

WINGTIPS



GREAT EGRET Photo by Barbara Baudot, location - Nievre, France

APRIL 2020

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April 2020 Program
Tuesday April 7, 2020
Carlisle Visitor Center
Chasing Cranes in China



Diana Steele (far right) and her family

When my family and I were invited to China to attend a New Year’s Eve wedding, we jumped at the opportunity. Instead of visiting all the usual tourist hotspots, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, etc., I asked my husband and two children if they would be up for a birding-focused trip after the wedding. “It would take us outdoors, and to places we would never visit otherwise,” I pointed out. To my surprise delight, they agreed!

This is the story of our travels to unusual places on a faraway continent, and how we managed how to bird there. We encountered only one English-speaking tourist during our entire trip, but discovered many delightful and unusual birds, including three species of Cranes.

I am a science writer and birder, volunteering as a board member of the Ohio Ornithological Society and organizing the OOS’s May “Warblers and Wildflowers” weekend at Shawnee State Park. I monitor a network of Eastern bluebird nestboxes as well as three American kestrel nestboxes for Black River Audubon. With my trip to China, I have birded on six continents. Africa is on my bucket list!

My daughter, EJ—who at 11 years of age has already birded on three continents—will co-present with me.

April Field Trip
Saturday, April 18, 2020, 9 a.m.

Cascade/Elywood Park

Enter Cascade Park driveway near Furnace/West River
intersection in Elyria and park below the hill.

Patty McKelvey to lead

Castalia Field Trip

Eight birders, from both Black River Audubon and the Kirtland Bird Club, took part on a surprisingly clear, and warmer than usual, Saturday in February. Paul Sherwood, Black River board member, was the leader. The group toured the Castalia Quarry, Fish Hatchery, Bayview Fishing Pier and fields south of Castalia, before lunch at the Cold Creek Café.

The 31 species seen were greater white-fronted goose, Canada goose, trumpeter swan, northern shoveler, gadwall, American wigeon, mallard, American black duck, common goldeneye, common merganser, ruddy duck, Eurasian collared-dove, mourning dove, ring-billed gull, great blue heron, sharp-shinned hawk, bald eagle, red-tailed hawk, red-bellied woodpecker, blue jay, horned lark, European starling, American pipit, house finch, American goldfinch, American tree sparrow, song sparrow, and northern cardinal.

BRAS Board Member Applications Requested

Black River Audubon Society, which serves the Lorain County area, is seeking passionate and energetic board members to help protect wildlife and their habitats through science, education, advocacy and conservation.

The Black River Audubon Society board provides nature speakers, conservation programming, wildlife field trips, and scholarship opportunities to its members and the community. Specific skills that we are looking to add to our board include previous nonprofit or board experience, fundraising for specific projects, event planning, strong community connections, and a passion for birds and conservation.

If interested, please contact Jim Jablonski at jjjablon@aol.com or at 440.610.8626 for a Black River Audubon Society Board Member Application. Please contact him by April 1.

GREAT WHITE EGRET

Ardea alba

by **Barbara Baudot**

Great white egrets are among the avian world's most dazzling global citizens. Also called great white herons in New Zealand and many other countries, these birds have subspecies in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. They thrive in temperate as well as tropical habitats. Egrets living in cooler climates migrate south for the winter. I've been fortunate to photograph these feathered beauties in countries very distant from each other: great egrets stalking prey on a bank of the Niger River in Mali; wading in a shallow fishpond in Beijing; poised beside a wetland in Burgundy, France; and standing in the shallow pond off Russia Road in Oberlin. The Oberlin photo was taken under the watchful eyes of the late Harry Spencer, long-time Wingtips editor.

Whether male or female, juvenile or adult, the great white egret is an elegant bird cloaked in bright white feathers. Tall, with a very long neck, elongated black legs and a thick orange-yellow bill, it holds its wings close to its svelte body. In flight, the egret's neck is tucked against its shoulders with its legs extended straight back.



Great Egret in flight. Photo by Barbara Baudot, Nievre, France

Egrets inhabit freshwater, brackish waters, marine wetlands, and sometimes dry pastures. They also roost on trees and bushes overlooking ponds in the company of other birds. Solitary or in small groups they seek fish, frogs, reptiles or insects and, in fields, small rodents. Wading slowly and deliberately through shallow waters they stalk victims, or by remaining stationary, they await their prey. With sudden thrusts of their sharp bills they spear their meals.

For centuries, egrets have inspired symbols and legends. For example, Native Americans characterize the great egret as a symbol of patience, calmness, determination and good judgment. In China this bird represents strength, purity and long life. For ancient Egyptians egrets are a source of light and part of the creation myth. In Africa they are believed to communicate with gods.

Growth of long lacey plumes from their backs, the brilliance of their neon green lores, and the blackening of their maxilla announce the breeding season for great egrets. The male chooses a nesting site and begins to build an imposing nest in a tree or bush near other egrets in a heronry. After the rituals of courtship, a pair forms a monogamous relationship for a season, sometimes longer. They complete a nearly three-foot wide nest of sticks and twigs, the female lays 3 to 6 eggs and both parents incubate and nourish their nestlings initially with regurgitated food. The young begin to breed the young begin to breed.

The splendor of their breeding plumes caused the great egrets' near-extinction in the late 19th century. For at least two centuries feather hunters were richly rewarded for the bundles of feathers collected from the bodies of thousands of breeding adults. In the 1800's an ounce of feathers sold for the equivalent of \$2000 and meant the death of six adult birds. But feather adornments were all the rage, even suggesting social status. In feather markets fashionable women found white plumes with which to decorate their hats or fashion their boas and billowy fans. Soldiers used them to decorate fancy uniforms.

While breeding, great egrets were particularly vulnerable to feather hunters. Nesting in crowded heronries, it took little time for hunters to decimate them. Fortunately, however, the mass killing of large populations of great white egrets, engendered a strong backlash from conservationists. To protect birds and to discourage the feather trade, the National Audubon Society was incorporated in the US in 1905. In 1953, the great white egret in flight became its symbol. The Audubon Society sparked other conservation movements and the enactment of international treaties. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 is among the oldest wildlife protection laws.

More recently in 1982, the UN Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) came into force, and in 1995 the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) was adopted. Towards the end of the 20th century, great white egrets began to make a major comeback in Europe. Thanks to all these efforts they are no longer classified as an endangered species.

The revival of egret populations should not encourage complacency. According to scientists, in the past half century the number of all birds has declined by 3 billion, or 29%, in the US and Canada. Habitat loss in the US and abroad, especially wetlands drained for industry and housing, is a major cause. Also, environmental regulations, notably in the US, are being threatened or weakened for the benefit of big industry.

Most recently, the MBTA, enacted in 1918 and upheld by the US Supreme Court in *Missouri v. Holland* (1920), is targeted by the current administration, which is seeking to loosen regulations that protect birds, notably water birds, from incidental killing by businesses, including oil and gas companies. Conservation groups are arguing that these new policies, if adopted, would put millions of birds in harm's way. Proposed changes were put on the Federal Register on 3 February 2020 for public comment for a period of 45 days. A final decision awaits.

References: birdsandblooms.com/blog/bird-nesting-season-great-egrets/;
nytimes.com/2020/01/20/climate/bird-deaths/;
nytimes.com/2019/09/19/bird-populations/;
Wikipedia, Great White Heron; All About Birds, Great White Heron.

FLORIDA SCRUB-JAY

Aphelocoma coerulescens

By **Gina Swindell**

Did you know that Florida has only one endemic bird species -- the Florida scrub-jay?

A member of the intelligent, inquisitive and attractive scrub jay family, they occupy only a part of the area of the state. Once encompassing a healthy population, by 1987 the scrub-jay had become fragmented in communities so isolated that they were classified as a threatened species.

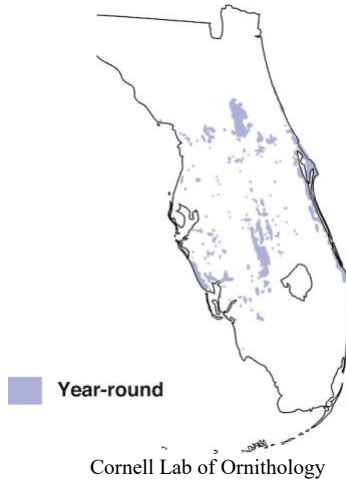
I just returned from the Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival in Titusville, FL where, among many other great events, I attended an excursion that included a NASA bus ride to restricted areas that contained specifically maintained scrub-jay habitat. This made it possible to spend a lot of time with these beauties. No wonder they are a desired species for many birders across the country. They were spectacular!

Shortly after entering the NASA property we encountered a shack loaded with armed guards. After passing through without incident, we were driven what seemed like a couple of miles into the scrub. While on our way to the drop point, a feral hog and her six little piglets quickly skipped over the roadway in front of our ride -- much to the delight of most of the passengers! Eventually, the bus climbed a large mound and dropped us at the top where we had an awesome view of the pad that was scheduled to launch a rocket the following Monday. This mound also overlooked several miles of scrub-jay habitat which also sheltered Florida panthers, bobcat, several species of snake and many other animals. After taking in the fabulous view, we all began to make our way down the steep hill.

As we gathered at the bottom our guide explained that the jays would eventually begin to emerge from the scrub. It is common for a sentinel to watch predators and to alarm the others should the situation present itself. It didn't take long before these beautiful birds were popping up all around us. It was so much fun to watch them. They actually followed us as we walked the path. The jays appeared quite comfortable with the activity, likely due to the fact that our guide is out there frequently checking on the site. He said that they are familiar with him, which may explain their interest in us. They are very social birds that live in family groups and are known to adapt to human presence.

Florida scrub-jays are the only North American scrub-jay that has a cooperative breeding system. They live in family groups of up to 8 which includes the breeding pair and past seasons offspring who act as sentinels, territory defenders, and help to feed their siblings. The mating pair are monogamous, keeping their territory until they die, and, like humans, their young stick around until they obtain their own territory - which typically occurs 2-4 years after birth. There are several ways in which these jays acquire a territory, but it is difficult since their requirements are so specific.

According to the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, "Optimal scrub-jay habitat occurs as patches with the following attributes: 1. Ten to 50 percent of the oak scrub made up of bare sand or sparse herbaceous vegetation; 2. Greater than 50 percent of the shrub layer made up of scrub oaks; 3. A mosaic of oak scrubs that occur in optimal height (4 to 6 feet) and shorter; 4. Less than 15 percent canopy cover; and 5. Greater than 984 feet from a forest." Fire suppression and habitat destruction account greatly for the lack of ideal habitat. So, while scrub-jays are not so hard to see west of the Mississippi, the Florida scrub-jay is the only species you'll see east of the river and, you guessed it, you will only see them in Florida.



The residents of Florida do seem to understand the requirements of this special bird and there is a growing dedication to providing healthy scrub-jay habitat. There are relocation programs to help them along, too. If you find yourself in Florida, definitely take the time to visit a place where these very social beauties have taken up residence. You will not regret the time spent with them. Happy birding!

References: allaboutbirds.org/guide/Florida_Scrub-Jay/lifehistory; fws.gov/northflorida/species-accounts/Fla-scrub-jay.2005; fws.gov/verobeach/StatusoftheSpecies/20151002 SOS FloridaScrubJay!; floridawildlife.com/floridaanimals_wildlife/FloridaScrubJays.

Great Response to March Kestrel Program

One of Black River Audubon Society’s largest-ever crowds enjoyed the March 2020 program at Carlisle Reservation. A total of 95 attended the first public viewing of *Fledge*, the story of a pair of kestrels that decided to nest behind the gutters in an old Cleveland building undergoing renovation at the corner of Detroit and W. 26th Streets.

When Snavelly Group project supervisor Walt Gachuk learned of the kestrels, he immediately researched their habits and called bird experts who provided advice. He quickly decided to reschedule the project, giving the birds time to nest, hatch their eggs, and support their young to full fledging.

Mr. Gachuk got in touch with young grad student videographer Najada Davis, who set up cameras near the nest, capturing the feeding of the hatchlings and their later antics which included falling from their precarious ledge to the street below!

Despite the obvious urban hazards, due to the attention paid to the young by their parents and human volunteers, including Black River Audubon's kestrel program chairperson Larry Wilson, all five eggs hatched and the young fledged!

Not only was the nest a major success for the threatened species, Najada Davis's video proved to be a triumph with the audience, all of which thoroughly enjoyed the 35-minute work. Congratulations go to Davis, Walt Gachuk for his concern and efforts for the kestrels, as well as Larry Wilson, for his help and for scheduling this wonderful program!

If you missed the meeting, you can view the nearly three-minute trailer at Black River Audubon Society's Facebook page. Go to the page and look for the posting with the title below.



Black River Audubon Adult Scholarships Awarded

BRAS is awarding three scholarships to area birders to attend the summer camps at National Audubon's Hog Island off the coast of Maine during the summer and early fall of 2020.

Lara Roketenetz of the University of Akron field station in Bath Nature Preserve works in the area of outdoor education for students from the first grade through high school. She will use her "Sharing Nature: An Educator's Week" scholarship to improve her overall birding skills and to learn new approaches to outreach programs with students.

Tim Fairweather, naturalist at Sandy Ridge, plans to improve his knowledge of raptors during the "Raptor Migration" camp in mid-September.

The Ohio Young Birders' scholarship to the "Coastal Bird Studies for Teens camp" was awarded to Cleveland's Helena Souffrant.

**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



Black River Audubon Defends MBTA on News 5 Cleveland



Left to right, Jim Jablonski Black River Audubon advocacy chairperson, Marnie Urso of Audubon Great Lakes, and Sally Fox, Black River's president.

Local media are becoming increasingly aware of threats to birds and the environment. After seeing an Elyria Chronicle story that followed up on a notice in last month's Wingtips, a News 5 Cleveland staffer reached out to Black River Audubon. She proposed an interview with local chapter and regional Audubon officials to learn more about the administration's threatened policy changes to the century-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Reporter and photographer Dave Gapinski interviewed Sally Fox, Black River president, as well as Marnie Urso of Audubon Great Lakes on February 26 at Lorain County Metro Parks Sandy Ridge Reservation. Fox and Urso both emphasized that with the *overall* North American bird population down three billion over the last 50 years that this is definitely not the time to weaken this law which has been successful in restoring many bird species that were near extinction.

To learn more about these and other proposed environmental policy changes by the government, how to oppose them, and to contact your representatives in Washington, go to audubon.org/takeaction.



FLORIDA SCRUB JAY photo by Rob Swindell, location - Kennedy Space Center

BLACK RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY

"Birding Since 1958"

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