

# WINGTIPS



AFRICAN FISH EAGLE photo by Dominique Michal

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NOV. 2017

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# **November Program**

Tuesday, November 7, 7:00 p.m.  
Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center

## **Judy Semroc “Chimney Swifts: Nature’s Imperiled Avian Insectivores”**



**Judy Semroc getting into her work!**

Judy Semroc currently works in the Natural Areas Division for The Cleveland Museum of Natural History as a Conservation Specialist. She is the founder of “Operation Botanic Rescue” (a volunteer plant rescue group) and “Chrysalis in Time”, the first Ohio Chapter of the North American Butterfly Association (NABA). In 2013, Judy was the recipient of the “Outstanding Staff Achievement Award” for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Judy is a co-author of “Dragonflies & Damselflies of Northeast Ohio” in 2008, and “The Goldenrods of Northeast Ohio” in 2017. As a former petroleum geologist and science teacher, Judy loves to learn about and share her passion for the natural world through hikes, interpretative programs and photography.

Judy’s November presentation to Black River Audubon Society will focus on the natural history, behavior, benefits and reasons for the population decline of chimney swifts. In addition, ideas will be presented for ways you can help this beautiful and very important species.

# **November Field Trip**

**Sandy Ridge Reservation  
Lorain County Metro Parks  
Saturday, November 18, 2017, 9:00 a.m.**  
Meet at 6195 Otten Rd., Perry Township  
Sharon “Birdchick” Stiteler to lead

## **Jack Smith Outstanding Speaker Series “Today’s Office”**

**Sharon “Birdchick” Stiteler  
Saturday, November 18, 2017, 2:30 p.m.**  
Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center  
12882 Diagonal Road, LaGrange



**Birdchick.com**

Please don't miss hearing Sharon “Birdchick” Stiteler, this year's Jack Smith Outstanding Speaker on Saturday, November 18, 2017, at 2:30 p.m. at the Carlisle Reservation Visitor Center. Simply titled “Today’s Office,” Ms. Stiteler will entertain us with tales from her birding adventures, including counting birds by plane above the Mississippi River, getting barfed on by pelicans, and searching for birds at a nude beach.

Employed as a ranger for the National Park Service, Ms. Stiteler also maintains the popular blog “Birdchick.com”, speaks internationally, and regularly appears in national publications, on the NBC Nightly News, Minnesota's Twin Cities TV and radio stations, plus numerous birding publications. Her outdoor jobs are mostly full

of beauty and adventure but come up short on bathrooms and normal food.

The energetic Ms. Stiteler will also lead the BRAS monthly field trip that same morning at Sandy Ridge Reservation, beginning at 9:00 a.m. Join us for both events!



Birdchick.com

## **Christmas Bird Counts: Save the Dates**

The 2017 Christmas Bird Counts are coming soon! Set aside the following dates for these enjoyable citizen science events.

The *Elyria area CBC* will be held Saturday, December 16, 2017 with Marty Ackermann once again serving as the coordinator.

The *Wellington CBC* will occur between the holidays on Saturday, December 30. Diane Devereaux will organize the event.

Look for further information in the December Wingtips and at the December membership meeting at Sandy Ridge Reservation.

## **Bluebirds Are Calling**

Although bluebird season is months away, planning for it is a year-long job for Penny and Fritz Brandau, BRAS coordinators of our extremely successful bluebird monitoring program, one of the best in Ohio.

That success could be threatened in 2018, however, due to a decline in volunteers. Penny Brandau reports that volunteers are needed to monitor a number of trails at Columbia Reservation, Wakeman, Vermilion, Oberlin and Elyria. In addition, she is looking for someone to record nestbox data in Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Nestwatch website. This task occurs mainly in October and November. Help is also needed in maintaining, building and setting up bluebird boxes.

If interested in helping, please contact the Bluebird Program Coordinators, Fritz and Penny Brandau, at 440-670-3684 or [pennybrandau@gmail.com](mailto:pennybrandau@gmail.com).

## A Birder's Diary: Feathers

By Carol Leininger



Feathers are structures that grow out of follicles in the epidermis of birds and consist mainly of keratin. *Contour feathers* cover most of the bird's body and are your typical flight feathers. They consist of a shaft from which a broad flat vane is attached with a branching pattern of barbs, barbules, and hooklets.

The barbules hook together like a host of tiny zippers. If barbs become separated the bird can run its beak through the barbules and hooklets to zip it up again. Much time is spent preening feathers in this manner so they are always in peak condition for quick flight. *Down feathers* have a shorter quill with long flexible barbs that do not interlock. They can be seen as natal down in nestlings and under the contour feathers of adults. They are important for insulation and are especially abundant in waterfowl.

Some contour feathers have *after feathers*, such as with grouse and pheasants, where a miniature feather grows out from one side of the lower shaft and is usually fluffy. These feathers are believed to increase insulation. *Semiplumes* have longer shafts than down feathers but no interlocking barbs. *Filoplumes* are hair-like feathers with a long shaft and only a small vane at the tip. Sometimes you can see these as hairs on a plucked chicken. They seem to have nerve endings at the base, and may act as sensory devices. *Rictal bristles* have a stiff shaft with no vane. They are often found around the mouth in flycatchers and are thought to have some tactile function. *Powder downs* are contour feathers that continually grow at the base while the tip disintegrates to powder, something that is common in herons, possibly to help waterproof the bird. *Display feathers*, common in birds of paradise, are contour feathers in male birds that form long crown-like plumes or barbless wires.

The ratites, or flightless birds such as the ostriches, white emus, kiwis and cassowaries, seem to have more primitive feathers. Ostrich feathers are soft and barbless, emus and kiwis have feathers that appear more hair-like and shaggy-like fur. Cassowary feathers are solely quills. In all these birds the wings are vestigial. But fossils of *Archaeopteryx*, considered the first true bird, show it had contour feathers much like birds today with barbs, barbules, and hooklets.

## AFRICAN FISH EAGLE AND BALD EAGLE

*Haliaeetus vocifer* and *Haliaeetus leucophalus*

By **Barbara Baudot**



North America's bald eagles and sub-Saharan African fish eagles—circling skies over river banks and lakes and the edges of the sea—symbolically represent, as have other eagles over millennia, virtues attributed to gods and warriors—courage, power, honor, perspicacity, longevity, and freedom. In 1782, when the Great Seal of the United States was adopted, the bald eagle became the US national emblem—bearing an olive branch, a bundle of thirteen arrows and a scroll emblazoned with: "*E Pluribus Unum*." With head tossed back, crying *wee-ah hyo, hyo, hyo* the African fish eagle is called the "Voice of Africa" and the symbol of Africa's soul. This eagle is the national emblem of Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Sudan.

Despite the vast distance separating their habitats, these two sea eagles appear closely related physically, share common instincts, and exhibit similarly patterned behaviors.

Males and females of both species are identically plumed. Their heads and tails are covered in snow white feathers and most of their body feathers are dark brown-black. The white feathers of the African sea eagle, however, also cover their upper bodies, and their wing feathers are black. Females of both species are about 25% larger than the males. The feet and hooked beaks of both species are yellow, however the African sea eagle's beak is tipped in black. The bald eagle is somewhat larger than the African fish eagle but both wingspans generally vary from 1.7 to 2 meters.

Both species often perch beside their lifetime mates on high branches over-looking some body of water below—just as in the

cover photo of African sea eagles taken by Dominique Michal in Zambia. Mature at four to five years, they build nests below the crowns of tall trees or snags; in the absence of trees they nest on cliff edges. They lay 2-3 eggs, often raising only the strongest eaglet to adulthood. The couple will reuse the same nest after adding a layer of building materials. These nests become enormous, particularly since the same couple may breed for 35 years in the same nest.

They devour fish but will also consume small mammals, reptiles and carrion. These birds are reputed kleptoparasites—stealing prey from other birds. Their super vision enables them to target prey from lofty perches; then swooping down—clawed talons extended, they swiftly pluck these fish from shallow waters.

There can be strong bonds between humans and eagles. My neighbor, Ian Coates, tames and trains golden eagles as hunting partners. He lent me Captain CWR Knight's book, *All British Eagle [1944]* documenting Knight's falconry with eagles as he demonstrated his skills in Europe, South Africa and the US. He was presented a bald eagle, Miss America, in the US. Given this species' awkwardness in handling and natural recalcitrance, Knight's effort to tame her was considered a fool's venture. The Captain's patience triumphed however: after 13 weeks he freed Miss America for a hunt. After soaring and diving beside Knight's golden eagle, she returned gently to Knight's outstretched arm. According to Knight, "Miss America was a very graceful and buoyant flier; not a skilled hunter, but so pleasing to watch."

Many published photographs and accounts of eagles at liberty in Massachusetts were captured by Jack Swedberg, whose magnificent films chronicled their movements from 1970 to 1990. Jack was part of a nationwide program to bring bald eagles back from near extinction. Today both the bald eagle and the African sea eagle have IUCN ratings "of least concern."

**References:** *All British Eagle*, by C.W.R. Knight, 1944; *Think Like an Eagle: At Work with a Wildlife Photographer*, 1992; [animaltalk.co.za/10-cool-things-about-the-fish-eagle/](http://animaltalk.co.za/10-cool-things-about-the-fish-eagle/); African-fish-eagle-national bird; "Bald eagle and African sea eagle" in Wikipedia; Bald eagle in Audubon.org; "How did the bald eagle become America's national bird" in history.com

## **Hurricanes: Birds, Habitats and Migration**

Hurricanes and other storms often benefit birders as strays blown off course by high winds often land in unexpected areas. I still fondly remember my first sighting of a blue phase snow goose among the Canada geese at Sandy Ridge Reservation following the remnants of



a hurricane years ago. The poor, lost guy was allowed to hang out with the crowd and even flew with the Canada geese, but always as the last bird in the V formation.

But the string of hurricanes the southland has been experiencing this late summer and fall has had mostly negative effects upon birds in that location. When Hurricane Harvey tore up the Texas coast, a captive breeding program to save the prairie chicken was devastated. Staff at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge had been tracking 29 breeding hens before the storm. Afterward, it appeared only five survived.

That was only one example of the destruction. The Texas Gulf Coast is home to 380 bird species, many of which were already threatened. Harvey destroyed terns, gulls, pelicans and songbirds. In addition, coastal islands hosting rookeries of brown pelicans, herons and egrets were all hit hard by erosion and lost the shrubbery necessary for ground nesting birds.

The damage to flowers will also impact migrating hummingbirds that, it's said, have become increasingly dependent on feeders in the area to stoke up before they attempt to finish their long-distance migrations across the Gulf.

One positive for birds, if not for humans, is the massive increase in mosquito breeding in Texas. Migrating insectivores will receive a bonanza when they arrive in the affected areas. **Reference:** Audubon.org **JJ**

## HOUSE FINCH

*Carpodacus mexicanus*

By **Cathy Priebe**

The house finch, originally a native of western North America, first came to the eastern United States as an introduced species. This small bird was being trapped, shipped and sold as a caged bird in Long Island, New York, in the early 1940s.



Shop owners illegally selling the birds released them to fend in an environment far less friendly than their original homeland. But that did not stop this hardy critter as they multiplied and spread, reaching Ohio by the early 60's and coming full circle arriving back to join their western population in the 90's.



I was a teenager when I saw my first house finch. A pair of them had made a nest in a flower basket hanging outside my parent's kitchen window. The male was so handsome with his spattering of red feathers glowing in the sun, while the female was a very drab, streaky brown. My educated guess now is that they had just recently found their way to our backyard on their journey to becoming one of the most abundant birds to inhabit practically all of the U.S. Not a small feat, by any means. Especially when this feisty species has recently been plagued by an eye disease called Mycoplasmal conjunctivitis, or more commonly "house finch eye disease".

First reported in 1994 by citizen scientists (in the Washington D.C. area) participating in Cornell Lab's Project Feeder Watch, house finches were developing crusty, swollen eyes that were partially to completely closed, causing them to have difficulty finding food, flying and eventually surviving. "Conjunctivitis can have many causes, but the type most often seen in house finches is caused by the bacterium *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*. This bacterium has long been known as a pathogen of domestic turkeys and chickens. The disease has affected several other wild bird species, including American goldfinch, evening grosbeak, and purple finch," according to a recent report from Cornell Lab.

According to the report, house finch populations are currently stable and only between 5 to 10 percent of the eastern population are still affected by the disease. Below are some tips to help keep your birds healthier at your own backyard feeding stations.

### **Clean Your Feeders to Stave off Disease**

House finch eye disease is caused by bacteria that can accumulate on bird feeders when visited by sick finches. Other diseases, including salmonella, can also be spread at feeders, so follow these tips to keep your feeders clean and disease free:

- Clean your feeders at least every month with a diluted bleach solution. Rinse well and allow your feeders to dry completely before rehangng them.
- Consider purchasing tube feeders that can be completely disassembled and washed in a diluted bleach solution in the kitchen sink or put in the dishwasher.
- Rake the area underneath your feeder to remove droppings and old, moldy seed.

- Space your feeders widely to discourage crowding among birds.
- If you see diseased birds, take feeders down and clean them. Wait a few days before putting feeders back up to encourage sick birds to disperse.
- Read about house finch eye disease at Project FeederWatch.

**References:** Project Feeder Watch, Cornell Lab; Birds of Ohio, Jim McCormac; Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion, Pete Dunne

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

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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.**

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Attention: Chance Mueleck**



**A healthy male house finch enjoying a dogwood berry.**



**MALE House finch suffering from finch eye disease. Note the closed eye and washed out color. Both photos by Sue Mowatt at flickr.com/photos**



BALD EAGLES photo by Debbie Parker

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