



THE PLAIN DEALER

Audubon club's land teems with bird life

Thursday, June 15, 2006

James F. McCarty
Plain Dealer Reporter

The National Audubon Society owns some of the most vital wildlife preserves, sanctuaries and parks in the United States.

But with few exceptions, Audubon's hundreds of local chapters rarely delve into real estate.

One of those exceptions is the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland, which, through foresight, business acumen and good fortune, has acquired through the years three tracts of prime Portage County habitat, each about 150 acres.

Developers, who dream of turning Aurora into a Hudson clone, look at Audubon's pristine sanctuaries with envy. But they're not for sale at any price, said chapter President Dan Melcher.

Audubon's predecessor, the Cleveland Bird Club, bought the 165-acre Aurora Sanctuary in 1941. The Novak and Molnar sanctuaries were bequeathed to Audubon's Greater Cleveland chapter with the promise that the land would be preserved forever.

Birders are the biggest beneficiaries.

Last year, about this same time, I joined a group of Audubon members on a bird census at the Aurora Sanctuary. I recall being blown away by the beauty of the tract's maple-beech forest and the abundance of wildlife, with pileated woodpeckers and wood thrush, Acadian flycatchers and Eastern kingbirds, pine warblers and yellow-billed cuckoos.

Last weekend, I joined a team of bird-hunters led by Jim Tomko on a survey of the Novak Sanctuary. Although the property is located only a few miles north of the Aurora Sanctuary, the habitat was different, and we found a wider variety of bird life than we encountered last year.

The birds are nesting now, and the songs are primarily intended to establish territory and to communicate with a mate. Being able to bird by ear is essential because the canopy is so thick, views of the singers are fleeting.

Our ears told us that ovenbirds and great crested flycatchers are abundant at Novak, although I never saw more than a flash of either bird. As expected, we heard red-eyed vireos throughout the forest. Bonuses were the yellow-throated and blue-headed vireos.

Rose-breasted grosbeaks were common, but scarlet tanagers were scarce. Yellow warblers were everywhere, but hooded warblers were absent.

From a blind overlooking a pond, we enjoyed quality time with families of pileated woodpeckers and wood ducks. A pair of red-shouldered hawks calmly surveyed the scene from the uppermost branches of a bare tree. A pair of wild turkeys gliding across the water was a nice surprise.

A short walk to a second pond brought us to a heron rookery, where the calls of the great blues were surreal, and the red-headed woodpecker and Baltimore orioles provided a nice bonus.

Once the sun had lifted over the treetops and warmed the cold forest, the birding changed. Ruby-throated hummingbirds appeared. A willow flycatcher called. An Eastern meadowlark sang. And a pair of blue-winged warblers chipped at each other in a pine tree in a field.

Birders in Northeast Ohio are obviously blessed with some of the best destinations within an hour drive from home. It's a bonus for members of the Greater Cleveland Audubon club to be able to visit a sanctuary and say, "This is mine."

The next birding hike at the Novak Sanctuary is scheduled for 9 a.m. Saturday, July 1, in search of fledglings.

Other sightings

and events

The Frontera Audubon club in Weslaco, Texas, is another of the rare local chapters that owns a preserve. But what a difference location makes. The 15-acre sanctuary in the Rio Grande Valley hosted an amazing number of Mexican species between 2004 and 2005, including a half-dozen crimson-collared grosbeaks, elegant trogon and white-throated robin. In a six-month span, the sanctuary attracted more than 11,000 visitors and took in nearly \$40,000 in entry fees and donations.

Just across the Geauga County line at the Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area, Trumbull County, Ethan Kistler - one of the brightest young birders in the area - found marsh and sedge wrens, yellow-billed cuckoos and warbling vireos, several prothonotary warblers and yellow-throated vireos, an osprey and a bald eagle.

Another of the region's top birding rookies, Philip Chaon of Cleveland Heights, received a recognition award and a \$200 bonus last week from the Kirtland Bird Club.

A couple of surprise birds last week included an American tree sparrow at Mentor Lagoons (a first-ever sighting of the bird there in June) and an American pipit at Voinovich Park in downtown Cleveland - eight days later than the previous last spring sighting, recorded in 1977, according to Birds of the Cleveland Region.

Birding by canoe on the Upper Cuyahoga River, Chris Pierce encountered healthy populations of prothonotary warblers using nesting boxes along the way.

The Blackbrook Audubon chapter, at its monthly bird walk, found common moorhen and dickcissel at Chagrin River Park in Lake County, per Becky Thompson.

To reach this Plain Dealer columnist:

jmccarty@plaind.com

© 2006 The Plain Dealer

© 2006 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.