering another chance at something unexpected.

What stood out most on the final morning, though, was less about any one species and more about the feeling of the place itself. The energy of migration was still fully underway all around the group. Birds continued arriving overnight from across the Gulf and beyond, feeding briefly in the narrow lakeshore woods before eventually moving onward again.



The morning became a fitting farewell not only to Magee Marsh, but to the entire Lake Erie migration experience. After a week immersed in forests, marshes, islands, shorelines, geology, conservation history, and thousands of migrants, it felt meaningful simply to spend one final slow walk along the boardwalk listening to birdsong, and watching migrants feed in the cold morning air.

Trip Report Photos – Page 1: Magnolia Warbler (Bob), Cape May Warbler (Bryan), Tree Swallow (Sandy) **Page 2:** Station Road Bridge (Sandy), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Bryan) **Page 3:** Black-throated Green Warbler (Bryan), Ledges Trail at Cuyahoga Valley National Park (Sandy) **Page 4:** Red-bellied Woodpecker (Bob), Group birding (Bryan), Yellow-throated Warbler (Sandy), Blackburnian Warbler (Bob), Northern Parula (Bryan) **Page 5:** Bald Eagle with fish (Sandy) **Page 6:** White Pelicans (Bob), American Woodcock (Bryan) **Page 7:** Vince releasing banded bird (Bob), Lake Erie shore (Sandy) **Page 8:** Group birding (Bryan), Kelleys Island shore (Bryan), Prothonotary Warbler (Bob), Scarlet Tanager (Bob), Baltimore Oriole (Sandy) **Page 9:** Glacial grooves in Kelleys Island State Park (Sandy), Red Columbine (Sandy), Canada Warbler (Bob), Hooded Warbler (Bryan), Bay-breasted Warbler (Bob) **Page 10:** Blackpoll Warbler (Bryan), Trumpeter Swans (Sandy) **Page 11:** Maumee Bay boardwalk (Sandy)

