

WINGTIPS



BROWN THRASHER, photo by Chad Wilson

FEBRUARY 2024

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February 2024 Program

Tuesday, February 6th at 7 p.m.

Carlisle Reservation

Bogs and Fens

Judy Semroc

Bogs & Fens:

Rare Habitats in Need of Protection



Judy formerly worked in the Natural Areas Division of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History as a Conservation Specialist for more than 20 years. She is the founder of “Chrysalis in Time,” the first Ohio chapter of the North American Butterfly Association (NABA). Judy also serves on the board of the Ohio Bluebird Society, Ohio Ornithological Society (Conservation Committee) & The Ohio Biological Survey. She has co-authored two natural history field guides, "Dragonflies & Damselflies of Northeast Ohio" and "Goldenrods of Northeast Ohio: A Field Guide to Identification & Natural History."

As a former Petroleum Geologist and science teacher, Judy loves to learn about and share her passion for the natural world through hikes, interpretive programs, and photography. Learn more about Judy's latest adventures & offerings through her new company, Nature Spark!

Description of Program:

Rare habitats provide the setting for rare species. Join us to learn more about these special habitats, including their inhabitants, natural history and what we can do to help protect them. As climate change and habitat degradation pose significant threats to our natural world, these rare habitats are some of our most imperiled. Learn how you can help to save them.

February Field Trips
All trips are on Saturdays
Guests Are Always Welcome!

February 17th, 2024, 9:00 a.m.
Old Woman Creek
2514 Cleveland Road E, Huron, OH
Old Woman Creek Staff to lead

Elyria/Lorain Christmas Bird Count 2023

By Marty Ackermann



This year marked the 124th Christmas Bird Count and the 65th count in the Elyria-Lorain circle. This year the count was held on December 16 with 54 people participating. They counted for 79 hours, covering 54 miles on foot and 289 miles by car, while another 5 persons counted at their feeders. The result was 73 species on count day and one during count week (cw). There were 31,457 individual birds reported, which is within the range of the numbers in the last decade.

The species seen and the number of each are: Mute Swan 5, Trumpeter Swan 7, Canada Goose 3248, Snow Goose (cw), Mallard 586, American Black Duck 13, Gadwall 4, Northern Shoveler 12, Bufflehead 3, Common Goldeneye 42, Red-breasted Merganser 434, Hooded Merganser 3, Common Merganser 68, Ruddy Duck 67, Double-crested

Cormorant 3, Common Loon 1, Bonaparte's Gull 42, Ring-billed Gull 19888, Herring Gull 660, Great Blue Heron 11, American Coot 14, Sandhill Crane 3, Wild Turkey 6, Turkey Vulture 3, Bald Eagle 10, Northern Harrier 2, Cooper's Hawk 8, Sharp-shinned Hawk 4, Red-shouldered Hawk 16, Red-tailed Hawk 24, Peregrine Falcon 3, American Kestrel 15, Barred Owl 1, Short-eared Owl 1, Rock Pigeon 396, Mourning Dove 78, Belted Kingfisher 13, Red-headed Woodpecker 12, Red-bellied Woodpecker 73, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 2, Downy Woodpecker 96, Hairy Woodpecker 16, Pileated Woodpecker 13, Northern Flicker 33, Blue Jay 174, American Crow 80, Eastern Bluebird 112, American Robin 696, Cedar Waxwing 89, Black-capped Chickadee 110, Tufted Titmouse 76. White-breasted Nuthatch 74, Red-breasted Nuthatch 1, Brown Creeper 3, Carolina Wren 41, Winter Wren 2, Golden-crowned Kinglet 2, Yellow-rumped Warbler 5, Snow Bunting 36, Dark-eyed Junco 161, American Tree Sparrow 171, Song Sparrow 22, Swamp Sparrow 7, White-throated Sparrow 72, White-crowned Sparrow 4, House Sparrow 393, House Finch 178, American Goldfinch 83, Pine Siskin 6, Northern Cardinal 159, European Starling 2660, Red-winged Blackbird 4, Common Grackle 76, Brown-head Cowbird 25.

Brown Thrasher

Toxostoma rufum

By Chad Wilson

Some people use sightings of American Robins as a sign that spring is here. What they might not be aware of is that many American Robins overwinter, they just cluster together around berry bushes in forests, rather than eating worms on our lawns in wintertime. Personally, when my glances out the window show me a Brown Thrasher in the back yard, I nod to myself and know that spring migration has arrived!

Although Brown Thrashers are pretty good-looking birds, what really sets them apart from other birds is their song. They can mimic over 1100 sounds, including other birds, animals, and even mechanical equipment! Their "normal" spring songs sound a bit like a Northern Mockingbird's, but repeated twice instead of thrice.

Brown Thrashers are found in the central and eastern United States, and, unlike a lot of migrants, they don't fly all the way to South or Central America during the winter, and they barely cross the border into Canada in the spring for breeding...they mostly stay within the lower 48 states year-round. The Ohio ones will migrate to the southern US, though, so don't go looking for them in winter!

Brown Thrashers are aggressive nest defenders and sometimes strike humans and dogs hard enough to draw blood. They are also the largest bird to be victim to Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism, although sometimes they do recognize they are being duped and discard the eggs. Both male and female birds help raise and feed the young, which can fully feather and fledge within 9 days! It is speculated that this accelerated timeline for fledging is a defense mechanism, as the shrubby hideouts for their nests can also house predators.

Brown Thrashers can be tough to find, as they are often secretive, but in the spring they will perch high and sing, and they will often also forage on lawns, so those are the easiest ways for birders to spot them.

There are many thrasher species in the United States, but only the Brown Thrasher breeds east of the Mississippi River. The genus name "Toxostoma" means "bow beak", referencing thrasher's long, decurved bills.

Brown Thrashers have an extremely varied diet including nuts, seeds, insects, berries, lizards, and frogs. They are particularly partial to acorns!

I thoroughly enjoy having Brown Thrashers frequent my yard, and I hope everyone gets a chance to both see and hear this bird this year!

References: <https://www.allaboutbirds>; <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/merlin>; Birds of Ohio by Kennedy and McCourmac

Galapagos Islands – Part II

By Charlie Weil



Lonesome George, the last known Pinta Island subspecies of giant tortoise, photo by Charlie Weil

Editor's Note: The editor got ahead of himself and published part III last month instead of part II. So here is part II and part IV will be next month!

The Galapagos Islands first appeared on maps about 1570 and were originally called “insular de los Galopegos” or Islands of the Tortoises. This iconic species has become symbolic of the archipelago. Originally there was thought to be 250,000 animals living on the islands but today that number has shrunk to about 15,000. The tortoises were a favorite food source for whalers and other passing ships. A tortoise could be kept alive on a ship for up to one year without eating or drinking, resulting in a source of fresh meat.

Originally there was thought to be 15 species of tortoises on the islands with Isabela having 5 species by itself. Currently the number of surviving species has been reduced to 12 with three species being driven to extinction by hunting. Genetic similarity to one of extinct species has been found in a small group of adult tortoises at the Charles Darwin Scientific Station and there is currently a multigeneration program of breeding to try and get tortoises with as high as possible genetic composition of one of the extinct species.

There are two shell types of tortoises, the dome back and the saddleback. The dome back has a shorter neck and has adapted to eating vegetation close to the ground. The saddleback tortoise has a much longer neck and has adapted to eating higher vegetation in the regions that they inhabit. Interestingly, we were told that the saddleback “battle” by stretching their necks as high as they can in the air. The winner is the one that can stretch the highest. The loser slowly retires. We saw an example of this behavior when there were two that squared off over a pile of leaves they were eating in an enclosure at the Darwin station.

The pregnant female tortoises will travel from the upland regions on the volcanic peaks to the sandy beach areas to lay their eggs. Since their walking speed is a blistering 0.2 miles/hr. this can be a multi month journey. The newly hatched turtles weigh about 1.8 oz and are easy prey for hawks as well as dogs and feral pigs. It takes a tortoise about 20 to 25 years to reach sexual maturity in captivity and up to 40 years in the wild (tortoises can live over 100 years with some living over 150 years).

There is a concerted effort in the Islands to protect and increase the tortoise population. We visited a tortoise nursery on Isabela Island which had breeding pairs and hundreds of young tortoises in enclosures of various age groups. All the tortoises have a number painted on their backs with a color code that designates which island the species came from. Later the tortoises can be introduced back in the wild and tracked by the number. On our 10 kilometer walk to the Wall of Tears we saw several of these released species crossing the path. We also visited a similar but much larger nursery at the Charles Darwin Scientific Station. In that site there were tortoises from many, if not all, the Galapagos Islands.

Enough of tortoises - the Galapagos islands are also well known for their iguana and lizard species. On fairly arid islands like Balta they have land iguanas (we saw several as we walked from our arriving airplane to the airport terminal). The ones we saw were perhaps two feet long. On the larger wetter islands like Isabela and Santa Cruz you find the marine iguanas. They are about the same size as the land iguanas and are black in color. We literally saw hundreds of marine iguanas and at times had to be careful not to step on them as they tend to be inactive, soaking up the heat of the day. The marine iguanas feed on seaweed with the young small ones feeding only at low tide when they don't need to dive as deep

for their food.

Next month I will talk about the second zone of Ecuador the high mountain region around the capital Quito and the Mindo Cloud Forest.

The 10 Most Exciting Birds of 2023

By Chad Wilson

December is a great time to reflect back on the past year. These are some of the birds that got Ohio birders buzzing with excitement this year!

(Editor's note, it is actually very difficult to figure out how many sightings a bird has had in Ohio, so take these numbers as an estimate)

- 1) **American Flamingo** - A pair of American Flamingos were found at Caesar Creek State Park beach on September 1st. These were so unlikely that when I posted the information in a couple of my birding groups, people responded with laughter emojis. But they were real! The only downside is they only stayed about 6 hours, and some birders couldn't get there in time to see them. These were the first state record for Ohio and, at the time, the northern-most record of American Flamingo ever! (Later in the summer some showed up in Wisconsin, making them the new northern-most record).
- 2) **Ferruginous Hawk** - Another state first for Ohio, this hawk usually hails from the western United States, and was found in a farm field in North Fairfield, Ohio on June 13th by local birder Ben Meredyk. It only stayed a couple of hours before flying off to other Ohio locations and then West Virginia (which we know because the bird had a radio transmitter). The only place birders saw it in Ohio was the North Fairfield location.
- 3) **Glaucous-winged Gull** - The third and final state first of 2023, Anthony Rodgers found this west coast gull downtown Cleveland on January 2nd. It was amazing that he picked it out from all the thousands of gulls that overwinter there, and many birders got to add it to their life lists!
- 4) **Heerman's Gull** - The second Ohio record ever, this gull was found by local birder Sarah Taylor (and a couple others simultaneously) on April 29th in our own Lorain County! It was at the Lorain Impoundment parking lot eating leftover Taco Bell, then it went to the Hot Waters Pier, then back to the Lorain Impoundment docks. That was the only day it graced Lorain County with its presence, but it then hung out for over a month at

- various Cuyahoga County locations, most often at Euclid Beach.
- 5) **Ancient Murrelet** - There had been several reports of Ancient Murrelets on the Great Lakes this autumn, and on December 21st one of them decided to grace the Lorain Harbor with a visit. This was the second Ohio record ever, and the bird remained at the Lorain Fishing Pier for a couple days before being seen at other Lorain County lake stop areas such as Sheffield Lake Boat Ramp and the Avon Lake power plant. Current whereabouts are unknown.
 - 6) **Black-chinned Hummingbird** - Ohio's second-ever record of a Black-chinned Hummingbird was found at a private residence in Delaware County on November 4th and stayed about a week, letting many Ohio birders enjoy it.
 - 7) **Curlew Sandpiper** – On May 22nd the 5th Ohio record of a Curlew Sandpiper was reported at the Joint Watershed Management Project in Williams County. It was very nice that it was in breeding plumage, because in Autumn these birds look almost exactly like Dunlin. It stayed for two days before moving on.
 - 8) **Black-throated Gray Warbler** – Jen Brumfield found this warbler at Euclid Beach Park on December 22nd, making an early Christmas for many birders. As of the writing of this article on January 8th, this bird is still there, going from pine tree to pine tree and making life difficult for photographers. There have been at least 12 Ohio records but this is the first one since 2018.
 - 9) **Townsend's Warbler** – Rick Nirschl photographed this bird on April 30th at the Metzger Marsh woodlot. Sadly, he was the only one who saw it, and the next day it was reported in Ontario, so it headed north. It was the 5th Ohio record.
 - 10) **Tricolored Heron/Brewer's Blackbird** – I'm going to lump these together because I found them both at the Lorain Impoundment on the same day, April 21st. The Tricolored Heron sadly was only seen by me, and later that day turned up 4 hours east in New York. The Brewer's Blackbird stayed around the rest of the day, however, so many birders were able to see it.

Local superstars for Lorain County included a Limpkin, Heerman's Gull, Ancient Murrelet, Common Raven, Eastern Whippoorwill, Tricolored Heron, Brewer's Blackbirds, and of course Sandy Ridge's superstar Sandhill Crane colt! 2023 had a lot of great birds, now bring on 2024!

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An Ancient Visitor

By Chad Wilson



Ancient Murrelet, photo by Kevin McKelvey

There was an mini-invasion of Ancient Murrelets on the Great Lakes late this Autumn, and by mini-invasion I mean maybe between 3 and 5 were in the region.

On December 21st one decided to visit good old Lorain County, giving birders great looks from the Lorain Fishing Pier for a couple of days. It was then seen later in the week at the Sheffield Boat ramp and later at the Avon Lake Power Plant. It has not been seen in 2024, although I know a lot of Cuyahoga birders are hoping it keeps swimming east toward them! This was the second-ever Ohio record, and the first in 70 years!

The English term "murrelet" is a diminutive of "murre", a word of uncertain origins, but which may imitate the call of the Common Guillemot. Ancient Murrelets are called "ancient" because they have grey on the back like a shawl, as worn by the elderly. They are from the alcid family, which are sometimes referred to as the “penguins of the north” because of their similar body designs.

References: <https://animalia.bio/ancient-murrelet>; <https://coastalstudies.org/connect-learn/stellwagen-bank-national-marine-sanctuary/sea-birds/alcids/>



MARINE IGUANA, photo by Charlie Weil



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