The HOUSE WREN

Bulletin of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

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New stairway by Fulton Pond

Work was completed September 18, 2026, on a new stairway in the Aurora Sanctuary near Fulton Pond, replacing the 'pallet steps' that had been there for more years than the Trail Crew could remember.

We removed the 4" x 4" posts intact and replaced them with 4" x 6" posts. The side supports for the steps are 2" x 12" boards that are bolted to the 4 x 6 posts with ½" diameter bolts. The design for the steps was borrowed from the stairway at the other end of the Aurora Sanctuary which remains solid after more than 20 years.

Some of the old 4 x 4 posts and pallet pieces were repurposed into the top and bottom of the structure. So, if

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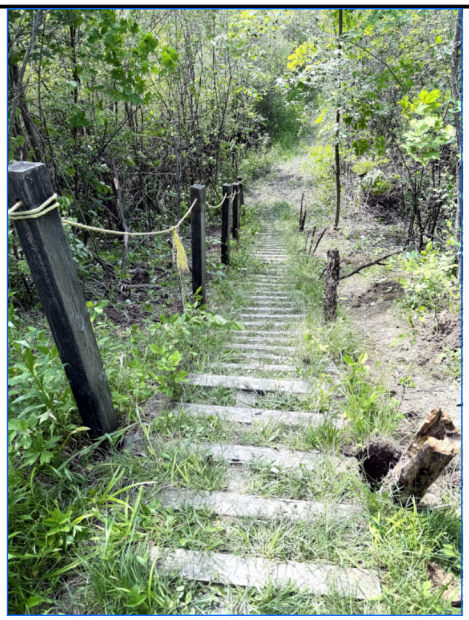

Fulton Pond pallet steps before construction of new stairway.

Photo: M. Valencic

The draw to nature

What draws us to a deeper appreciation of nature? For my grandson, Graham, it was the magic of a small camera with a telephoto lens. He grew up hearing his mom announce, "C'mon … we're going on a nature hike with Pops!" He learned the fun of turning over logs to discover what lay beneath and hearing stories about plants and animals. But the day his mom gave him her small Lumix camera with a 150mm telephoto lens, everything changed.

At 17, he appreciated the technology of this fine little camera and started exploring photography. But when he started bringing nature 'up close' (cropping images) he was amazed. The first image he sent me was of a western honeybee on a hydrangea flower. When cropped, the image showed the bee covered with pollen grains and a small beetle on its head. A pollinator pollinating! Was the beetle a parasite or hitchhiker? What's that flower the bee is on? The first of a lifetime of questions he will ask as he explores nature using photography.

Western honeybee

Photo: G. Nagy

Our nature hikes are more special these days because HE is discovering the cool things and finding answers to a

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Bird Quest records many firsts!

Pomarine Jaeger? (Casual Corvids) Are you kidding me?

Twenty species of Warblers! (Three Shrikes You're Out) That's nuts!

Not to mention rubber duckies, bird stickers, a Scavenger Hunt for kids 15 and under, and ASGC stickers for adults. Those are some of the 'firsts' of this year's Bird Quest.

Yes, it was a success at every level. One hundred thirty-three species of birds were found across the IBA (Chagrin River Corridor Important Bird Area) by 124 participants organized in 30 teams.

They managed to find the much-coveted Connecticut warbler, mourning warbler, olive-sided flycatcher, Merlin and even a black-crowned night-heron. But the 'Best Bird' was a juvenile Pomarine jaeger that made a short appearance over Bass Lake for team Casual Corvids. Jaegers are ocean birds and make only rare appearances inland and had never before been recorded in Geauga County.

Seven teams found between 10 and 20 warbler species, but waterfowl were

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From the Nest...

Welcome October, which is possibly my favorite month of the year! Mild temperatures, sunny days, migration and leaf color!

We enjoyed a fantastic Bird Quest with great camaraderie, good food and excellent record. One of the best prizes ever was John Lillich's life-size carving of an ivory-billed woodpecker. If you think about it, one of John's challenges was to carve this beauty from written descriptions and artists' depictions as there are no good photographs of the ivory-billed woodpecker. It was astounding!

Also we installed a stairway up the slippery mud slope below Fulton Pond at the Aurora Sanctuary. Two chimney swift roosting/nesting towers were constructed, and one is already installed at the Novak Sanctuary. The other one is destined for Hach-Otis. Lots of volunteer work has gone on and I thank Keith Kohnke and his trail crew in addition to Matt Valencic and his battle against invasive species. Thanks to many others who have helped us move forward with our mission statement goals.

—Jim Tomko, President ASGC

New stairway

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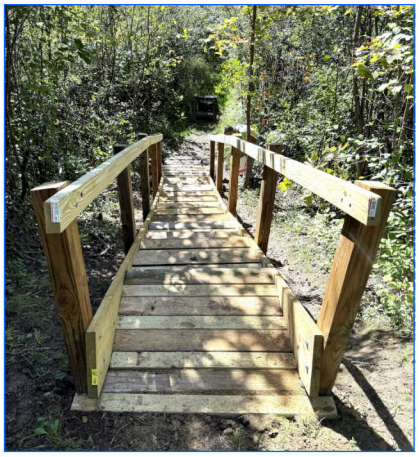
you think the landing at the bottom looks a little funky, that's why! The old wood was still solid, so we decided to use it. After a year the entire structure will be the same color.

The project was funded internally (less than $400 of materials) and constructed by Trail Crew members Keith Kohnke, Don Vorhees, Rick Deininger, John Bauman and Matt Valencic, and a volunteer who prefers to remain anonymous.

—Matt Valencic



New Fulton Pond stairway, completed 9/18/26
Photo: M. Valencic

New home for chimney swifts

Chimney swifts have a new nesting and roosting structure at the Novak Sanctuary, compliments of a generous grant from Shaker Lakes Garden Club and the hard work of two ASGC engineer volunteers, Bill Rucki and Dave Shaper, with some assistance from our Novak caretaker Mark Magree and myself. The design of the 16-foot tall tower was influenced by Paul & Georgean Klye's *Chimney Swift Towers: New Habitat for America's Mysterious Birds,* with some modifications. An online video made the project look 'like a piece of cake' for anyone with basic carpentry skills. It proved more challenging than it appeared!

The tower is built in three 4-foot sections with the first section resting on 6-foot steel legs embedded in 1,200 pounds of concrete. Dave is a woodworker with a well-equipped workshop and that allowed him and Bill to do the precision cutting and assembly of the wooden sections.

Next, a portable mixer was used to mix 20 – 60# bags of concrete for the base. The bottom section was aligned and secured perfectly plumb in that base. After the cement cured for 10 days, the second section was attached, but it would take another month to find someone with a boom lift truck (aka, 'cherry picker') to help get the third section in place. We are grateful to Rich Driscoll of Northeast Tree & Crane for donating his truck and a worker, Karlin Yoder, to get the last section in place.

Matt Valencic (in shadow) and Dave Shaper secure the final section.
Photo: M. Magree

The exterior was completed on August 25th with an estimated total of 130 volunteer hours.

We could not accomplish the work of this chapter without our many dedicated volunteers. Whether you volunteer on a regular basis, seasonally, or just occasionally, know that you are appreciated and you are helping to conserve the precious resources of this planet.

—Matt Valencic

Ban Twaddell and the remains of a red oak at Hach-Otis Sanctuary.
Photo: J. Lillich

Clean-up at Hach-Otis

Here is what Ban [Twaddell] and I cleaned up on Tuesday the 23rd [of June]. It was a mess but we prevailed in about three hours. This was on the main trail to the overlook at Hach-Otis. It was a red oak about 80 to 90 years old. Sad to lose the old timer but there aren't many youngsters in the woods here.

—John Lillich

Critter Corner

Photo: www.allaboutbirds.org/

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)

Although Chimney Swifts appeared on earth millions of years before humans, we still named them after a human-made structure that they prefer to roost and nest in. Prior to and without human-made structures, chimney swifts nested in hollow trees, caves, and on cliff faces. They still use natural places, but much prefer chimneys, old wells, and openings in barns and abandoned buildings.

Their nest is a semi-circular shelf of twigs glued together with sticky saliva and cemented to the wall of their nesting structure with that same sticky saliva. The nestlings outgrow the nest in about two weeks and then cling to the wall of the chimney for another two weeks before they are strong enough to fly.

Each nesting structure typically has one nesting pair although non-nesting chimney swifts occasionally roost in the same chimney and an unmated individual will help feed the nestlings. During migration scores of chimney swifts will roost for the night in a chimney. It is a spectacular sight to see a tornado-like vortex of these swifts funneling into a chimney.

One of the reasons these birds are declining is that now chimneys are smaller and many are capped. We are lucky to have a chimney swift nesting tower made by our dedicated volunteers at two of our wildlife sanctuaries (Novak and Hach-Otis).

We see these birds exuberantly twittering as they distinctively flutter in the air above our houses, backyards, forests, lakes and streams. They do almost everything on the wing. They eat, drink, mate, bathe and court while flying. In fact, their foot structure is designed to cling to vertical surfaces which makes it almost impossible for them to perch on a branch or walk on a horizontal surface. While in flight, they

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In case you missed it

"Fringed Gentian Walk"

We had a rainy start to our annual Fringed Gentian walk. But a hardy, outdoorsy group of ten of us persevered.

We were lucky to be joined by a group from the Native Plant Society of Northeastern Ohio. Expert botanists such as president Judy Barnhart, who is a retired naturalist from Geauga Parks, and former president Tom Sampliner, hellped guide us in identifying the autumnal flora.

We found turtlehead, bottle gentian, ladies tresses and yes, fringed gentian. Unfortunately, the sun did not shine and the fringed gentian remained tightly closed. One specimen did give us a partial open view, allowing us to be awed by its spectacular detail and beauty.

—Jim Tomko

Chimney Swift

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can be described as looking like a cigar with scimitar-shaped wings.

They migrate to South America for the winter. You may still get a chance to see them this season because stragglers can be found through October.

—Jim Tomko

Bird Quest

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hard to find. No surprise that the teams with the most species (88 species from Where's The Darn CONW?) also visited the most habitats during the 24 hours. Most birds are habitat specific.

Now in its 12th year, CRBQ continues to be a popular event with families, friends and even 'serious birders', with some teams returning year after year and new teams registering every year.

To help keep the younger kids engaged we introduced an animal scavenger hunt with 42 critters to find, an idea borrowed from the Headlands Birding Festival. And to help us learn about your CRBQ experience so we can continue to improve, we introduced a short questionnaire which many of you completed – Thank You!

A quick shout-out to Geauga Feed & Grain (Newbury) and Wild Birds Unlimited (Willoughby) for generously supporting CRBQ every year with door prizes. Both businesses can supply all your bird feeding needs.

Mark your calendars for September 10 -11, 2027 for the 13th annual Chagrin River Bird Quest. And check our website regularly (Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland) for a variety of programs every month of the year.

—Matt Valencic

Nature

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multitude of questions using technology. Thank you, Jenny (my daughter), for opening that door for Graham and adding another dimension to our relationship.

You can introduce friends and family to nature using technology: photography or the Merlin, SEEK or iNaturalist apps. Will you discover the beauty of flowers, insects and sunsets, the wonder of birds at your feeders, or just walk with them through your home vegetable or flower garden?

It does not take an advanced degree to share the beauty, wonder and awe of nature. The future of birds, animals, insects and plants depends on more people getting 'hooked' on nature and helping to conserve it every day.

—Matt Valencic

Upcoming Events

Field Trips

Oct 11 1:00pm
"Fall Color Saunter"
Hach-Otis Sanctuary

Join us for a spectacular and informative walk with long time member and naturalist, John Lillich, to view the scenic Chagrin River Valley put on its *"grand finale"* of the season. We are fortunate to have this gem of a wildlife sanctuary/state nature preserve to dazzle our senses and always present us with a wildlife surprise! Meet at the parking lot at the end of Skyline Drive off of River Road in Willoughby Hills.

Programs

Oct 14 12:00 noon
"There's a Fungus Among Us!"
Via Zoom

It's been a wet summer and fall, and mushrooms seem to be popping up everywhere! Let's take a closer look at the mushrooms we're seeing, discover why they appear when the weather gets wet, and uncover the surprising ways fungi help keep soil healthy. Fungi play important roles in our ecosystems, helping decompose organic matter, support plant growth, and keep nutrients moving through the soil.

To register for the zoom program:
www.natureinmybackyard.ohionativeplants.org/programs

Breeding bird survey 2026

This summer has flown by. My June was especially fleeting. I had trouble nailing down dates for the Breeding Bird Survey which we do annually in June. It is best to be done in June as this will ensure that the birds are still on territory singing their hearts out and migrating individuals have moved north. This year, I did not have the time to organize the group of birders that usually helps out. I did the survey on my own with the help of the Merlin app which listens for bird calls and identifies them. The following is a list of results which were submitted to eBird.

Aurora Sanctuary: June 29th, 54 species.

Novak Sanctuary (West side): June 30th, 49 species.

Novak Sanctuary (East side): July 1st, 35 species.

—Jim Tomko

Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland
P.O. Box 391037, Solon, OH 44139

The Newsletter of the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland

DATED MAIL

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A Wry Smile

I'm always disappointed when a liar's pants don't actually catch on fire...

Do you have an "Audubon Moment" to share? Send photos and short text to info@clevelandaudubon.org.

Audubon Moment

Mergansers at dawn

Pine silhouettes gathered the first light along their edges, and the morning seemed suspended between night and day. The lake lay still, holding its breath. I arrived at dawn, before the park's quiet would yield to footsteps and voices, hoping to encounter birds in the brief hour when the water still belonged to them.

Ahead, a kayaker drifted motionless and lifted his hand toward the open lake. There, a pair of mergansers glided across the surface. They rode low and alert, their bodies aligned with the water's quiet rhythm. The male's iridescent, slightly disheveled head caught the rising light; the female followed close behind, composed and steady.

Without hesitation, they dove, vanishing beneath the surface and rising again yards away. Their movement between air and water seemed effortless, as though the boundary between the two did not exist.

Diving birds have long stirred human imagination. In some traditions, water birds that plunged into the depths were said to bring up earth itself, shaping land from water. Whether understood as myth or metaphor, the image endures: life sustained through descent and return. Mergansers, nesting in tree cavities yet hunting in deep water, embody this passage between elements—creatures at ease in air, wood, and depth.

At dawn, they seemed less like ordinary waterfowl and more like quiet sentinels, revealing something about the health of the lake beneath them.

For a few moments, the water belonged entirely to them—no voices, no movement, only light and the quiet discipline of survival. Then, as the day began to stir, they lifted from the surface and flew low across the lake. I remained still, aware that what I had witnessed required little more than patience—and a willingness to arrive before the day claimed the water for itself.

—Sepala Weliwitigoda