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Naturalist Journeys OHIO TOUR: The Biggest Week in Birding May 11 – 16, 2015

With Guide, Dan Donaldson with 7 Participants:
Ed, Susan, Terry, Joan, Charlie, Phyllis and Johanne

Trip Report by Dan Donaldson
Photos by Dan Donaldson and Terry Peterson

Monday, May 11 Arrival Day! Magee Marsh / Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge

Today our group arrived to the shores of Lake Erie, between Sandusky and Toledo, in preparation for *The Biggest Week in Birding*.

And what a week it was! We spent the day orienting ourselves to the area with short visits to the varied birding locations we would be visiting most of the week.

Our first stop was the famous Magee Marsh Boardwalk. We spent a couple of hours here, and while the boardwalk was quite busy with visitors, we had many great looks at 15 warbler species, Black Billed Cuckoo and both Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrush.



After lunch at Blackberry Corners, the local corner tavern, we visited the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, which boasts 6,700 acres of protected/managed Lake Erie marshes and upland scrub-shrub forests. After a quick stop in the new, LEED-Certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) visitor center, we drove the auto tour through many of the wetland units, each of which are managed individually to maximize diversity within the refuge. Trumpeter Swans were reintroduced here in the

late 1990s, and resident swans are easy to identify because their necks and heads are stained a bright orange-red from the high iron content in the water here. The shore-birding was challenging today but we did manage good looks at several shorebird and waterfowl species, including Blue-winged Teal, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Wood Duck, Bald Eagle and a young Great-horned Owl that was reared in a vacant Bald Eagle's nest.

Tuesday, May 12 Oak Openings / Metzger Marsh

Today we ventured west of the Lake Erie marsh region to visit the Oak Openings region of Ohio. Oak Openings is an ancient sand dune area that boasts nearly 80% of Ohio's rare and endangered species.



This unique dune and wetland complex creates unique habitats here in Ohio that replicate the oak savannahs and sand barren areas located far out in the mid-west. Our target birds for this area were Lark Sparrow, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers and Red-headed Woodpecker. We dipped on the tanagers, but had incredible views of Lark Sparrow as they flew from the grasslands out to the road to collect grit for digestion. Eastern Meadowlarks were also in the area, to the delight of our western participants. Fire is used regularly to manage the forests here and the open savannah woods enabled us to spot Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird and other sparrows.



At the Oak Openings Visitor Center we walked the nearby forest areas where we heard, and some find, Hooded and Pine Warbler, as well as Warbling, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Warbler.

After lunch at the infamous Tony Packo's in Toledo, we headed to Pearson Metropark to visit newly-created wetlands in a large wetland restoration project. We dipped on the Marsh Wren, but did find both Least and Semi-palmated Sandpipers staying in the cattail areas, keeping out of the wind. Shortly before leaving, a Spotted Sandpiper flew in and did a very fast 100-yard dash along the shoreline.

Wednesday, May 13 Marblehead Island / East Harbor State Park / Magee Boardwalk

Very strong north winds kept us off the ferry to Kelley's Island today. We opted instead to venture east of the Lake Erie Marsh areas and explore local patches that were situated out of the wind.

We started at Marblehead Island where we were lucky enough to catch the endangered Lakeside Daisy in bloom. While tiptoeing through the daisy plants we had two Mississippi Kites fly over, briefly circle in the distance, and then disappear over one of the few hills in the area.



After a quick stop at the Marblehead lighthouse and lunch, we birded East Harbor State Park. The inside bays held mostly Great Blue Heron. Our walk along the woodland trail proved too windy to be very productive, but we had some of the best looks many of us have ever had at a Red-eyed Vireo.

Hearing of better birding back at Magee Boardwalk, we left to catch the late afternoon warbler activity and we were not disappointed. The birds were down at eye-level, feeding on midges that had to come down low to get out of the wind. We had Cape May, Blackburnian, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, and Canada Warblers all within five feet of us, as well as American Redstart. They were feeding off of branches that hung over the trail. When all was said and done, it turned out to be a 21 Warbler day!



To top it off, we stopped at a flooded farm field where we were lucky enough to observe both Glossy and White-faced Ibis before a Peregrine Falcon blasted in to scatter the several hundred Ring-billed Gull and Dunlin that were roving the newly-flooded field.

Thursday, May 14 Magee Marsh / Ottawa Marsh / Metzger Marsh / Maumee Bay State Park

Although we had planned to spend the next two days working the famous Magee Marsh Boardwalk, we changed up our routine and ran a 6:00 AM shuttle for those that would rather skip a formal breakfast and get on the boardwalk early. Thursday produced many of the same birds as earlier in the week, but it was obvious that the birds were coming and going. Many of the Baltimore and Orchard Orioles had moved on, but the Chestnut-sided Warblers were now in much greater numbers. Many of the Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes had moved on and Grey-cheeked Thrushes were now the dominant thrush in the woods.

We did encounter a light rain and found a nice little spot out of the wind at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge where Northern Parula and Yellow, Black and White and American Redstart warblers were down low, working the dogwoods and willows along the wetland management canals.



As we left Ottawa NWR, we had wonderful roadside looks at a family of Sandhill Cranes, two adults and two chicks, feeding in the grassy fields along the ponds in the driveway to the visitor center.

We made a quick and successful trip to Metzger Marsh to find a reported Black-billed Cuckoo and were treated to a nice observation of a Mink as it foraged along the canal. Some of the group were able to catch a glimpse of a Merlin that streaked this small woodlot at the shore of Lake Erie. Sora were heard in the cattails, but never spotted. The canals and nearby mudflats did, however, afford us great looks and comparison opportunities for differentiating Common, Forster's and Caspian Terns.

We returned to Maumee Bay State Park Lodge to participate in the birding festival activities. Some members of the group attended a keynote speaker address, others watched the bird tattoo contest and visited the many vendors and tour companies that were set up in the lobby.

Friday, May 15 Magee Marsh / Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge / Metzger Marsh

Today started out with another sunrise shuttle to Magee Marsh. We met up with the rest of the group to find that Blackpoll Warbler were now in abundance. Scarlet Tanagers were also more prevalent. The boardwalk was busy, but more eyes brought more birds. This was a great day for flycatchers as Willow, Alder and Least Flycatchers were found, along with their cousins the Eastern Kingbird and Eastern Wood Pewee. We made quick stops at Ottawa NWR and Metzger Marsh in hopes of picking up a few more species, and then headed back to the lodge early to relax and get ready for our dinner together at The Beirut, a local restaurant famous for fresh, authentic Lebanese food.



Saturday, May 16 Departures

After breakfast and one last review of our bird list, our group exchanged contact information and prepared for departures from Cleveland International Airport. Thanks to all who travelled to join Naturalist Journeys and guide Dan Donaldson for the Biggest Week in Birding!