



The HOUSE WREN

Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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Volume XXXIX, Number 2

Visit our website at www.clevelandaudubon.org

February, 2021

The “Keystone” plants

If you want to attract the most bird species to your yard, start thinking beyond sunflower seed, thistle (nyger) and suet. Don't get me wrong – these three foods will almost guarantee about 20 species, especially during winter. But come spring, the migrants (warblers, vireos, flycatchers and others) and our summer birds are going to be looking for insects, not seeds. And once the baby birds hatch, even seed-eaters like sparrows and grosbeaks will be looking for insects to provide the most nutrition for their chicks (baby birds are not able to digest seeds at this early stage).

Dr. Doug Tallamy (Entomologist with the University of Delaware) tells us the best way to attract insects is with native plants – trees, shrubs and flowers. As I mentioned last month, insects and

diseases evolved with our native plants and they have achieved a balance when all parts of the ecosystem are in place.

Some insects are attracted to flowers (pollinators) while others are looking to prey on them (predators). Birds eat both types! Moths and butterflies deposit their eggs on leaves and stems and when the eggs hatch into caterpillars, birds eat those too!

There are hundreds of native plants to choose from but Tallamy talks about “keystone plants”, those handful of genera that are the backbone of an ecosystem. For trees, we are talking about native oaks (he calls them the Superstars!), cherries, willows, birch, cottonwoods, elms, crabapples, viburnum and dogwoods.

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Building nest boxes

Need an indoor project this winter that will benefit the birds? How about building some artificial nest structures to make your landscape more appealing to a wider variety of species? We've discussed using native plants to produce fruit, seeds and insects so let's talk a little about nesting opportunities.

Birds like robins, cardinals, gray catbirds and hummingbirds are ‘open-cup nesters’, birds that make a cup-like nest on tree branches, in shrubs or even inside buildings (barn swallows). The trees, shrubs and thickets in your neighborhood provide lots of opportunities.

‘Primary cavity nesters’ like woodpeckers, sapsuckers and flickers rely on

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“Neither rain nor sleet...”

You have probably noticed *The House Wren* is not arriving in your mailbox in a very timely manner. As I write this, February is almost here but the January newsletter is still among the missing. As many of you have experienced, our mail is not reliable right now.

We are embarrassed when an event we promote in the newsletter has already occurred by the time you receive the information. Or an article about February birding doesn't get to you until sometime in March.

Like everyone else, we hope the Post Office returns to its pre-COVID level of service soon. In the meantime, please find the current issue of *The House Wren* at www.clevelandaudubon.org, under Documents.

—Editor



Bluebird at nest box.

Photo: M. Valencic

From the Nest...



As predicted by those who study the boreal forests, we have had some unusual visitors from the north! I hope you have had the good fortune to see some redpolls, evening grosbeaks, and red-breasted nuthatches. There have been repeated sightings of a snowy owl

along the lake front break walls. The winter season always holds some interesting surprises.

We have enjoyed Matt Valencic's education committee arranging our “Third Thursday” online presentations. There are some great programs to come. Watch our newsletter or our website to see what is next.

Hopefully later this year we will be able to resume our field trips and in-person programs. But even if you don't have a guided walk, give yourself a dose of nature to soothe and rejuvenate your mind and your body.

See you on the trails,

—Jim Tomko, President

Nest Boxes

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standing dead trees or dead limbs to excavate a nest cavity. If dead or dying trees are not a threat to people or buildings, consider leaving them standing for these birds.

Then there are 'secondary cavity nesters' like the black-capped chickadee, tufted titmouse, Eastern bluebird, house wren, Eastern screech owl, wood duck and prothonotary warbler, that use old woodpecker holes or natural cavities to hold their nest. We can attract more of



Prothonotary warbler exiting artificial nest structure.

Photo: M. Valencic

these birds by providing artificial nest structures for them in our landscape.

What birds do you want to attract? Before you build anything, go to www.allaboutbirds.org/news and review the habitat needs of those birds to see if it is realistic to try attracting them to your property. If it is, then go to www.nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses to find plans for various structures. You can also go to the North American Bluebird Society (www.nabluebirdsociety.org) for



Pileated woodpecker with brood at Eldon Russell Park in Geauga County.

Photo: M. Valencic

bluebird box plans and fact sheets.

When you provide an artificial cavity, be prepared to monitor it from time-to-time to see what species are using it. House sparrows and European starlings are both aggressive cavity nesters we want to discourage (topic for another article), and mice and wasps can take over unused boxes. Cleaning them out at the end of winter will make them more attractive to native birds in spring.

—Matt Valencic

Finding February birds using eBird

Do you know how many species of birds have been seen so far in 2021 in NE Ohio? Log into eBird (www.ebird.org) and let's find out. Not only can you learn WHAT is being seen, but you can also find WHERE they are being seen.

From the home page, click [EXPLORE](#) then [BAR CHARTS](#). From the list of states, find and click [OHIO](#) then look to the right and click [COUNTIES IN OHIO](#). Now scroll to the bottom of the page and click [CONTINUE](#).

To select just one county, [find and click the county name](#) then click [CONTINUE](#).

Final step ... at the top, click [CHANGE DATE](#). Change 1900 to [2021](#), then click [CONTINUE](#). Now you have a list (in taxonomic order) of all the birds seen in your specified county this year. If you want to know exactly where a species was seen, click the little blue icon next to the name and a [HOTSPOT MAP](#) appears. Click on any of the teardrop icons for a list of all checklists at that hotspot this year.

Now get dressed and go chase some birds!

—Matt Valencic

Critter Corner

Photo: M. Valencic



Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

Do you hear that red-shouldered hawk? It's right over there! Look! All the birds have fled from the feeders! Oh, wait a moment. Yes, he fooled me again.

Blue jays are accomplished hawk call imitators and will use that call to clear the feeders. Then they can swallow sunflower seed after sunflower seed which they store in their crops to carry away for later consumption in leaner times.

Blue jays are in the crow family (Corvidae) which contain some of the most intelligent birds in the world. These unmistakable, year-round visitors to our feeders have a blue crest, head and back with bright blue wings, white throat with a dark necklace, grayish breast and a white belly. Males and females look alike.

They build a bulky nest of twigs, grass and leaves in the crotch of a tree or shrub where they lay three to six brown speckled, pale bluish to olive eggs which are incubated mostly by the female for 18 days.

Their food is primarily composed of nuts, seeds, berries, insects, and carrion. They are famous nest robbers and will eat other birds' eggs and nestlings. They are the raucous bullies at the feeder and will push their way past everyone except maybe the red-bellied woodpeckers.

Many blue jays are non-migratory but each spring there is a spectacle of enormous flocks of them staging a northward migration surge along the southern Lake Erie shoreline. They fly east then later west and back east seemingly too timid to face crossing the open waters of Lake Erie. Most of these blue jays end up circling around Lake Erie to reach northern nesting locations.

Blue jays sure do brighten a winter day with their bright hues and brash activities. Let's enjoy their visits.

—Jim Tomko

Keystone plants

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When choosing herbaceous plants, go for native goldenrods, asters and sunflowers.

Does this mean that you should not plant non-native plants? Of course not. To quote Tallamy: “It is not the presence of non-native plants that destroys food-webs, it is the absence of native plants!”

So, as you are planning what to do in your yard this spring, consider adding a few “keystone plants” to your landscape – for the birds!

—Matt Valencic



Bobolink with caterpillar.

Photo: M. Valencic

The Squawk



Send your comments, questions,
or complaints to
info@clevelandaudubon.org

Looking for a speaker?

Did your civic, volunteer or nature organization have in-person speakers before the pandemic? Many groups have gone to Zoom® to connect with members and get back to business.

If your group is looking for a speaker on nature topics you can see the list of our Zoom® talks available on our website (www.clevelandaudubon.org) by clicking the [Backyard Naturalist \(with speakers bureau\)](#) button on the right side of the homepage. Then contact us at info@clevelandaudubon.org to book a speaker.

Talks are presented at no charge though donations are gladly accepted. All speakers are volunteers and 100% of contributions go to work in ASGC chapter activities.

Did you know?

Because of their penchant for storing acorns by burying them often quite far from the “mother” tree, it is thought that blue jays caused the unexpected rapid northern advance of oak forests following the receding glaciers of the ice age.

—Jim Tomko

Caterpillars and chickadees

According to Richard Brewer (*The Wilson Journal*, Dec. 1961) it can take more than 6,000 caterpillars to raise one clutch of chickadees! Adults feed the young from dawn to dark for about 16 days before the young leave the nest. Then they feed them another two weeks while the young move about the understory of the forest. If the caterpillar population is abundant (lots of native plants) the parents can be more efficient, bringing multiple caterpillars to the nest with each visit.

Two things you can do to help chickadee breeding success: add more native plants to your landscape and provide natural (dead trees with woodpecker holes) and artificial nesting cavities for them to use.

—Matt Valencic



Chickadee with 3 caterpillars.

Photo: M. Valencic

Upcoming Events

Third Thursday Series

February 18 7:00pm

“A Birding Trip to Cuba”

Via Zoom®

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. Although it is separated from mainland America by less than 100 miles, Cuba has many endemic bird species, which draw birders from around the world. Join us for a birding trip across this naturally-gifted island to see special endemic birds such as the bee hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world, sharing space with North America’s wintering birds.

Presented by Ami Horowitz.

March 18 7:00pm

“Don’t Touch that Nest!”

Via Zoom®

Did you know that you may be breaking a federal law by disturbing nesting birds or possessing a feather or egg collection? Learn about the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1916 and how it is intertwined with the beginning of the National Audubon Society.

Presented by Jim Tomko.

To register for these programs, go to www.clevelandaudubon.org and look under EVENTS.

April 15 7:00pm

“Lights Out Cleveland”

Via Zoom®

Bird-building collisions are a significant source of bird mortality, especially during spring and fall migration. Dr. Jones will update us on the progress being made to reduce crashes, and how each of us can become part of the solution. In the second half of his talk, he updates us on how technology is helping identify new songbird hybrids being discovered right here in northern Ohio.

Presented by Dr. Andy Jones

DATED MAIL

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A Wry Smile



Chocolate is God's way of telling us he likes us a little bit chubby.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Great Backyard Bird Count

As winter progresses, I continue to enjoy my bird feeder visitors. I have had a red-breasted nuthatch breeze in and out sporadically along with the regular visits of the white-breasted nuthatches, black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, cardinals, blue jays, mourning doves and goldfinches.

I hope all of these and more show up on the weekend of the Great Backyard Bird Count. Please join in on this fun international event beginning Friday, February 12th and ending Monday, February 15th.

The protocol is to spend a minimum of 15 minutes (or longer if you wish) watching your bird feeder (or walking) and record all the birds you see or hear. Then go on-line to BirdCount.org and record the birds identified.

It is quite interesting to see others record their bird lists in real time from all over the world. This is the largest citizen science project ever designed. It gives ornithologists and other scientists a snapshot in time of bird population trends.

This annual project sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society began in 1998. They are counting on you to join in. If you try it out this mid-February, let me know how you do and what you think about it.

—Jim Tomko



Hairy woodpecker at suet feeder.
Photo: M. Valencic

Website photo contest

You're invited to submit your photos representing the best of the **spring** season from one or more of our sanctuaries. The winning photo will be featured on our website's homepage and the winner will receive a \$10 Subway gift card. Spring pictures accepted until **May 15th**.

Check www.clevelandaudubon.org for full contest information. So get out those cameras and click away!