

# Black River Audubon Society

# WINGTIPS

November 2015



YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON  
Photo by Joe Strong

Editors: Jim Jablonski, Cathy Priebe, and Harry Spencer  
Webmistress: Arlene Lengyel

# Program

**Andy Jones, Ph.D. Head of Department of Ornithology, Cleveland Museum of Natural History**

## **A Biologist's Guide to Iceland**

**November 3, 7 p.m.**

**Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center**



Iceland is home to extraordinary landscapes. The island's name is deceptive; it is a very beautiful green land, with an unexpected rainbow of colors from the mosses, algae, flowers, and wildlife. Wide-open spaces are framed with ice-capped mountains; glaciers and geysers are common, and there is an abundance of waterfalls. Volcanoes are common and active, and have had major impacts on life in Iceland.



The diversity of birds is low compared to tropical and even temperate locations but the birding is spectacular. The island is home to great numbers of nesting seabirds, including the iconic Atlantic puffin and the Eurasian oystercatcher (above). Dr. Andy Jones led a tour to Iceland in 2013, visiting the well-known sites along the southern and western portions of the island as well as a rarely visited small island community. He will highlight life in the far northern island, covering the life of humans as well as wildlife, focusing on the bird life and will touch on the unique geology of this young, volcanic land as well. And don't miss his attempts to pronounce the names of Icelandic towns and locations!!!

## Photos by READERS



Immature YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON  
photo by Philip Lyston



GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH at bird feeder  
photo by Wendy Akin

## Field Trips

**Saturday, Nov. 21, 2015, 9:00 a.m.**  
**Sandy Ridge LCMP (outer limits walk)**  
Meet at Perry Johnson Nature Center  
Naturalist Tim Fairweather to lead

## Cascade/Elywood Park, Elyria September Field Trip



By **Tammy Martin**

Our first field trip ever to Elyria's Cascade Park drew seven participants (Marty Ackerman, Patty & Kevin McKelvey, Betsy Miles, Harry Spencer, Jeanne Williams, and me), meeting at the current Nature Center. Jeanne, a fourth-generation Elyrian, guided us through this once grand city park, now under the management of the Lorain County Metro Parks. After a brief introduction/description of Cascade's current plans, Betsy bowed out, as she was unable to accompany us.

Jeanne led us south past wet areas, including a vernal pool, to an impressive rock formation; the former home of three caged bears. In-and-around the rocks were various steps/pathways that city residents have used over the years. Among these formations, Jeanne pointed out where Metro Park employees had just finished sandblasting years of graffiti. Next, we walked along the river, passing the former concrete

river crossing that leads to Elywood Park, and up to the north end of Cascade Park. Near the river crossing, a hillside slump closed the main roadway to motorized traffic some years ago, but remains open for pedestrians.

Fall birding was a bit slim (26 species), but varied to include both residents and migrants. We found/heard wood duck, spotted sandpiper, chimney swift, ruby-throated hummingbird, belted kingfisher, red-headed, red-bellied, and downy woodpeckers, northern flicker, eastern phoebe, red-eyed vireo, blue jay, black-capped chickadee, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch, Carolina wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, American robin, gray catbird, Nashville, magnolia, and black-and-white warblers, American redstart, chipping sparrow, northern cardinal, and American goldfinch.

In between birding and touring the park, other “nature” study drew our attention: ground hog, fox squirrel, American toad, red admiral butterflies, and some rather large wasps (cicada killers, perhaps?). Plus several plant species: dodder, lizard’s tail, pale Indian-plantain, wingstem, bitternut hickory, and catalpa. It’s always nice when we broaden our view and notice our surroundings. See you on our next outing!

## **A Birder’s Diary: Environmental Degradation and How Birds, and Birders, Can Help**

By **Carol Leininger**



Ancient human cultures used mines. A concentration of migratory fish had returned to indicated that warm weather was

Even today it would be wise contamination (e.g. DDT) still is who knows how much damage newer pesticides are doing. Declines in air and water quality (acid rain and mercury) are affecting wood thrush and loon populations. Predator poisoning affects California condors. The human population controls the world and non-human populations on earth.

Loss of habitat has led to extinction of ivory-billed woodpeckers, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and spotted owls. Poor forestry practices and forest fragmentation are common. Whole ecosystems are being damaged – coastal beaches supporting piping plovers and least terns are disturbed and grasslands are lost to agriculture, thus harming prairie chicken and whooping crane populations. Even marine ecosystems are affected as a result of fishing practices; e.g., the decline of red knots from over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs and the decline of various albatross species that are hooked and drowned in long-line fishnets. Oil spills and oil pollution affect fish populations, which in turn cause seabird foragers to struggle. New diseases, such as West Nile virus and house finch eye disease, are being introduced through human enterprises.

Global warming is changing the timing of migration and egg laying. Drier weather is causing prairie potholes and wetlands to disappear. Coastal flooding as sea levels rise will also destroy important feeding areas such as marshes and mud flats for many migrants. And, of course, humans continue to increase the number of skyscrapers and wind turbines without much regard to migrating birds. Have we forgotten the significance of indicator species?

But, there is hope as more people begin to participate in citizen science projects. If you love birds, get involved in breeding bird surveys, Christmas Bird Counts, eBird, Great Backyard Bird Counts and Project Feeder Watch. Studying birds is an excellent way to monitor changes in our environment. Birds are great indicators if we only note what they are telling us.

birds as indicators long before canaries were put in coal ospreys and bald eagles on a river in June meant the spawn. The appearance of robins and swallows on the way.

for humans to pay attention to bird indicators. Pesticide present in poorer countries where our birds winter, and

## Love Conquers All Among Finches

According to a study done at the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Germany, zebra finches allowed to choose their own mates were much more likely to successfully breed and showed less “infidelity” than birds placed into arranged pairings.



Zebra Finches

The researchers used zebra finches since they are monogamous and mate for life, and share nesting and offspring rearing duties. But at times they are known to stray with their neighbors’ mates, as many other species are known to do.

One hundred and sixty finches were allowed to choose their own mates but, after the females chose their mates, the researchers broke up half the arrangements and made new pairings. Those in the other half were left alone.

The change didn’t seem to bother the males but the females were much less responsive to their new partners. And the males were much more likely to neglect their accustomed parental roles.

The change did not affect the number of eggs laid but survival rates of chicks from the self-selected couples were 37 percent higher than among those that were arranged. In addition, the self-mated pairs performed better as parental partners, which proved crucial for success of the hatchlings.

The research on zebra finches, widely sold in the wild bird trade, may help declining species. Naturalists attempting to restore species such as Hawaii’s Maui parrotbill, which are monogamous breeders, may need to maximize the birds’ mate selection in order to more rapidly increase their population.

**Reference:** “Why Love Matters to Zebra Finches” in [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org); photo from “Background on Zebra Finches” in [devbio.biology.gatech.edu](http://devbio.biology.gatech.edu).

## ***YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON***

*Nyctanassa violacea*

By **Jim Jablonski**

As I’ve said previously, one of the opportunities to research birds

That’s the case again with this heron, which is a bird of the deep south. It makes it difficult to locate. Throughout the entire year, it inhabits coastal areas.



the best things about writing for *Wingtips* is the I’ve never seen.

month. I’ve never seen a yellow-crowned night-heron in the Deep South. And even there its secretiveness makes it difficult to locate. The only areas in the U.S. that it inhabits are Florida and tiny slices of the Georgia and Texas coasts.

More solitary than its cousin the black-crowned night-heron, the yellow-crowned, nonetheless, is common in some coastal areas. Feeding by day and night, this heron is sometimes called the “crab-eater” since, with its big

bill, it is well adapted to breaking open shells. In fact, the nearby island of Bermuda introduced them to bring land crabs under control.

A very pale yellow-crown, above a black and white face on a gray body, gives the bird its name, but it is hardly distinctive. Facial markings, with a sharp white stripe below the eyes distinguish it much more clearly from its black-crowned cousin.



Yellow-crowned night-heron in [Audubon.org/fieldguide](https://www.audubon.org/fieldguide)

The bird's habitat pretty much rules out the chance that I will see the yellow-crowned anytime soon. It makes its home in cypress swamps, mangroves, bayous and other streams with a good deal of heavy cover. However, it has been known to nest in trees in urban areas.

Feeding like most herons, the yellow-crowned forages on land or shallow water by simply waiting for prey to come near. It is thought that its morning and dusk feeding times may be influenced by the tides along the coasts. In addition to crabs, the yellow-crowned eats mollusks, frogs and fish.

For a large bird, relatively little is known definitely about its habits. It seems to nest in isolated pairs or in small colonies, sometimes with other large wading birds. The male displays for the female by emphasizing its size in stretching its neck, pointing its bill upward and spreading its wings while calling loudly. After mate selection, the parents-to-be build a platform nest of sticks, twigs and leaves for their clutch of four to five, blue-green eggs. Incubation takes 21-25 days, but the time until fledging is unknown.

The yellow-crowned heron's conservation status appears to be stable and it is even expanding its breeding range northward. During the 1930's and 1940's, the yellow-crowned established small colonies in Ohio and as far north as Minnesota. However, in later years these declined and today there are only small colonies in the Dayton and Columbus areas. Still, that gives me hope that I might spot this secretive bird some day!

**References:** "*Yellow-crowned night heron*" in [audubon.org](https://www.audubon.org/); "*Yellow-crowned night heron*" in [ohiobirds.org](https://www.ohiobirds.org/); "*Night-herons*" in *Field Guide to Birds of North America* by Kenn Kaufmann.



KILLDEER photo by John Koscinski

## ***Killdeer***

*Charadrius vociferus*

By ***Cathy Priebe***



Even though there are many birds that we like to associate with the beginning of spring, the loud call of the killdeer is one of my top five birds that gives me hope that our cold weather is finally departing.

This familiar plover is a breeder in almost all of North America, with the exception of southern Mexico, Alaska and arctic Canada. Often found near lakeshores, golf courses, open grassy fields, mudflats, and even urban areas, this bird is quite adept at adapting to various habitats. For example, my mother's neighbor placed a chair in the middle of her driveway to protect a killdeer nest. Really, they nested in the driveway!



Typical killdeer nest (pics4learning.com)

If their call is not enough to help you identify them, their dapper attire certainly will. The killdeer is brown on top with a white breast and two black bands on their neck, a white eyebrow, long yellow legs and a rusty rump. They generally nest on open ground in a scraped depression and both parents share the nesting duties. It is not unusual for the pair to raise two broods in one season.



Killdeer in Audubon.org/fieldguide

Since their nests are often in the open and not well camouflaged, the killdeer often lures a predator away by employing the “broken wing” act. When I first observed this behavior, I was fooled by this poor “injured” bird and followed it until it miraculously flew away.

Killdeer eat primarily insects, earthworms, marine invertebrates, snails and spiders. Their movements are jerky as they feed, often described as stop, walk, stop and then eat. They also quite clearly say their name when they call and they are quite loud and often very vocal. Nicknamed the “noisy plover” by Pete Dunne, they make their presence known when they are approached.

Most killdeer migrate south from September through early November, but there have been individuals recorded throughout the year in Ohio.

**References:** *Birds of the Cleveland Region* by Larry Rosche; *Pete Dunne’s Essential Field Guide Companion* by Pete Dunne; *Birds of Ohio* by Jim McCormac.

## **Bluebird Adaptation to Human Environment**

Noise pollution gets to everyone but there usually isn’t much we can do about it except speak more loudly. Eastern bluebirds understand that only too well according to Caitlyn R. Kight and John P. Swaddle’s study “*Eastern Bluebirds Alter their Song in Response to Anthropogenic Changes in the Acoustic Environment*” in the journal **Integrative & Comparative Biology**.

The lengthy title, which borders on print pollution, merely tells us that bluebirds in areas made noisy by human development, such as highways, construction, etc. know they have to call more loudly to others, especially to other males who may be infringing on their territories. Males in noisier sites also produced higher-pitched songs to cut through the human-made noise. And they adjusted immediately, changing the volume according to the needs of the moment.

The researchers speculate that “human habitats provide an ideal setting in which to perform experiments on communication strategies, with resulting data poised to reveal underlying evolutionary processes while also informing conservation and management.”

Perhaps this voice adaptability helped the bluebirds I monitored who were threatened by the construction work on my trail at High Meadows Metro Park this past summer! (see *Wingtips*, September 2015). **JJ**



## Free Audubon Bird Guide App

The National Audubon Society recently announced its new Bird Guide App. According to its emailed announcement, “the award-winning app instantly turns your mobile device into the most trusted field guide in North America”

It will provide the following among other features:

- 821 in-depth species profiles
- 3,200 bird photos
- thousands of bird calls, differentiated by region and season
- seasonal and migratory range maps
- recent local bird sightings

**National Audubon Membership Application (Includes membership in Black River Audubon and subscriptions to WINGTIPS and AUDUBON magazine):** \_\_\$20/year, \_\_\$30/2 years, \_\_\$15/year Student/Senior

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**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.**