



The HOUSE WREN

Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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Chickadee in decline

Then piped a tiny voice hard by,
Gay and polite, a cheerful cry,
“Chick-a-dee-dee!” saucy note
Out of a sound heart and merry
throat

As if it said, “Good day, good sir!
Fine afternoon, old passenger!
Happy to meet you in these places
Where January brings few faces.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
“Chickadee”

January has come and gone, but the results of the Christmas Bird Count are now in, and we have some sad news about our chickadees. They are in major decline.

This is a trend that has been ongoing for the past 55 years with about a 20% decline in our area between 2011 and



Photo: M. Valencic

2021 (eBird)

How can this be? This cheery favorite bird, beloved by so many? Well, look around. What do you see, say, in your own yard? Birds need food, water,

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Chickadee memory

The brains of chickadees grow in the late summer and early fall. At this time of year the birds cache food, usually seeds, throughout their home range. Come winter, they need to be able to find what they’ve stashed. The growing part of the brain is the hippocampus, which plays an important role in spatial memory.

Dr. Fernando Nottebohm of Rockefeller University in New York studies the growth of neurons in the brains of birds. He focused on the remarkable ability of black-capped chickadees to recall the locations of hundreds of stored seeds. His lab produced the first evidence that in the adult brain of birds neurons are replaced periodically, with the learning of new behaviors.

Dr. Nottebohm suggests that as demand for memory space peaks, chickadees discard cells that hold old memories and replace them with new cells that store fresh memories.

Studying the ability of a bird’s brain to generate new neurons might uncover ways to replace brain cells lost due to injury, stroke or degeneration, as happens in diseases such as Parkinson’s, Huntington’s and Alzheimers.

Perhaps we should reconsider how we use the term “bird brain.”

—Michael Stein

Edited from “BirdNote”

March birding in NEO

March is a transition month with many birds heading north. That means saying ‘goodbye’ to snow buntings, Lapland longspurs (their brightest color is in March), rough-legged hawks and American tree sparrows and ‘hello’ to migrating ducks and some of our summer breeding birds.

Once the ice disappears waterfowl ‘magically’ appear on our inland lakes. Over 20 duck species along with grebes, loons and gulls can be found during March and April, most of them heading to their breeding grounds in Canada or



Bufflehead.

Photo: M. Valencic

the Arctic tundra. Hotspots include Bass Lake, LaDue and East Branch reservoirs in Geauga County, Mosquito Creek

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From the Nest...

Official spring is just two weeks away. With the lengthening daylight, the migration will be upon us!

It will be interesting to learn if the duck migration will pass us by because the ice on the lakes and ponds is so thick it may not have melted enough to have all the species we usually do. If the ponds and lakes are frozen when they



arrive to their favorite layover locations, they will continue to openings in the Lake Erie ice and pass us by.

Also, I am eager to see the results of the Great Backyard Bird Count. So far 8,078 species were reported world-wide. That is 158 more than 2024 and over half the known species.

The United States, Canada and India turned in the most checklists. Columbia,

Ecuador and India recorded the most species. Over a half million people from 199 countries participated.

Thanks to all of you who participated. Let’s keep getting out there!

See you on the trails,

—Jim Tomko, President

Chickadees

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and shelter. Do you see the host plants on which caterpillars feed, caterpillars that, along with spiders and other soft bodied insects, make up 100% of a chickadee nestling's diet? Do you see any standing deadwood or snags that chickadees could use to excavate a cavity to nest



Excavating a nest cavity

Photo: M. Valencic

in? Maybe you have put up a nest box, but is the entrance hole the right size to keep the house sparrows out (<1 1/8")?

And beyond our own yards, what do you see as you travel about? Lawns are ubiquitous, as are non-native plants. Parks are devoid of snags. And the use of pesticides, including Mosquito Joe, is silently removing the insects our songbirds depend on. None of this seems

remarkable on its own, but it adds up. To raise young, chickadees need insects that feed on our native plants (six to nine thousand of them), and they need snags to nest in. Their decline isn't a mystery, it is a reflection of the choices we have been making about how our spaces look and function.

Any good news? Yes! We can change our choices. Plant natives. Leave the deadwood. Rethink "tidy." If we do, the chickadees will assuredly find their way back, and we will once again hear that saucy note.

—Jane Ellison

March birding

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Lake in Trumbull County (especially the north end at Mahan Denman Boat Ramp), and West Branch and Magadore reservoirs in Portage County. There are also many smaller lakes and ponds where waterfowl stop to rest and feed.

Wetlands welcome back sandhill cranes, Wilson's snipe and tree swallows. (I saw seven sandhill cranes flying in Geauga County on Feb. 21st!)

Look for Eastern meadowlarks and killdeer on agricultural fields and Eastern phoebes along forest edges and



Sandhill crane.

Photo: M. Valencic

near buildings and bridges where they like to nest.

Add to this our 50 or so year-round birds and you have plenty of reasons to go birding in March. If the weather is yucky, remember that "bad weather equals good birding"!

No excuses! The birds are waiting to be watched!

—Matt Valencic



Northern pintail.

Photo: M. Valencic



Photo: M. Valencic

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)

We are just out of the migration path of long-tailed ducks as they are more common on Lake Michigan during migration. On occasion, in small numbers they will occupy Lake Erie, plus other lakes and larger reservoirs in Ohio in early winter before ice-up and late winter after ice-out. During migration they show up at LaDue Reservoir now and then.

These ducks have an amazing plumage in winter and in summer. My wife, Joan, describes them: "It looks like God had some leftover spare parts from many duck species and put them together to form this duck!"

Drakes have an exceedingly long tail and the winter plumage is almost a mirror image reversal of its breeding plumage. Non-breeding plumage of the drake is a white head outlining a dark face and neck with white plumes overlapping a dark back and wings.

Breeding plumage of the drakes is a dark head and neck with brownish plumes overlapping dark wings and back. They have small two-tone bills.

Their distinctive call of "owl owl" is quite memorable.

These birds are serious divers for food. They have been known to dive 200 feet below the surface to forage for aquatic invertebrates such as small crustaceans, shrimp, aquatic insects, mussels, and an occasional fish.

They winter mostly in salt water or on freshwater lakes. They prefer to nest on islands or peninsulas in arctic lakes in tight clusters.

As we get ice-out, that is the time to see them. They will be desperately winging their way north to claim the best nesting spot.

I hope you get to see and hear them this spring migration.

—Jim Tomko

In case you missed it

“Winter Bird Count”

Pleasant winter weather provided an excellent bird walk for a wonderful group of ten participants. We had a nice spectrum of ages and abilities from new to highly accomplished birders.

There was a crusty layer of snow on the ground so many of the wildlife tracks were difficult to distinguish.

The cardinals were singing their fabulous territorial songs, a Carolina wren through its song kept bragging about its “Tea-kettle, Tea-kettle, Tea-kettle.” But the bird of the day was a flyover of three trumpeter swans.

We all enjoyed a wonderful winter walk in the amazing Aurora Sanctuary.

Thank you all for joining me on this winter bird survey and contributing data to the Great Back-yard Bird Count.

—Jim Tomko



Great Back-yard Bird Count group in the Aurora Sanctuary.

Photos: M. Valencic

Did you know?

Long-tailed ducks propel themselves under water by partially flapping their wings. Most ducks propel themselves under water with their webbed feet.

—Jim Tomko



Long-tailed duck, male.

Photo: M. Valencic

Volunteer Opportunity

Want to help out ASGC but not get your hands dirty?

We are searching for a Recording Secretary. This person attends quarterly Board meetings and takes notes of the proceedings. The notes are then typed and compiled with the Committee Reports provided by the individual committee chairs, and then sent in a single file via email to BOT members.

Meetings are held the fourth Tuesday of January, April, July and October at 7:00pm. Most are held in-person at the Western Reserve Land Conservancy in Moreland Hills, some may be via Zoom. A fifth meeting is held in June during our Annual Dinner, location varies.

Contact ASGC at info@clevelandaudubon.org if interested.

Save the Date!
ASGC Annual Meeting and Dinner
Saturday, June 6, 2026

Upcoming Events

Field Trips

March 28 9:00am
“Waterfowl Wander”
LaDue Reservoir

Join us to view the astounding plumage of the drakes as the waterfowl wing north to their nesting grounds. This is a caravan-style birding tour where we will stop at several favorite lakes and ponds in southern Geauga and northern Portage counties. We will finish our trip with lunch at Freddie's in Streetsboro to share stories and our tallies. Make sure to have a full tank of gas because gas stations are not one of our stops. Meet at the boat ramp parking lot at the end of Washington Street off of St. Rt. 44 in Auburn Corners.

Programs

March 11 12:00 noon
“Using Native Plants at Home”
via Zoom

What are native plants and what are their ecological contexts? If we can answer those questions, we know whether or not they will be able to grow and thrive in our gardens... or not. Engage in the discussion about native plants and how they can be successively incorporated into our gardens. Debra Knapke will offer many examples of native plants in their habitats and in gardens.

Register for this Zoom program at:
www.natureinmybackyard.clevelandaudubon.org/programs

March 15 2:00pm
“Raptors of NE Ohio”
Dunham Tavern Museum (6709 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland)

Raptors are birds that get their food by hunting other birds or mammals. We know them as Eagles, Hawks, Falcons and Owls. Some live here year-round while others visit only during the winter. Enjoy pictures and natural history of the 19 species typically found in NE Ohio throughout the year. About one hour in length.

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An Audubon Moment

On January 7th my neighbor was driving home in a snowstorm when a small owl flew into his windshield as he passed my driveway. He and his sister, Linda Gilbert, went back looking for it and there on the edge of the road sat an

Eastern screech owl, very



Happy Ending

own in the outdoor aviary and two weeks after that it was ready for release where it was found, on our farm.

Since none of us had seen or heard a screech owl in the area for almost 30 years, this was a big deal. I had an owl box in the barn and managed to attach it to a big maple in the woods. If it was looking for a home, I wanted to provide!

Shortly after sunset six of us marched into the woods and Linda opened the top of the carrier. In about three seconds the owl flew out and landed on a branch about 40 feet away and just looked

around for three or four minutes, then flew deeper into the woods to another perch.

It was home again, and in our woods!

—Matt Valencic

dazed by the experience.

They brought it home and when it made it through the night took it to the Wildlife Rehab

Center at Penitentiary Glenn in Lake County. Two days later the technician said it had experienced head trauma, and they were giving it anti-inflammatories, but it looked a little better.

Ten days later it was eating on its

A Wry Smile



May the wind at your back not be the result of the corned beef and cabbage you had for lunch.
Happy St. Patrick's Day!