



The HOUSE WREN

Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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January, 2022

How owl pellets form

Students at Leighton Elementary School in Aurora learn about avian digestion in 5th grade, concluding with an owl pellet dissection lab. Two of my grandkids have attended this school so I was lucky enough to be asked to assist during their labs. I enjoyed watching the discovery and learning what took place and thank Dr. Stoyle and Mrs. Samelko for allowing me to help out.

Most of the owls in NE Ohio catch and eat small mammals like voles, mice, shrews and moles which they swallow whole. They don't have a crop like hawks and falcons, so their prey moves right into a chamber called the proventriculus where strong digestive juices dissolve the 'soft parts'



Students dissect an owl pellet at Leighton Elementary in Aurora.

Photo: Mrs. Samelko

of the animal (muscle, fat, skin and internal organs). Then the contents move
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Unraveling LBJs

Little Brown Jobs (aka, sparrows) can be tough to identify even on a good day. Their drab brown colors and small size (about six inches long) help them blend into the dense vegetation they all call home. Let's unravel the five most common species found in NE Ohio during winter: song, American tree, white-throated, white-crowned and swamp sparrows.

Song sparrows have coarse streaks on the breast and flanks that sometimes form a dark spot on the breast. They have a striped crown, dark mustache (lateral throat stripes) and grayish eyebrow and are found year-round in fields and edges. Their single 'chimp' note is heard more than their song this time of year.



Song sparrow.

Photo: M. Valencic

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Winter raptoring

I wrote about raptors in the January 2021 newsletter which you can find on our website under Docs/Info. This January I want to share several locations in NE Ohio that reliably hold raptors during winter (Dec – Feb) and remind you that chasing raptors is a great way to get out of the house and go birding, even in the coldest weather.



Northern harrier.

Photo: M. Valencic

Chasing raptors is done from the comfort and concealment of your car. Dress comfortably, crank up the heater and bring beverages, lunch, snacks and a friend or two. The car acts like a blind so you can talk and get animated without scaring the birds. Most birds can be viewed with binoculars from inside the car but bring a spotting scope for those far away (sorry, someone has to leave the car unless you have a window mount).

In general, winter raptors like open fields and wetlands with established
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From the Nest...



We give a heartfelt thank you to all who contributed to our annual appeal fund drive. It is a pleasure to have all of you like-minded people join us in preserving our wildlife and educating our members and local school children about the intricacy and connections of all of nature. Without your generosity, we would not be able

to meet our mission statement goals. Thank you very much.

If you have not yet had a chance to contribute, there is still time. We happily accept donations anytime.

I love the winter woods. It is easy to see the lay of the land without the leaves on the trees and there are no mosquitoes, deerflies, ticks, or lush

poison ivy leaves. What a fine time to get to know your local patch of woodland. Please consider joining us on some of our field trips this season.

See you on the trails,

—Jim Tomko, President

Sparrows

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White-throated adults have a well-defined white bib, striped head that can be black and white or tan and brown, a dark bill and yellow spots in front of the eye. The breast can be lightly striped. Some will sing their 'poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody' song.

White-crowned adults are slightly larger, have a clear breast with a yellow bill and black and white stripes on the head. The light gray breast color extends to the nape of the neck.



These sparrows differ enough from one another that with a little study you should be identifying them by the time spring arrives and brings a few more species to challenge us!

American tree sparrows, a winter specialty, are often in flocks of 10 to 40 birds. They respond to 'pishing' by moving up to higher vegetation to see what's happening. They have a clear breast with central spot, short, bicolored bill (lighter lower mandible), rufous crown and eye stripe on a gray face. Two wing bars finish the outfit with a sweet 'jingling' call among the flock.



Swamp sparrows favor wetlands of all types, from standing water to wet fields. They have very faint breast streaks. Look for the white throat, rufous (red) on the wings, buffy flanks, and gray to gray/olive on face and nape. Single 'ching' note is used at this time of year (different pitch than song sparrow's 'chimp').

—Matt Valencic (text and photos)

Raptor hotspots

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vegetation where they can find small mammals. Think prairie, meadow, wetlands, old fields, pastures and state wildlife areas. Airports are also good habitat as are Amish farms (because of the style of agriculture they use for field crops). Expect to find Northern harrier and rough-legged hawk, short-eared owl (these seen usually at last-light of day), red-tailed, red-shouldered and Cooper's hawks, American kestrels and possibly a merlin or snowy owl (those last two are

long-shots!). Here is a list of the traditional hotspots for winter raptors, by county:

Cuyahoga County: Cleveland Hopkins Airport (viewed from the 101st Bomb Squadron restaurant parking lot). Burke Lakefront Airport (from pull-offs along N. Marginal Road).

Geauga County: Patch Road from Tavern Road to Newcomb Street; Hayes Road from Swine Creek Reservation north to Peters Road.

Lake County: Mentor Marsh and
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Critter Corner

Photo: M. Valencic



Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)

By sight this songster is often overlooked. But by song it is a virtuoso!

"Madge-Madge-Madge put-on-your-tea-kettle-ettle-ettle!" is the commonly used phonetic mnemonic helping us to remember the song. The male song sparrow will sing all year 'round. In fact, it was discovered that the female will sing a softer version of the song as soon as breeding territories are established.

Margaret Morse Nice, an American Ornithologist in the 1930s and 1940s at Ohio State University, put Ohio ornithology on the map with her scientifically organized and thorough studies of the song sparrow population along the Olentangy River that flows through campus. Prior to her research it was thought that female songbirds did not sing territorial songs. Territorial songs are sung to attract mates and defend against intruders.

Females were shown to choose mates who showed an increased ability to learn. By incorporating more elements into their song, males demonstrated their ability to learn and were more successful in attracting a mate.

Most of "our" song sparrows are non-migratory or short distance migrants. Song sparrows may fledge two or three clutches per year. They usually nest on the ground laying one to six brown speckled, blue to green eggs in a sturdy grass cup often as near to us as the grass at the borders of our backyards and flower beds.

They eat insects, spiders, seeds, and berries. Song sparrows readily use our ground birdfeeders, competing with other sparrows and finches.

Keep your eye sharply looking for these pretty, little, streak-breasted sparrows foraging on the ground under your feeders.

—Jim Tomko

Did you know?

A song sparrow's song is so complex that Northern mockingbirds are not able to accurately mimic it.

In case you missed it

“Winter Solstice Hike” December 17th

Seven adventurers joined me for the Winter Solstice night hike. We had great December weather with temperatures in the upper 30s. There was a very thin cloud cover through which the one-day-short-of-a-full moon shone brightly. We did not need our flashlights for most of the walk.

Aside from some Canada geese honking there was a peaceful, muffled silence which we all therapeutically soaked in. A look out over the marsh from the blind showed beautiful swaying

cattails and sedges in the moonlight.

We made our way to the new observation platform at the Beaver Pond to try out the newly constructed bench.

As we let the forest settle back into its normal routine, Chuck spotted the head and wake of a beaver cruising quite close to see what we were up to. Suddenly it smacked its tail on the surface of the water, letting all creatures know that we were in the woods. A second beaver appeared but kept its distance.

As we headed back toward the trailhead, Marty noticed a barred owl silently float into the tree branches above us. Fortunately we were able to coax it to hoot its amazing territorial song. Soon its mate joined in, either serenading us or, more likely, hurling insults in response to our calling, telling us it is their territory and to stay out in no uncertain terms.

It was a perfect December night hike.

—Jim Tomko

Owl pellets

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into the gizzard (ventriculus) where grinding and compression takes place, squeezing out all the valuable nutrients which continue through the rest of the digestive tract. What remains is a mass of indigestible parts in the shape of the gizzard. It moves back into the proventriculus where it remains moist until regurgitated by the bird.

Owls often use the same daytime perch for many days and regurgitate a number of pellets while there. Scientists and nature lovers collect and dissect the pellets to learn something about the bird’s diet. As the students learned, pellets can contain the remains of two or three small mammals of different sizes and species. Rodents and



Bones from three rodents and two shrews found in a single owl pellet.

Photo: M. Valencic

shrews were mostly found, but occasionally bird or insect parts are found. Every pellet is unique which makes for a new adventure each time.

—Matt Valencic

Raptors

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Mentor Lagoons Preserve areas; Fairport Nursery Road.



American kestrel holding a shrew. Photo: M. Valencic

Tuscarawas County: Dundee Fields
Wayne County: Funk Bottoms Wildlife Area; Wilderness Road; Wecht Road

You can check recent activity using eBird’s EXPLORE HOTSPOTS feature. Not sure how to do that? Go to our website under Docs/Info, General Presentations and click on [eBird 101](#) for a free pdf of instructions.

—Matt Valencic

Upcoming Events

Third Thursday

Jan 20 7:00pm

“Many Sides of the Mushroom”

Via Zoom®

Mushrooms tell many stories and have many sides. Learn some common mushrooms, some stories and some medicinal plants too. Presented by Bob Bartolotta.



Register for this program at
www.clevelandaudubon.org/Events

Field Trips

Jan 29 9:30am

“Winter Track Walk”

Aurora Sanctuary

Let’s see who else uses our trails when we are not there. A number of mammals and some birds leave distinctive tracks and “calling cards.” Sometimes there is a real-life story to tell from the imprints left in the snow. This is a two-mile walk so dress for the weather with proper footwear. We will hope for a fresh light snowfall to show the details of the tracks registering in the snow. Meet at the Brettschneider Park/Audubon parking lot on the north side of Pioneer Trail a few hundred yards east of Page Road in Aurora.

Feb 20 9:30am

“Great Backyard Bird Count”

Aurora Sanctuary

Join in on this international bird count that occurs this weekend throughout the world. We will count every bird we see and hear on this two-mile path that has been surveyed for many years. You will be contributing to our knowledge of what species use our sanctuary in the winter and this information will be shared on e-bird and with interested parties all over the world. Dress for the weather including proper footwear for snow or mud. Meet at the Brettschneider Parking lot on the north side of Pioneer Trail a few hundred yards east of Page Road in Aurora.

DATED MAIL

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Please recycle this newsletter

A Wry Smile

If you can't be kind,
 at least have the decency
 to be vague.



An Audubon Moment

I know you've experienced an unfamiliar bird song but the bird producing it is not taking center stage. This is very frustrating to those of us doing surveys.

On a Christmas Bird count several years ago we were following the Hike and Bike Path along the Cuyahoga River in Munroe Falls. The numbers and variety were good. We had a Northern flicker, a yellow-bellied sapsucker, and a goldeneye.

But there was a fairly loud, strident, often repeated call that seemed to follow us the whole two and a half-mile walk.

Now either it was a common bird that was passing the song along or it was a friendly serenader that kept us company as we walked. It was a very buzzy "cheer". Every time we stopped to search the bird went quiet. We became sure it was an unusual species and we wanted this bird on our list.

Finally, as we neared the end of our zone, my friend Chuck caught sight of it. I should have been able to guess the ID because it is a common species with an amazing vocal repertoire.

It was one of the less common calls of our common Carolina wren. As it turns out, I have never forgotten that particular song and it shows that sometimes you just have to see the bird!



A Carolina wren at Geauga Commons park.
 Photo: M. Valencic

—Jim Tomko