

# Ohio's Biggest Week in Birding | May 3-10, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



With guides, Dan Donaldson and Rick Weiman, and participants, Bob D., Johnnie, Red, John, Bob H., Catherine, Deke, Judy, Deirdre, Kathy, Marion and Christine.



## **Wed., May 3                      Arrival Day-Cleveland | Local Cleveland Birding.**

With our lodging right next to the airport, we were able to quickly settle into our rooms and head out for some late afternoon birding. Cleveland is blessed with a robust metropark system, and we headed to Rocky River Metropark for some riparian woodland birding. Rocky River is world famous for its ancient fish fossils, most notably Donklostean, a large shark-like fish that swam the seas in present-day Ohio over 300 million years ago. After visiting the Nature Center, we headed outside and birded a short loop trail that took us through a mature forest, several great wildflower patches and a beaver marsh complex. We picked up 30 species here, most



notably Belted Kingfisher, Tufted Titmouse and Black-capped Chickadee, all are birds that can be missed in Western Ohio where we spent the rest of the week. We headed to Wendy Park, a small green patch in an otherwise industrial harbor area in downtown Cleveland. Here we viewed the famous Cuyahoga River where it empties into Lake Erie. We saw many Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, but also added Bufflehead, Killdeer and Double-crested Cormorant. Dinner was at a local Irish pub.

## **Thurs., May 4                      Cuyahoga Valley National Park | Cleveland Birding**

Today was dedicated to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. This national park is ranked in the top 10 most visited yet is not as widely known as Yellowstone or Acadia. We started our morning 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 several among the sycamore trees that line the Cuyahoga River here. We walked along the Ohio-Eire Canal towpath and had great looks at Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Warbling Vireos, Great-crested Flycatcher, Carolina Wren, Eastern Phoebe and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers.

Next, we moved on to a heron rookery on Bath Road where we saw over 30 Great Blue Herons nesting in large sycamores near the road. Red-breasted Mergansers were actively feeding in the river here as well. We hiked the Beaver Marsh Trail where remnants of the canal still hold water and old sandstone canal locks can still be found. The still waters of the canal provided close looks at Green Heron, Blue-winged Teal, Prothonotary Warblers, Canada Geese and painted turtles. On our way to the Beaver Marsh boardwalk, we were greeted by a mixed flock of swallows that included Tree, Northern Rough-winged, and Barn. On our return walk, we were fortunate to walk into a flock of Cedar Waxwings feeding along the canal. We enjoyed lunch in the canal-port village of Peninsula, then headed back north to Cleveland. Our last birding stop of the day was at Lakeview Cemetery, Cleveland's Cemetery of Record and more of a formal garden/arboretum than a cemetery. Here, among its famous residents such as Elliot Ness, President Garfield and other Cleveland notables, we added to our growing trip list with Chimney Swift, Solitary Sandpiper, Green Heron, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Northern Flicker. Then we visited Cleveland's Little Italy neighborhood where we had an amazing dinner at La Dolce Vida.





## Fri., May 5

This was a transfer day, but not before we did some more local birding. Our first stop was the Erie Street Cemetery in downtown Cleveland. This two-block green spot acts as an urban oasis and a migration trap in spring and fall. This day it was sparrows and thrushes. We had 21 species in 20 minutes including White-throated, White-crowned, Lincoln's, Field and Chipping Sparrows; and American Robin, Hermit Thrush and Wood Thrush. Brown Thrashers, Gray Catbirds, Northern Flickers and a nice migrating flock of 20+ Blue Jays rounded out this stop.

The Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve was once a Cuyahoga River dredge disposal facility, but after closing down, it naturalized and became a fantastic birding location. We spent the rest of our morning here finding Swamp Sparrows, Common Loons, Orchard and Baltimore Orioles and several warblers such as Black-and-white, Black-throated Blue and Yellow-rumped. After a quick lunch, we headed off for the western basin of Lake Erie. However, we got a tip on the way that prompted us to stop at a local metropark where a pair of Sandhill Cranes with a chick had just been reported. We arrived at the location and, after a brisk, half-mile forest hike, we arrived at a 200-acre wetland where the cranes had been seen. Sure enough, after a short walk, we found the three of them busily feeding along the edges of the wetland, giving us fantastic observations and photo opportunities. 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 had just kicked off, and vendors and many participants were arriving. We enjoyed our first meal at the Maumee Lodge, reviewed our bird list for the day and made plans for our first day in the Magee Marsh area.

## Sat., May 6

We began our first full day here on the famous Magee Marsh Boardwalk, quickly tallying 50 species with standouts such as a very cooperative Eastern Whip-poor-will, Soras, American White Pelican, Osprey, Bald Eagle (nesting right by the trail) and 10 warbler species: Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Nashville, Common



Yellowthroat, Yellow, Palm, Pine, Yellow-rumped and Black-throated Green. Lunch was at the locally famous Black Berry Corners that serves up “lifer pie,” a favorite for local birders, some now famous, celebrating life birds! In the afternoon, we birded Howard Marsh and the cabin areas of Maumee Bay State Park and Lodge. Howard Marsh a recently restored wetland project, converting 2,000 acres of farmland back into productive wetlands. We quickly found all three expected species of terns: Common, Forster’s and Caspian, all lounging together on a mudflat. We kept a keen eye out for Black Terns, migrants that had been reported in the area, but we were not able to locate them.

Six Black-necked Stilts, rare in the Midwest, were a nice find, and we had fine views at Semipalmated Plovers, Dunlin and Lesser Yellowlegs. Pied-billed Grebes were paired up and could be heard calling throughout our time here. A Northern Harrier made a close flyby, and a lone Black-crowned Night-Heron was seen resting on a muskrat hut. Then we headed to Maumee Bay Lodge to bird around the rental cabins. This lesser-known spot is often productive late afternoons. Here we found both Red-bellied and White-breasted nuthatches, very cooperative Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Red-headed Woodpeckers and our first Cliff Swallows. Sandhill Cranes were calling as the sun dipped lower in the sky. Dinner was at the Maumee Bay State Park and Lodge.

## Sun., May 7

In the western basin, we always watch the winds so we can pick the best day to be on the Magee Marsh Boardwalk, and this was our day. After an early breakfast, we headed straight to Magee Marsh. With great anticipation, we unloaded out of our vans and headed to the entrance of the boardwalk. Bam! Our first bird was





an extremely cooperative Hooded Warblers, a brilliant male that stayed close to the board walk, feeding on midges low in the vegetation. Yes! There had indeed been a nice wave of birds arriving overnight. We eventually tallied 15 species of warblers including Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white, Prothonotary, American Redstart, Cape May, Northern Parula, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Palm, Pine and Black-throated Green. Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Scarlet Tanagers all arrived in good numbers. The local Eastern Screech-Owl was out all morning to the delight of birders and photographers. And a big bonus was seeing a young Red Fox who spent the morning lounging near an old cottonwood snag.

After a full morning on the boardwalk, we stopped at the Black Swamp Bird Observatory office and giftshop and visited the Biggest Week's optic vendors tent. The birding was just as good in the trees and shrubs surrounding the optics tent, with mixed feeding flocks of warblers and flycatchers. We tried out the many brands of optics, and yes, some of us walked away with new binoculars.

Our next stop was the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. We toured the Visitor Center and checked the feeders. The birding was so good that we decided to delay lunch and take the driving tour through the refuge. The birding was a bit light, but we did have good looks at Sandhill Cranes, Great and Snowy Egrets, American Woodcock, Trumpeter Swans and many Bald Eagles. We enjoyed a late lunch back at the lodge and spent the rest of the day exploring the trails and boardwalks around the Maumee Bay Nature Center where we had stunning looks at several Scarlet Tanagers.

## Mon., May 8

This morning we visited Winous Point, one of the oldest private waterfowl hunting clubs in the country. Originally an exclusive hunting club, it now operates as a conservation and wetland preservation organization supporting land protections, wetland restoration and aquatic and natural resource research. We arrived at the stunning clubhouse where we received a brief orientation and then birded the nearby grounds, then headed out to the marshes. American White Pelicans were observed in large groups resting out in the wetland as well as several close flybys. Tundra Swans stood out brilliantly in the marshes, and we found many ducks and geese including Canada Geese, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Rudy Duck, and Pied-billed Grebe. Areas that had exposed mudflats provided us with good looks at Killdeer, Dunlin, Least and Semipalmated



Sandpipers and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. An active group of seven Sandhill Cranes, calling most of the time we were there, made several appearances flying around the marshes. Lunch was at The Jolly Roger, a local favorite known for its Lake Erie perch and walleye. The automated mushroom bread and frying machine was mesmerizing to watch. We spent the afternoon back at the Magee Marsh boardwalk. The birds were quite active, feeding voraciously to fuel their migration north after sunset. On the way back to the lodge, a quick stop at Metzger Marsh provided some great looks at photographs of Common Gallinule and feeding Common Terns.

## Tues., May 9

After breakfast we ventured to Kelley's Island, a 30-minute ferry ride from the mainland. It is often the first stop for birds that choose to island hop rather than fly directly over Lake Erie. We decided to head straight to the northern part of the island, then work our way back to the ferry throughout the day. Our first stop was the Glacier Grooves State Memorial, a stunning example of the natural forces that carved these huge grooves in the limestone bedrock of the island. It was a brisk morning, and we worked the treeline just as the sun hit the glacial grooves. Migrating Blue Jays flew low overhead, soon joined by Northern Rough-winged, Tree and Barn Swallows along with Purple Martins.

A short walk in the old quarry, with its younger, lower trees, turned up several warblers including Northern Parula, Blackburnian, Yellow, Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green, and of course, Yellow-rumps. We also located a local celebrity -- a Leucistic American Robin that was nesting near the State Park entrance. Back on the mainland in the early afternoon, we made a quick stop at the Lakeside Daisy State Nature Preserve. This is home to one of the rarest plants in North America: the lakeside daisy that grows on barren limestone bedrock like that found here in western Ohio. We made one last stop at the Magee Marsh Migratory Bird Center before heading back to the lodge with time to relax and pack before our farewell dinner at The Beirut restaurant in Toledo.





## Wed., May 10

Departure day. After breakfast, we loaded the vans and said goodbye to the Magee Marsh region and departed for the Cleveland Airport. Everyone shared contact information and we said goodbye to new friends with whom we shared the spectacle of spring songbird migration in northern Ohio, and the Biggest Week in American Birding!

*Photo Credits: Group at Magee Marsh (Robert Hill - RH), Cedar Waxwings (RH), Scarlet Tanager (RH), Group by the lake (Judy Guzy - JG), Sandhill Cranes & Colt (RH), Eastern Bluebirds (RH), Rocky River Nature Center (JG), Red-tailed Hawks (RH), Eastern Phoebe (RH), Hairy Woodpecker (RH), Group Birding (JG), Tree Swallow (RH), Group Photo (JG), Blue-winged Teal pair (RH), Great Blue Heron (RH), Maumee Bay Lodge Bird Festival (JG), Turtle (Christine Jenkins - CJ), Black-throated Green Warbler (RH), Bald Eagles (RH), Yellow Warbler (RH), Fox (CJ), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (RH), Black-throated Blue Warbler (RH), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (RH), Beaver (CJ), Eastern Screech Owl (CJ), Scarlet Tanager (CJ), Hooded Warbler (CJ), American Woodcock (RH), Baltimore Oriole (RH), Black-throated Blue Warbler (CJ), Blackburnian Warbler (CJ), Warbling Vireo (RH), Group (JG)*