



The HOUSE WREN

Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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Visit our website at www.clevelandaudubon.org

Feb, 2023

Bluebird Trail Volunteers

Do you love bluebirds or have an interest in learning more about them? Are you looking for a family conservation project that can involve the children? Or maybe something you could do with a friend? Then consider joining the Bluebird Trail Volunteers at our Novak Sanctuary on Townline Road in Aurora.

No experience is necessary, but you should be physically able to walk the level, mowed paths for about an hour during your visit. Your commitment would be to inspect the 20 bluebird boxes at the Novak Sanctuary once every two weeks during the breeding season (mid-March through August). Depending on how many volunteers respond, that time commitment could be less. **Training will take place on Satur-**



Photo: M. Valencic

day February 25th from 10am-noon.

Inspection involves recording the progress of nests, eggs, and chicks found
(Continued on page 2)

The Great Backyard Bird Count

Do you want an excuse to gaze out your kitchen window at your bird feeder for 15 minutes (or more)? Please consider joining in on this fun international event beginning Friday, February 17th and ending Monday, February 20th.

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

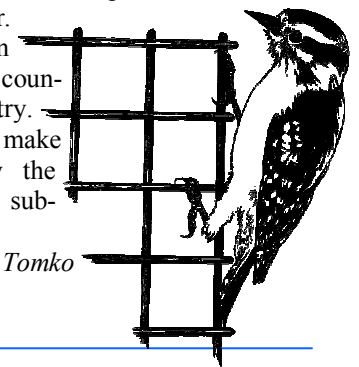
I get a kick out of seeing others from around the world record their bird lists in real time on an interactive global map. You will be able to see where the world is asleep and where the active birding is occurring. This is the largest citizen science project ever designed. It gives ornithologists and other scientists a snapshot in time of bird population trends.

The GBBC is sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

Results will be published a few weeks later.

Participation varies from country to country. Let's help make our country the #1 checklist submitter!

—Jim Tomko



Phoebe nest platforms

We all have our harbingers of spring, those plants or animals whose presence signals the change of seasons, even if the weather does not. For me, it is the spathe of skunk cabbage poking through the snow and the songs of red-winged blackbirds and Eastern phoebes. It would be nice if all of them were on our property, but our woods are not conducive to skunk cabbage (they like continuously wet seeps), and we don't have a cattail marsh. But we do have habitat for Eastern phoebes.

Phoebes like open woodlands with some understory and water nearby. In

nature they seek an overhang of some kind for their nest, like the under surface of a fallen tree's root mass.

The eaves on the east side of houses,
(Continued on page 2)

Root mass from a fallen willow. Photo: M. Valencic



From the Nest...

I would like to thank all of you for remembering Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland with your donation to our annual appeal. Your generosity is very much appreciated. If you did not have a chance to contribute, we are happy to accept your donation any time all year long.

What was your first bird of the year?



Mine was a dark-eyed junco. What a great way to start the year with a dapper plumaged "snowbird" enjoying the birdseed that I was offering.

The annual Great Backyard Bird Count is coming! Anyone may participate in this fun and amazing, free, international, four-day event. You will be contributing to our understanding of bird

population trends and you will be giving your own mental and physical health a boost. Please think about joining in.

See you on the trails,

—Jim Tomko
President, ASGC

Girl Scouts and bluebirds

Scouting is one of America's best ideas. Parents and professionals help young people to grow and learn valuable life skills while giving back to their communities.

Scouts often do projects for rank advancement that benefit the environment. As part of the requirements for their Girl Scout Bronze Award, Elizabeth and Jillian wanted to build bluebird



The Scouts present their bluebird boxes to ASGC at the Novak Education Center.

Photo: M. Valencic (Continued on page 3)

Phoebe nests

(Continued from page 1)

barns, garages and bridges are a suitable substitute and the birds take readily to them. The female uses mouthfuls of mud to create a base, even on a vertical surface, then builds it out with moss, leaves, grass and animal hair. But she will also use platforms if placed under the eaves of buildings. Be sure to locate it up high, about 10 to 15 feet off the



Phoebe nest under the roof of a covered bridge.

Photo: M. Valencic

Bluebird Volunteer

(Continued from page 1)

in each box. You will learn to identify the nests and eggs of bluebirds and other birds. If paper wasps or house sparrows are found, they are removed, and we show you how that is done. Once the babies leave the nest, we clean out the old nest and continue monitoring for the next brood.

If you would like to join the team or have questions, please email us at info@clevelandaudubon.org.

nest boxes. After participating in Chagrin River Bird Quest 2022 with their moms and friends (Flocking for Feathers team), they talked with me about the project. I was happy to give them some information and was delighted to find out they wanted to donate the finished boxes to ASGC.

Their timing could not have been better as we prepare to rekindle

ground, and where it is protected from the weather.

Plans for building a platform are readily available on the internet but get started soon because the birds will be returning mid-March and looking for nest sites. Don't be surprised if a robin or even a barn swallow decides to take up residence. Both are known to use platforms as nesting sites.

If you are in the mood to build bird houses, the February 2021 edition of *The House Wren* has articles and resources for creating habitat and building structures for cavity nesting birds. Go to www.clevelandaudubon.org and look under Docs/Info Newsletters to review the articles which contain helpful links.

Phoebes are not cavity nesters, but they do benefit from structures called nesting platforms if located in the right place.

—Matt Valencic



Did you know?

Merlin are clever hunters using hedge rows, fences and tree-lines for cover. Sometimes two Merlin will work a flock of birds with one coming from below and the second one delaying its approach to capture prey trying to fly up and away from the Merlin below. Merlin have been known to follow Northern harriers as the harriers course over a field hunting mice and voles. The harrier flushes birds up and out of the grasses at which point the Merlin rockets in to nab the flushed bird.

—Jim Tomko

Jim Tomko

Critter Corner

Photos: M. Valencic



Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

What was that? It looked like a miniature fighter plane zipping by! This bird, which I first knew as the pigeon hawk, is an exquisite speedster. Falcons are among our fastest birds and this species lives up to the reputation.

Many falcons overtake prey by "stooping" or diving on their prey, using gravity to help propel them, but the Merlin overtakes its prey in level pursuit and spin-on-a-dime agility. It can maneuver so skillfully that it has been known to easily capture another ultimate flying machine—a dragonfly!

Birders often mistakenly check off American kestrel (another falcon) when they get a fleeting view of the Merlin streaking by. The kestrel has similar dimensions to the Merlin but the Merlin is slightly larger, stockier, and more solidly built. In flight it is a stronger and more solid flyer with shallow and very rapid wing beats. It is not known for hovering as kestrels are. It is known for pursuit. Often we say, "Did you see that? I think it was a Merlin!" as its tail feathers disappear into the distance. It often flies faster than 30 miles per hour.

The Merlin we see have solid upper parts (grayish in males, brownish in females) with a single facial stripe and an eyebrow. They have heavily brown- and rufus-streaked underparts.

It would be rare and unusual to have a Merlin nest in our area. They are northern nesters and prefer to use abandoned hawk or crow nests but will occasionally use an abandoned tree cavity. They are present here through April and then not again until the autumn migration. I hope you get to see one sail by!

—Jim Tomko

In case you missed it

“Winter Track Walk” January 14th

The snow cover was just about perfect! The day was not too cold in the woods but when the wind blew out in the field, we could feel it. Many critters apparently had more sense than we did as they were still holed up from the previous day’s blustery weather.

At first, I was feeling a little crest-fallen due to a lack of tracks in this new snow. Suddenly we saw some canine tracks headed toward us right down the middle of the trail. We knew they were coyote tracks because of their size and the oval shape with the toes squeezed tightly together. Many of the tracks only registered toe-nail imprints on the two middle toes. Dogs usually register toe-nail imprints on all four toes and dogs have a round shape with the toe imprints more relaxed and spread apart. But

mainly we could see that the owner of these tracks was on a mission. They went straight down the trail with no side-tracking or distractions. Dogs meander all over the place like they don’t have a care in the world. Also, dog tracks are usually accompanied by human tracks and we were the first humans to make tracks that day.

Marty Sickinger pointed out some mouse tracks for us where every once in while we could make out the tail drag. Our ubiquitous white-tailed deer left imprints too. Surprisingly there were no rabbit, squirrel, fox or turkey tracks. Those animals were staying nice and cozy in their protected resting places.

It was an excellent winter walk in the woods.

—Jim Tomko

The Squawk



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

In case you missed it

“Winter Solstice Hike” December 16th

It was a fine winter night. There was hardly a breeze. The woodland was quiet. There was barely any disturbance except the occasional squeaking and creaking of two trees rubbing together when the faint breeze blew. From the blind we looked out over the marsh hoping to glimpse an owl searching for a vole. We did not even hear a Canada goose! We quietly crept back to our new overlook deck expecting the beaver or muskrat to be paddling around since the pond had not yet frozen for the winter.

Not a swimmer was to be found. We stopped for a few minutes attempting to lure in a barred owl with barred owl calls but we did not get a single response. We finally heard a Canada goose flock begin honking as they rearranged themselves for the night. On the way to the parking lot everyone commented on how wonderful a night hike is especially in the winter woods.

We drank almost all of the hot cocoa and ate almost all of the freshly baked gingerbread men as we said our good byes and headed home to celebrate the upcoming holidays.

—Jim Tomko

Girl Scouts

(Continued from page 2)

our Bluebird Box Monitoring Program (see article on page 1). Jillian and Elizabeth’s boxes will be used to replace boxes that have suffered the ravages of weather and time in the Novak Sanctuary. They will each be given a number and become part of the 20-box Bluebird Trail at Novak.

Thank you, Elizabeth and Jillian, for helping bluebirds and the tree swallows that also use the boxes. We wish you the best as you continue your Girl Scout adventures.

—Matt Valencic



Photo: M. Valencic

Upcoming Events

Third Thursday

Field Trips

Feb 5 2:00 to 3:30pm

“What a Plant Knows”

Novak Education Center

Short, cold days don’t have to interfere with your study of natural history! The ASGC Education Committee invites you to join us in reading *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (2017) by Daniel Chamovitz this winter. We’ll gather over coffee and tea in the warmth of the Novak Education Center to discuss the natural history of plants as revealed in this exciting little book.

RSVP for this event:

info@clevelandaudubon.org

Feb 16 7:00pm

“Bumblebees”

Via Zoom®

Learn the importance of these ‘flying teddy bears’ that pollinate native plants that support our birds. — Chris Pappas.

Mar 16 7:00pm

“Amphibians of NE Ohio”

Via Zoom®

Meet our smooth and slippery neighbors as they emerge from their winter hibernacula and learn how they survive in NE Ohio. — Jim Tomko.

Register for the above programs at

www.clevelandaudubon.org/Events

Feb 19 9:30pm

“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 walk following a path that has been surveyed this particular weekend of the year for many years. You will be contributing to our knowledge of what species use our sanctuary in the winter. 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 I waited 'til I had all my ducks in a row,
I'd never get across the street.
Sometimes you just have to gather up what you've got and make a run for it.



An Audubon Moment

Ice Fishing

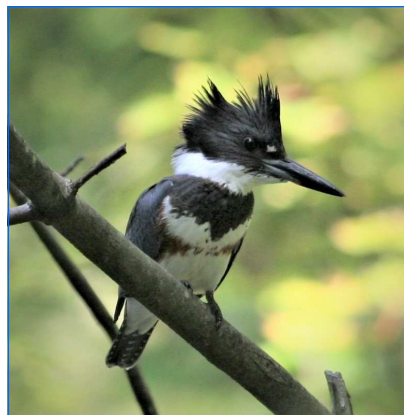
I've always been fascinated by belted kingfishers. They are spectacular with their blue and white plumage, their extraordinary crest, and their heavy-duty bill. They nest in a tunnel that they excavate in a steep riverbank. They are primarily visual fishermen and often perch over water to dive full tilt, head first into sometimes very shallow water to capture a fish, tadpole, frog, salamander, or other large aquatic invertebrate.

Then I think about the optics involved. When an object is under water, that object is not where it appears. Due to the refraction of light the actual position of the object is displaced and the kingfisher has to correct for that displacement as it dives into the water, and aim where the prey actually is and not where it appears to be. Plus, it must be able to turn the dive before it hits the bottom of the stream. I've seen kingfishers do this in just inches of water. To me this is flabbergasting!

Kingfishers need open water to fish. Many of our kingfishers migrate south in the winter but they are hardy creatures and move back north as soon as the ice is out. There are a number of them that do spend the winter with us by patrolling rapidly moving streams that seldom completely freeze.

Two of my best birding buddies, Kim Pease and Marty Sickinger, were birding along the Aurora Branch of the Chagrin River one winter day and were delighted to discover a kingfisher. The river was mostly frozen but this kingfisher found an opening in the ice and it was actually diving at an angle, travelling under the ice shelf to capture its prey.

That is a wondrous display of winter ice fishing that rivals all the amazing things this bird does to survive!



—Jim Tomko