

# WINGTIPS



White-crowned Sparrow, photo by Gina Swindell taken in Amherst

JANUARY 2021

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# January 2021 Virtual Program

Tuesday, January 5, 2021, 7pm

Via Zoom

**Hawks and Men**

**John Blakeman**



**John Blakeman with Savanna, the Red-tailed Hawk**

(Photo courtesy of John Blakeman)

John Blakeman, a retired high school biology teacher living in Perkins Township, near Sandusky, is an expert on raptors. He began in the late 1960's at Bowling Green State University where he trained and displayed the university's live falcon mascot and also conducted feeding and physiology experiments with American kestrels. Over many years he trapped, banded, and released dozens of native raptors. He has studied hawks from Maine to Alaska and did a major hawk survey in northern Nevada. In addition, he conducted one of the first raptor breeding projects.

One of Ohio's first licensed falconers, he attained the status of Master Falconer. Using his falconry red-tailed hawks, he and his birds successfully hunted cottontail rabbits. He was also one of Ohio's first raptor rehabilitators. He was a major participant in the Ohio Raptor Survey Project, assessing the status of hawks and other raptors across the state.

Presently, in his work at NASA's Plum Brook Station, he applies his knowledge of Ohio prairies in a program to restore up to 3,000 acres of the Firelands prairie inside that giant facility. Finally, he is an accomplished nature photographer and was a founder of the Firelands Audubon Society. Professionally, he designs native plant landscapes, featuring prairie grasses and wildflowers.

*For this and future Zoom meetings, go to [blackriveraudubon.org](http://blackriveraudubon.org) and register at the bottom of the first page under Subscribe. A Zoom link will be sent to you.*

## A Tree to Honor Jack Smith

By Jim Jablonski



(l-r, Dick Lee, Lucy Mattes, Kate Pilacky, David DiTullio, Grant Thompson, Kaeth Shaughnessy, and Ray Stewart, photo by author)

Black River Audubon Society (BRAS) founder Jack Smith was influential in other nature-related organizations, such as the Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC). Following in his footsteps, BRAS continues to collaborate with WRLC on projects, including the Oberlin Preserve on Hamilton Street.

The Oberlin project, which included dozens of trees donated by BRAS, was completed this past summer. Recently, Andy Lance, our former conservation chairperson, donated a small sapling he raised from a seed collected beneath a Moses Cleaveland sycamore in Cleveland's Lake View Cemetery.

Moses Cleaveland trees are those deemed old enough to have been present when Cleaveland's surveying party mapped the Ohio Western Reserve in 1796. A total of 150 were designated this way in 1946, one for each year, at that time, since Cleaveland's work in the Reserve.

Kate Pilacky, BRAS board member and a field manager for WRLC, knew exactly what she wanted to do with the unique gift—honor the memory of Jack Smith by planting the young sycamore at the Oberlin Preserve.

On November 21, members of both organizations came together at the Preserve to honor the long-time benefactor of both organizations. It was a

quiet tribute, but a fitting one. Jack’s two favorite pastimes, nature and history, came together as two of his favorite groups planted this small tree that may, someday, be as historic as its parent in Cleveland.

## **BRAS Bluebird Program Sets a New Record**

Despite a second consecutive cold spring that caused the loss of 134 eggs and chicks, Black River Audubon’s bluebird program finished the season with 834 eastern bluebird fledglings--a new record! That figure is up from the 721 of 2019, which featured an even worse spring for nesting. The group of dedicated bluebirders, directed by Penny and Fritz Brandau, also fledged 1,268 tree swallows and 218 house wrens.

John Ryan, who administers the purple martin program, reported 243 fledglings at his home in addition to 119 at Lorain’s Lakeview Park and another 17 at Mill Hollow. It seems it wasn’t too long ago that John was working diligently, year after year, to attract his first martins to the nesting gourds at his home. The hard work has certainly paid off! *JJ*

## **WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW**

*Zonotrichia leucophrys*

By Gina Swindell



John James Audubon/National Audubon Society  
(cropped from the original color painting.)

Birding can be super fun and super challenging too! This is definitely the case with the beautiful white-crowned sparrow. These little passerines, sporting white crowns, just as their name suggests, are native to North

America and belong to the Passerellidae family. Ornithologists have identified five subspecies which differ ever-so-slightly in appearance.

The 5 subspecies fall into three groups:

- 1) Taiga (breeding in northern Canada)
  - a) Leucophrys (what we see here in Ohio during the winter):  
Reddish/pinkish bill. Lower white stripe stops above the eye.
  - b) Gambelii: Supraloral area is pale gray rather than white and the lower stripe goes past the eye through the lores. Bill is candy corn orange.
- 2) Pacific Coast
  - a) Nuttalli: Back pattern differs. Bill is pale yellow with a black tip. Breast color is more dingy, not so bright gray.
  - b) Pugetensis: Same as nuttalli. These two differ in range
- 3) Alpine Edge (breeding along the Rocky Mountains)
  - a) Oriantha: Very similar to our leucophrys but with a darker reddish/black bill.

These subspecies differ in range, migratory behavior and song dialect as well. If you are interested in learning more detail about the three groups, I recommend the YouTube lecture, [White-crowned Sparrow Subspecies w/ Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett](#). They do a fantastic job explaining these differences.

This lecture helped to clear up my confusion regarding a bird that my husband and I saw on our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip out west in 2017. We didn't recognize it, so we thought that we had a lifer. When we got home, I put it on the Facebook bird ID site and was surprised to find that what we had was not a life--it was an immature white-crowned sparrow. The confusion was due to an immature that showed up at our new house this year. It had similar characteristics to the white-crowned sparrow so I thought it might be an immature, but it didn't look the same as the bird from California. That's because our bird, and the California bird, are different subspecies. And, if that isn't enough to learn, the immature birds differ a good deal from the adults, which can make them hard to identify for inexperienced birders.

Birding by ear is yet another challenge with these sparrows. The white-crowned has been studied extensively, which has resulted in a vast knowledge of its songbird vocalization. It is way too complex to dissect here, but if you are interested, you can follow up by reading a great essay: [From song dialects to speciation in white-crowned sparrows](#) by David P. L. Toews. These sparrows are considered bilingual. Their song differs from range to range, but where birds overlap, they are typically fluent in two "languages," so to speak. The Covid pandemic is even affecting their

song in California's Bay area. With less traffic, these birds are adjusting their calls. It is really quite fascinating.

Now that you are aware of the buffet of white-crowned species, I hope that both you and I are able to see them. I am ready for the challenge, are you? Happy Birding!

**References:** Toews, David P. L., "From song dialects to speciation in white-crowned sparrows, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mec.14104>, May 25, 2017; White-crowned Sparrow, birds of the world.org; White-crowned Sparrow Subspecies w/Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett.

## NORTHERN LAPWING

*Vanellus vanellus*

By **Barbara Baudot**

The distinctive calls of northern lapwings in relatively remote habitats have for centuries given rise to superstitions and legends. One of these legends introduced me to the northern lapwing long before the exciting moment of actually seeing this bird pecking the sand flats of the Camargue in southern France.

These stories surely introduced the northern lapwing to the U.S., even though none of the 24 vanellus species are native to North America. Among them only the northern lapwings, often blown off their normal migratory paths during storms, are identified vagrants in the U.S.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the eerie calls of lapwings flying over the moors and deserted grasslands of the British Isles promoted an atmosphere of fear. The sharp "peewit peewit" calls aroused dread in peasants and miners as this vague, menacing sound stimulated their imaginations.

The poetry of the Scotsman, John Leyden, describes the curse of the lapwing.

The lapwing's clamorous whoop attends their flight,  
Pursues their steps where'er the wanderers go,  
Till the shrill scream betrays them to the foe.

The lapwings "peewit... peewit" calls also gave rise to the legend of the seven whistlers – seven birds flying by night threatening evil to all listeners. In 1855, lapwing calls incited miners' refusals to enter the collieries. Failing to heed peewit calls meant death in 1862 to 220 miners when a mine explosion occurred the day after the whistlers were heard. Local legends and fairy tales associating lapwings with some form of treachery or disobedience to the Lord were not limited to the west coasts of Europe but emerged in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Russia. Only in the Middle East is there a happy ending for a princess who becomes a lapwing.



In reality, northern lapwings are striking birds with attractive long, wispy dark crests. A flock of them landed in a field of dried grasses in our French village in mid-November. Their stunning plumage appeared black and white until bathed by sunlight; then their scapula and wings reflected iridescent greens and purples tinged with reds and yellow.

Several characteristics distinguish northern lapwings from ordinary waders or shore birds. Northern lapwings are as much at home on fallow fields and cultivated farmlands as they are on mud flats along bodies of water. And unlike the pointed wings of most waders, their wingtips are large and rounded. In flight they advance with deep, floppy beats that make the winnowing sound hinted in the term *vanellus* or little fan for the genus of northern lapwings.

Most lapwings are long distance migrants, moving south from breeding grounds where winter temperatures fall below zero. Winter flocks disperse in February when they return to their breeding grounds across a great part of Europe and in a band across Asia to eastern China. They are year-round residents in the British Islands and Ireland as well as southwestern Europe and Turkey.

Breeding begins in early March and ends in June. To broadcast their presence to rival males and attract a mate, northern lapwings perform spectacular flight/song patterns including steep dives, wobbles, zigzags, and rolls while calling “peeee wit.” Once established, couples are monogamous for the season, sharing responsibilities for incubating and raising the family.

Female lapwings lay three to four eggs in a scrape lined with vegetation. Upon hatching, chicks are able to walk and feed independently. They are led to a rearing area on rough, damp terrain where the chicks can feed while remaining concealed.

Poking with their beaks and tapping the soil with their feet, lapwings feed on the earthworms, beetles, ants, and other invertebrates they unearth.

The wing and vocal performances of lapwings protecting their young are famous. A parent drags a wing and limps while emitting sounds of distress, drawing attention away from the brood. Still pretending to be badly injured, the parent suddenly flies away, having succeeded in hiding the nest.

Despite such clever actions, populations of northern lapwings are in serious decline. Earlier legends cannot be blamed except perhaps in contributing to a lack of enthusiasm for efforts to protect them. Other factors have played larger roles. The first was the large-scale annual collections of eggs beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lapwing eggs were an expensive delicacy in Victorian England and the Netherlands. Subsequent laws, and others by the EU, have halted this practice. But since the 1940’s,

and particularly in the last 20 years, the numbers have continued to decline, driven down by loss of habitat and industrial farming.

Today the northern lapwing is on the red list of endangered species established by the IUCN and Birdlife International.

References: Northern Lapwing, Wikipedia; Handbook of the Birds of the World, Vol. 3; Birdlife International; [tcv.org.uk/northernireland/environment/biodiversity/priority](http://tcv.org.uk/northernireland/environment/biodiversity/priority); Lapwing, [birdspot.co.uk/bird-identification/lapwing](http://birdspot.co.uk/bird-identification/lapwing); [first-nature.com/birds/vanellus-vanellus/northernlapwing](http://first-nature.com/birds/vanellus-vanellus/northernlapwing).

## **Flushing the Boreal Forest Down the Drain, Literally** By **Jim Jablonski**

That's right, the North American boreal forest, covering huge tracts of Canada and Alaska, is swirling to its demise in the world's toilet bowls.

But first, what is a boreal forest and where exactly is it? According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, "a boreal forest is a large area of wet land in the far northern parts of the world that is covered with conifer trees." In North America these forests are generally between the 50<sup>th</sup> and 70<sup>th</sup> latitudes.

The boreal forest in Canada and Alaska is often referred to as a "bird nursery." Many of our area's most beloved migratory birds, especially warblers, breed in the boreal regions of Canada. They are just some of the three billion North American birds that are estimated to have been lost since 1970. Loss of breeding habitat is having an impact on avian and other forms of wildlife in the north as well as the rest of the world.

According to a CTVNews.ca article, the U.S.-based Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) says much of the loss of boreal forest is caused by the toilet paper industry. The NRDC report says, "we are quite literally flushing them (boreal trees) down the toilet . . . Across the world, forests are being cut down to become throwaway tissue products such as toilet paper, facial tissue, and paper towels . . . their toll on the environment forgotten or ignored."

If we don't want to revert back to our ancestors' use of newspaper and catalogue pages there are new alternatives. Some companies are now offering 100% recycled pulp, wheat straw, and even bamboo as the raw materials in their toilet paper.

Earlier this year, a NRDC study graded 26 major toilet paper brands with regard to their environmental friendliness. Most major brands were given F's while a number of lesser-known products received A's. The top-rated brand was the whimsically named Who Gives a Crap with a score of 495 out of 500. It's product uses 100 percent recycled material; the packaging is plastic-free "and 50 percent of profits (from toilet paper) are donated to help build toilets for people in need." The paper is ordered



online and shipped in 48-roll boxes. That should be enough to outlast any hoarding frenzy.

If you prefer your “quilted” product because it feels so good, how much better do you feel knowing warblers are threatened by your plush, extra soft toilet paper?

**References:** “What’s a boreal forest? And the three other types of forests in the world,” in worldwildlife.org; “boreal forest” in dictionary.cambridge.org; “How a toilet paper boom is harming Canada’s boreal forest,” Flanagan, Ryan, CTVNews.ca, February 26, 2019; Hirsh, Sophie, “Report Exposes How Sustainable 26 major toilet paper brands Are –Check Out the Winners and the Losers,” greenmatters.com.

## Hog Island Scholarships Delayed

Usually by now, BRAS has announced its Hog Island birding camp scholarship application process. However, the Audubon camp’s website has announced that summer camp registration is postponed until early 2021. A tentative schedule has been posted on the same website. Last year’s entire summer schedule was wiped out due to the pandemic but hopefully this year will be back to normal. By mid-January check “blackriveraudubon.org” or the Black River Audubon Facebook page regularly for updates. *JJ*

## The Black River Audubon Avian Quiz

1. What type of habitat is home to approximately 2/3 of all bird species?
2. What is the slowest flying bird? It can fly at just 5 mph.
3. True or False? A flock of ravens is called an “unkindness” or a “conspiracy.”
4. Which is heavier, a bird’s feathers or its skeleton?
5. The \_\_\_\_\_ is the only bird that willingly takes care of other females’ eggs.

The quiz answers can be found at the bottom of the back inside cover.



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## For the Sake of Comparison



**Immature White-crowned Sparrow**

(photo by Gina Swindell, Amherst)

Looks can deceive, especially when it comes to bird identification. Young birds change a great deal during their first year as can be seen in comparing the adult white-crowned warbler on the front cover with the first-year bird above.

In addition to the changes that come with age, a bird's appearance often changes with the season and even with weather conditions. The northern lapwing below illustrates both when compared to the bird on the back cover. In addition to a ruffled appearance due to windy conditions along the shore, the bird below is missing its crest which becomes prominent during breeding season.



**Northern Lapwing**

(photo by Barbara Baudot, Camargue, France)

**Answers:** 1) tropical rain forests, 2) American woodcock, 3) True, 4) Feathers, 5) ostrich



NORTHERN LAPWING, photo courtesy of Jan Wegener / aviscapes.com



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