



# The HOUSE WREN

## Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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Visit our website at [www.clevelandaudubon.org](http://www.clevelandaudubon.org)

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### Mexican violetear hummingbird seen in Ohio

On November 3, 2025, Chardon resident, Vickie, noticed a hummingbird at the feeder she forgot to take down, so she cleaned the feeder, added fresh nectar and watched an obviously weak bird return and start feeding. Over the next several days she and her husband watched the bird get stronger. She knew it was not a ruby-throat but was unable to identify it.

The weather turned colder on the 10<sup>th</sup> and she warmed the nectar to help the bird deal with the cold and so began the ritual of changing the nectar every hour or two for the next 18 days. What dedication!

Vickie contacted OSU Extension on the 24<sup>th</sup>, who contacted us, and that's when we entered the picture.

There was a video ... a green



Photo: M.Valencic

hummer with some blue and a downward-turned bill. WOW! I called my friend Kelly and 30 minutes later, in the fading light of day and through wavy glass, the Mexican Violetear Hummingbird, only the second recorded

(Continued on page 2)

### Keystones—The plants that are holding up the world (yes, really!)

We are hearing the term keystone plants more and more—so what are they?

The idea comes from ecology, first described by Robert Paine, who discovered that removing one critical species can cause an entire ecosystem to collapse, just like removing the keystone from an arch. Keystone species are not always abundant, but they support a disproportionate amount of life, especially insects like caterpillars.

Everything starts with the sun. Green leaves capture energy from sunlight through photosynthesis. That energy moves through the food web

(Continued on page 2)

### Novak flower gardeners

In September we asked flower gardeners to consider joining a new team that will care for the several flower beds around the Novak Education Center. Eight gardeners answered that call, three of whom are experienced native flower gardeners, and now we would like to add more members to the team. No experience is required, just a love of flowers.

The team will do a spring clean-up in April, cutting back dried flower stalks, digging out weeds, separating and moving plants that have grown too large

and spreading mulch. I'm sure there will be plants available for new homes if you are interested. You can bring your favorite tools or use ours.

Once spring clean-up is complete, the team will decide on a schedule for the summer chores of watering, supporting tall plants and weeding. And I look forward to any new ideas they may have for the gardens.

If you would like to join this team, please send me an email to [info@clevelandaudubon.org](mailto:info@clevelandaudubon.org). If you are new to flower gardening, this is an



Tiger swallowtail on ironweed.

Photo: M. Valencic

opportunity to learn by doing with experienced gardeners.

—Matt Valencic

### From the Nest...

Many holiday cards feature beautiful birds to welcome the season. I enjoy keeping a holiday card bird count. Mailing of holiday cards has become less popular but I am grateful to those who keep up the tradition.

This year my holiday bird count was 11 species if you count the Peace Dove and Woodstock of "Peanuts" fame. Nine



of those 11 species were featured on one card. It also displayed the most unusual species for a holiday card which was a red-breasted nuthatch.

I also love to remember the first bird of the new year that I see. Mine was a dark-eyed junco. What was yours?

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to all who have contributed to our annual appeal drive. These funds are

our major source of income to help us improve and advance the state of our natural world and educate others about how they can help protect our environment. If you have not yet contributed there is no deadline. We will gladly accept any amount of your generosity and at any time.

See you on the trails,

—Jim Tomko, President

## Keystone plants

(Continued from page 1)

when caterpillars eat the leaves. Caterpillars then make that energy available to birds and other wildlife.

Caterpillars are one of the main herbivores transferring energy from plants to the rest of the ecosystem. They are also essential food for baby birds.

In fact, research by Doug Tallamy shows that 96% of songbirds rely on insects to raise their young, even birds that eat seeds as adults. A single pair of Carolina chickadees needs more than 5,000 caterpillars to raise one brood. No caterpillars means no birds.

Tallamy found that just 14% of native plant species support about 90% of caterpillars. In gardens and landscapes, these keystone plants support an outsized amount of life.

The keystone plants in our area include oaks, native blueberries, and



Chickadee with three caterpillars.

Photo: M. Valencic

plants in the aster, sunflower, and goldenrod families.

So what are you dreaming about planting this spring?

—Jane Ellison

## Critter Corner



Photo: M. Valencic

### Red-headed Woodpecker

(*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*)

This aptly named woodpecker is a show-stopper, sporting a brilliant red head from bill to shoulders, black back, wings and shoulders, with a white chest belly and rump. They have large white patches on their wings.

Red-headed woodpeckers are one of the few woodpeckers that are not big fans of feeding by pecking wood. They actually prefer to fly out from a perch to capture an insect “flycatcher style”! They also love to gorge themselves on berries, nuts, bird eggs, nestlings, earthworms, spiders and small rodents. They do drill in wood for feeding and to excavate nesting cavities for themselves.

They are one of only four North American woodpeckers that cache food and the only one that covers the food with bark and woodchips. Most of our woodpeckers are year-round residents but many of the red-headed will migrate south due to their need to forage using their fly-catching routine.

I mostly find them where tall dead trees are standing in the water of a marsh or a pond near a forest. The first time you see a juvenile it may confuse you because the head is brown with dark speckles.

They can be found in our area any month of the year but most often from April through October. Red-headed did make the Christmas Bird Count list for Portage County. They regularly visit suet feeders for a week or so during the colder months when insects are not flying.

Whenever they appear it is a memorable special treat. I hope you can add them to your 2026 species list in the next few months.

—Jim Tomko

## Did you know?

The red-headed woodpecker’s “heyday” was in the early 1900s when the chestnut blight and Dutch elm disease devastated our forests. Woodpeckers thrived with the death of those trees.

Today the threat is habitat loss, especially with the *removal* of standing dead trees from the forest for firewood, development and aesthetics. (If it is safe for you, please leave your dead trees standing.)

—Jim Tomko

## Violetear

(Continued from page 1)

in Ohio, was photographed and identified in Chardon. The next 48-hours would be crazy for Vickie.

Kelly explained that this was a very, very rare bird for Ohio and the Ohio Ornithological Society would want to document and confirm its identity. She also explained that if word got out, hundreds of birders would want to see it. Vickie could not agree to all those visitors since the only place to see the bird was from her kitchen. She did agree to a few select visitors the next day.

I arrived and took more pictures. Another visitor arrived, Dave, who boomed in his biggest, jovial voice, “VICKIE!” Turns out they were business friends 20 years ago and this was a wonderful reunion. It also made Vickie more comfortable knowing these strangers were all associated with Dave.

On November 26 Vickie wrote: “Cold front with winds moving in. My last video of the little one at 4:57 for the



Photo: K. Stanek

longest feeding we witnessed for 3 minutes straight. I believe he knew to get moving.”

So ended a very special relationship between a lost bird and the woman who cared deeply about it. Thank you, Vickie, for tending to your special visitor and for allowing us to share your joy.

—Matt Valencic

## In case you missed it

*“Winter Solstice Walk”*

We had a fine winter night for our Winter Solstice Walk in the woods. It was quiet, cold and peaceful. On this night we did not hear or see a creature. We heard the wonderful sounds of the wind in the tree branches.

Since the temperatures had been below freezing the pond was frozen so we had no hope of seeing beaver or muskrat activity. We tried to lure in a barred owl by imitating its call and playing its recording. But no response was heard.

We still enjoyed a fantastic night-hike capped off by hot chocolate and a snack of soft and chewy gingerbread cookies.

—Jim Tomko

## The GBBC explained

Get ready to participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)!

Here is how it works. You record as many birds as you see in at least 15 minutes of observation or for as long as you wish. You can look out your window, walk around the neighborhood, or go for a hike. You may do it as frequently as you like any time between Friday the 10th through Monday the 13<sup>th</sup> of February.

Then you go online to [birdcount.org](http://birdcount.org) and enter your data. In 2013 it went international. It is great fun to go to the website and watch the map showing when and where the checklists are coming from in real time. This information is reviewed by scientists to give them an idea of what is happening to the world’s population of birds. Understandably they factor in the fact that everyone from new birders to professionals submit checklists in order to get meaningful conclusions. To learn more go to <http://www.audubon.org/content/about-great-backyard-bird-count>.

—Jim Tomko

## New equipment to fight invasives

This past November we received an Enbridge Gas Ohio Watershed Mini-grant (administered by Western Reserve Land Conservancy) to purchase additional power equipment for our ongoing battle against non-native invasive plants in our sanctuaries.

The grant allowed us to purchase a Stihl FS91 trimmer and Stihl chainsaw, along with associated safety and support equipment for each. This will allow us to more efficiently remove buckthorn and other woody invasives from the woods in our sanctuaries. Let me explain.

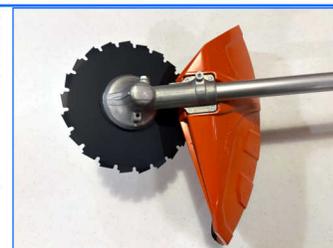
Since 2021 we have employed two strategies for managing buckthorn and autumn olive. First is to cut the trees by

hand and treat the stumps with herbicide, and second is to mow extensive patches in fields with the brush hog and then spray the regrowth.

Both work well but in 2026 our emphasis will be removing acres of small diameter buckthorn in the woods, a place we cannot get the brush hog and the amount of buckthorn is too much for cutting by hand. Our plan is to cut the buckthorn close to the ground using the FS91 trimmers with a cutting blade attachment and spray the regrowth with dilute herbicide when it is about 24” tall. We did a half-acre test plot in 2025 and it worked great!

The new chain saw will be helpful in

FS91 Trimmer with cutting blade  
Photo: M. Valencic



the Aurora Sanctuary where we have some very large trees around Fulton Pond. We will also use it for clearing trails after storms.

If you would like to join the Trail Crew to help clear invasives and various other projects, just email [trailcrew@clevelandaudubon.org](mailto:trailcrew@clevelandaudubon.org). We will add you to our list of valued volunteers.

—Matt Valencic

## Upcoming Events

### Field Trips

**Feb 15 9:30am**  
*“Great Backyard Bird Count”*  
Aurora Sanctuary

This annual, international event is developed and promoted by Cornell Lab of Ornithology in collaboration with National Audubon Society in 1998. To participate you can join us on our winter bird survey hike. Help us make Ohio a top contributor this year! We will meet at the Aurora Sanctuary at 9:30 in the Bretschneider Park parking lot a few hundred yards east of Page Road on the north side of East Pioneer Trail in Aurora (896 E

### Programs

**Feb 11 12:00 noon**  
*“Ephemeral Excitement”*  
via Zoom

Our natural world has a tight schedule for completing many important feeding, mating and survival tasks before the trees fully leaf out and many of our spring wildflowers and insects take on a different look to their existence. Join in to learn about why these fleeting performances are so very important.

Presented by conservation specialist, field biologist and naturalist Judy Semroc.

To register for the Zoom presentation please visit [www.natureinmybackyard.clevelandaudubon.org/](http://www.natureinmybackyard.clevelandaudubon.org/)

**Feb 24 7:00pm**  
*“Owls of Ohio”*  
Middleburg Hts Library (16659 Bagley Rd)

Twelve species of owls have been spotted in Ohio. Several are residents, some are migrants, and a few are accidental visitors. Interesting owl trivia will be revealed. Some tips on how, when and where to spot owls will be shared. Presented by Jim Tomko.

No live owls will be exhibited.

**DATED MAIL**

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*A Wry Smile*



I don't know how to use TikTok. But I can write in cursive, do long division, and tell time on clocks with hands. So there's that...

*An Audubon Moment*

Last November my best birding buddy, Kim Pease, and I discovered a Northern shrike at Tinker's Creek State Nature Preserve in Portage County. It was our bird of the day because shrikes are not common in our area. A few weeks ago, we decided to return to see if we could find it again. We searched and searched the marsh but to no avail. You can bet a sharp lookout was kept on the rest of the walk.

When we got to the end of the peninsula trail Kim spotted a likely suspect all the way across the marsh in the top of a tree along the railroad right-of-way.



Merlin

Photo: M. Valencic

**The fighter and the bomber**

When we focused the spotting scope on it, our suspect turned out to be a merlin! Merlins are another unusual species for our area. We were delighted to watch this small, elegant falcon surveying its winter territory for an evening meal.

As we watched, a pileated woodpecker emerged from the forest understory, hitching its way up the tree to jab its large dagger-like bill at the accomplished predator. The immense woodpecker dwarfed the merlin in size and continued to lumber after the agile falcon, constantly harassing and displacing it from its perch.

The merlin darted around from tree-top to tree-top, easily out-maneuvering the woodpecker. After five or ten minutes of this unrelenting harassment, the merlin must have decided that it wasn't worth the energy. It finally disappeared into the forest unharmed but still hungry, allowing peace to settle back onto the marsh.

—Jim Tomko