

WINGTIPS



BOBOLINK Photo by Ken Busch Photography

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The Warblers Are Still Migrating!

Despite health problems in the human world that force us into homebound isolation, the cycles of nature continue in the larger world outside. Warblers will soon be migrating through the area and some, possibly these below, will end their trip in the Black River watershed to nest and breed. If you can, get out to see them!



Prothonotary Warbler
Photo by Dominique Michal



JBWilliams
Yellow Warbler
Photo by Jeanne Buttle Williams

ALL AUDUBON MEETINGS, FIELD TRIPS CANCELLED THROUGH JUNE

Due to corona virus health concerns, Black River Audubon Society (BRAS) must cancel all gatherings, both meetings and field trips through the end of June.

Scheduled field trips in July and August are given below. However, since there is no Wingtips mailing through the summer, check the BRAS Facebook page and website – blackriveraudubon.org for future updates or cancellations.

July Field Trip

Saturday, July 18, 8:30 a.m.

Oberlin Arboretum

Park on South Cedar Street before Morgan Street

Marty Ackermann will lead the group

August Field Trip

Saturday, August 15, 8:30 a.m.

Put-in-Bay

5174 Water Street, Port Clinton

Meet at the Miller Ferry Dock

\$15 ferry fee for round trip + cost of a boxed lunch

Reservations required

Lisa Brohl will lead

Call Sally Fox at 1-440-242-9720

Black River Audubon Email Address



BRAS has caught up with the 1990's with the addition of an email address, which will be checked daily. The plan is to respond quickly to questions regarding meetings, trips, cancellations, and other issues.

The address is – **blackriveraudubonsociety@gmail.com**. It will be posted on the covers of Wingtips, both electronic and hard copies, letterhead paper, and other locations.

CAPE MAY WARBLER

Dendroica tigrina

By **Gina Swindell**

Colorful and flitting, warblers are a sight to see and May is a great month to look for them around northeast Ohio. Magee Marsh is a favorite destination for several species of warbler as they prepare to cross over Lake Erie on their way to their North American breeding grounds. While they are all beautiful, one species that left a deep impression on me was the rusty-cheeked Cape May warbler.

These little beauties belong to the New World wood warblers. The first specimen was collected in Cape May, NJ in 1812 -- though one would not be recorded there again for more than 100 years. I saw my first last year while attending the Biggest Week in American Birding at Magee Marsh. At first sight I knew immediately that it was a species I had not yet seen but luckily, as is always the case with this event, there were plenty of warbler experts around to point out what was on display -- a Cape May!

The best time to see this striking little bird is during migration or in its wintering grounds. Its breeding range spans New England, the Great Lakes region, and much of southern Canada. During the breeding season they nest and forage high in the treetops of spruce-fir forests (40-50 feet off the ground) which makes it very hard to catch a good view of them. Little is known about its breeding/nesting life other than that both the male and female seem to feed the nestlings. While in their northern breeding grounds, their diet consists mainly of the spruce budworm. The abundance, or lack thereof, of this boreal insect typically shows a direct correlation to Cape May warbler numbers.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, "The Cape May warbler is perhaps best known among ornithologists as a spruce budworm specialist. Its populations expand during outbreaks of the defoliating spruce budworm (*Choristoneura fumiferana*), reaching high densities in such areas and then sometimes disappearing between outbreaks." These warblers will lay up to 9 eggs when the budworm is plentiful. On the other hand, if not so plentiful, the female will lay as few as 4 eggs.

The Cape May warbler heads south spending its winter in southern Florida but more often in the West Indies. They have a specialized, semi-tubular tongue that allows them to adapt to this habitat. They are able to drink nectar from flowers and will even visit hummingbird feeders from time to time. This, of course, makes them much easier to view than when

in their nesting ground. Luckily for us, and them, these warblers are of low conservation concern.



Cape May Warbler range map (in allaboutbirds)

Though their numbers remain good, there are several things that cause them harm, including building strikes, cats, hunters, pesticides and forest management problems. These warblers nest in mature trees. Therefore, fire management does deter them since they are not interested in new growth. Canada sprays heavily to reduce the spruce budworm. Though this was once a significant cause of Cape May loss, the spray has been adjusted in a way that, studies show, does not harm songbirds and has helped to substantially reduce death by pesticide.

Since these birds are of least concern regarding their numbers, they do not benefit from specific species management. On the flip side, since their numbers are doing well, your chances of seeing one is pretty good. Though the Biggest Week in Birding has been cancelled and Magee Marsh and its boardwalk closed this year due to COVID-19, the warblers will still be around for a few weeks in May. Keep your eyes peeled. Happy birding!

References: [allaboutbirds.org/guide/Cape May Warbler](http://allaboutbirds.org/guide/Cape_May_Warbler); Audubon.org/field-guide/bird/cape-may-warbler; wildadironacks.org/Adirondack-birds-cape-may-warbler; Cape May Warbler has its own part to play in springs avian orchestra inbayjournal.com; birdsna.org.

Birding, Astronomy, and a Vermilion Flycatcher: A Black River Audubon Travelogue

By Dave Lengyel

Pahrump, Nevada, is a quirky town (as its name might imply), about an hour west of Las Vega, just over the Spring Mountains, beyond Mt. Charleston. I go there each fall because I am a visual astronomer at Oberlin College, and I stay at Pahrump because it is within reach of dark desert skies in the Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge.

A few local astronomers and I stay for about a week, during which we spend most of our nights under the clear skies of the high desert. When I became interested in birding a few years ago, I realized this new activity would give me something to do during the daytime when I find it difficult to sleep.

A short walk from Pahrump is Discovery Park, an abandoned golf course that was taken over by some local residents and the Red Rock Audubon chapter. They have recorded 176 species within the park and sponsor regular bird walks, with their motto, “Come wander former fairways and happily end up in the rough as we look for migrant visitors.”

During one of my first visits there after becoming a novice birder, in 2016, I spotted and photographed a lifer for me. I was walking along a former golf cart trail, when a flash of red caught my eye. I had no idea what I saw, but one of the local residents, who serves as a volunteer, drove up in his (what else) golf cart. When I described the bird and showed him the photo in my camera, he told me it was a vermilion flycatcher. This was almost as exciting to me as finding a dim galaxy or a recent comet!

Most flycatchers, as birders know, are not flashy but this one certainly is, especially the male. They are commonly found in parts of southern California, southern Nevada, much of Arizona, as well as New Mexico, and Texas. Discovery Park in Pahrump is fortunate to have a couple of nesting pairs.

Other species in Discovery Park include Gambel’s quail, Cooper’s hawk, red-shouldered hawk, ladder-backed woodpecker, Anna’s hummingbird, common raven, Say’s phoebe, verdin, phainopepla, and house finch. During the breeding season, you might find black-chinned hummingbird, Lucy’s warbler, western kingbird and yellow-headed blackbird.

I’ve always loved astronomy, and always will, but birding has been an activity that fits nicely with it. We astronomers like to say, “keep looking up” and I guess that applies to birding just as well!

BOBOLINK

(*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*)

By **Barbara Baudot**

Bobolinks wintering in South America currently are migrating over thousands of miles to what remains of the hayfields and expansive grasslands in the northern half of the US and southern Canada. Living in New England where hayfields and small farms were abandoned to trees and woods, I never saw a bobolink. Acquaintance with these immortalized birds came from reading the 19th century poetry of William Cullen Bryant and Emily Dickenson. During that century bobolinks were so plentiful that Audubon found it “impossible to see a meadow that did not contain several pairs of them.”

One May morning after we moved to Oberlin, our neighbor Harry Spencer suggested we go see if the bobolinks had returned to the fields of the equestrian center in Carlisle Reservation. Now was the opportunity to see this bird which had so long intrigued me.

The bobolink is a small blackbird in the family *Icteridae*, comprising 100 species of songbirds – black birds, orioles, and meadowlarks. The bobolink is the only bird belonging to the genus *dolichonyx*. *Oryzivorus* meaning "Rice Bird" refers to the bobolinks' appetite for rice and other grains.

Today, in spring and early summer flocks are arriving in the prairies and grass fields of northern US and southern Canada, and bobolinks will molt their unisex dull brown/black and buff feathered cloaks. Males will emerge dramatically attired in bright black and white feathers. Their black upper feathers will be set off by white feathers on their scapulars, lower backs, and rumps. Black feathers will cover their undersides and their faces will be framed by buff skullcaps.

While breeding, the male bobolink sings cheerily and flutters about haphazardly, popping up and down, and hovering in place over meadows and hayfields. His “song spread display” indicates his territory and solicits interest in prospective mates. This display begins when perching on a stake or brush; he lowers his head, spreads his wings and simultaneously lowers and spreads his tail feathers. Then, while circling gaily above his territory, he raises his head, and with puffed up skullcap and white feathers, chirps a melodious song. Predominantly a social bird, the male is not much interested in serious fighting for his territory or his mate.

The female is poignantly described in Bryant's poem *Robert of Lincoln*:

Modest and shy as a nun is she;
Pretty and quiet, with plain brown wings,
Passing at home a patient life, broods in the grass while her
husband sings
One weak chirp is her only note,
Six white eggs on a bed of hay,
There as the mother sits all day,

Madame bobolink is an unobtrusive bird. She is permanently camouflaged in her dull brown striped feathers and buff belly. She clings and climbs along stalks of weeds and roosts near the ground. She chirps occasionally. On the ground in open hay fields or grassy prairies she builds her cup-shaped nest from loose hay and leaves and lines it with fine meadow grass. Her nest is hidden in dense vegetation. She lays 4 to 6 eggs and incubates them. Her mate shares the chores of feeding and caring for the hatchlings.

Breeding is complicated for bobolinks because males are polygynous, having several mates per season and more than one family to care for in addition to that of his principle mate. Females are polyandrous. Thus, a clutch of eggs can have multiple fathers.

No sooner do the young fledge, then the bobolinks gather in flocks, and move to damp coastlines where they molt their breeding feathers. Both sexes assume their dull brown appearance and by early August they migrate southward.

Bobolinks have always led a precarious life. In the 19th century when migrating through the southern US they were shot by the thousands as enemies of grain farmers. Their delicious flesh was sold to gourmets. Many were also captured in the North by bird catchers who sold them as cage birds. Some respite came from enactment of the Migratory Bird Act in 1918. But their numbers continue to decline today. Wintering in South America, they are shot as pests and poisoned by pesticides.

Although still listed as of Least Concern on the IUCN list of endangered species, bobolinks are suffering dramatic losses in North America. In the past 40 years, 75% of their population has disappeared (80% in Ohio)]. Early and repeated harvesting of hay kills thousands of unfledged bobolinks. Industrial farming has vastly diminished acreage of open grasslands and prairies. Among other initiatives, the Bobolink Project organized by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, now partnering with Audubon Vermont and Audubon Connecticut, uses donations to

assist farmers who modify their mowing schedules to enable these ground nesting birds to raise their young.

References: Birds of American, Audubon; All About Birds; Wikipedia; American Bird Conservancy, The Bobolink Project.

The Art of Truly Listening (to birds, of course)

Gordon Hempton is known to many as the Sound Tracker for his career of recording bird songs. Sadly, much like Beethoven later in his career, Hempton is now losing his hearing. He intends to turn his impending loss into a benefit for us all by sharing his life's work with anyone who is willing to listen – and there are many.

We really need the sounds of nature, but it is increasingly difficult today according to Hempton. He points out that the act of truly listening is a dying art, ruined by today's nearly universal sound pollution that acts as a screen separating us from the natural world. Given the calming effects of nature sounds, listening to birds is absolutely needed during this Year of the Pandemic.

Audubon.org, in a March 18, 2020 article titled "*Immerse Yourself in These Peaceful, Nature-Rich Sound Recordings,*" described Hempton's career and coming tragedy. It also provided links to seven "*Sound Escape*" recordings, each 25 to 30 minutes long, that provide narration and calming bird sounds from around the world. The article was put together by BirdNote, a National Audubon partner.

You owe it to yourself to check it out at audubon.org.

BRAS Continues to Seek Board Member Applicants

The nominating committee of Jim Jablonski, Dick Lee, and Debbie Mohr is continuing to seek applicants for the BRAS board. Potential board members should want to protect wildlife and their habitats through the promotion of environmental science, education, advocacy, and conservation.

The committee is looking to add four new members who have experience and skills in the following areas: previous nonprofit or board experience, fundraising, event planning, strong community connections, and a passion for birds and conservation.

If you are interested, please contact Jim Jablonski at our new email address – [**blackriveraudubon@gmail.com**](mailto:blackriveraudubon@gmail.com) or one of these phone numbers: 440-610-8626 or 440-365-6465.

**Black River Audubon Membership only
(but including Wingtips) is \$15/Year**

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/ZIP _____

**Send with \$15 check to Black River Audubon
P.O. Box 33, Elyria, OH 44036**

**“The mission of the Black River Audubon Society
is to promote conservation and restoration of
ecosystems, focusing on birds and other wildlife
through advocacy, education, stewardship, field
trips, and programs for the benefit of all people
of today and tomorrow.”**

**National Audubon Membership Application
(Includes membership in Black River Audubon
and subscriptions to WINGTIPS and AUDUBON
magazine: \$20/year)**

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/ZIP _____

**Chapter Code S52, 7XCH8
Send your check to: National Audubon Society,
225 Varick Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10014
Attention: Chance Mueleck**



Vermilion Flycatcher



Photo by Dave Lengyel, 2016

Primarily a Mexican resident whose range spills into the U.S., the flashy vermilion flycatcher would be even harder to see in this area than its drab local cousins. But you can learn where to find it in the U.S. by turning to Dave Lengyel's article inside this issue.

Sandhill Cranes above the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska



Photo (partial view) by Jim Jablonski, March 2020

Imagine the impressive flight and sound of the two sandhill cranes at Sandy Ridge Metro Park and multiply that by at least 10,000. That would give you some idea of the magnificence of the hour-long swirling, joyous arrival of them at the Platte River after a day of feasting in the nearby grain fields. This amateur photo of a small portion of one arriving flock fails to do justice to the spectacle, but no photo ever could.



CAPE MAY WARBLER photo by Rob Swindell

BLACK RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY

“Birding Since 1958”

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