

On eagles' wings, bird count soars

James McCarty

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AERIAL VIEW

There were times during Lakewood's Christmas Bird Count on Sunday when I was tempted to turn in a tally of a million ring-billed gulls from the lakefront and call it a day, such was the pain inflicted by a persistent bitter north wind that burned our faces and penetrated our multiple layers of clothing.

But then we would have missed some amazing birds that seemed to shrug off the Arctic assault, providing exciting moments and rewards in exchange for four hours of discomfort.

To add to our birding obstacles, the wind had pushed the lake ice to the shoreline, forcing the majority of waterfowl and gulls to seek open water more than 100 yards away from our team of seven birders, led by Paula Lozano.

Spotting scopes pulled the birds in closer, but the gusting winds rattled our tripods and caused our eyes to well up with tears.

In between blinks, we managed to find hooded mergansers, canvasback, redhead and scaup ducks paddling among rafts of mallards that had sought shelter behind a breakwall at the Edgewater Marina.

A young American bald eagle passed overhead, sending clouds of gulls billowing in a panic. It wouldn't be our last encounter with the continent's largest raptor.

Moving into Lakewood, we had sought shelter at the Pier W restaurant's lakeside overlook and were watching several common goldeneye and bufflehead ducks diving in the turbulent surf when a tiny dark duck went scuttering by on a beeline west.

Few of us got a good enough look to make a call, but eagle-eyed Larry Rosche nailed the ID: a harlequin duck, a rare winter visitor to the Great Lakes.

A pair of scoters followed a short while later, headed in the same westerly direction. The white-winged scoter was an easy call, but the accompanying bird was more difficult. Again, Rosche delivered the ID: surf scoter.

A second eagle — this one an adult — made a pass headed eastward toward Edgewater Park, but the best was yet to come. Hiking across the frozen tundra that was Lakewood Park, we spotted one eagle, then another and another. We watched as the three adult eagles rode the winds, diving and circling in pursuit of each other. One of them kept up a constant chatter. None seemed in the least disturbed by our presence.

Eventually, the aerial scene we had witnessed caused me to realize how much birding in Northeast Ohio had evolved since my first Christmas Bird Count 30 years ago. At that time, there were roughly 1,100 breeding pairs of eagles in the Lower 48 states, and only four in Ohio. Our national symbol was the face of the federal Endangered Species list.

Jump forward to 2007, when the bald eagle was removed from the Endangered Species list after the population had increased tenfold, to nearly 10,000 pairs in the Lower 48. It took decades, but eventually man wised up, preserved the eagle's precious habitat and banned the devastating pesticides such as DDT that were

destroying the raptors' ability to reproduce.

Five eagles in four hours in Cleveland and Lakewood — not a bad way to wrap up 2010.

Sightings

What may have been one of only a half-dozen mew gulls ever seen in Northeast Ohio showed up last week at Cleveland's East 72nd Street warm-water release site, Phil Chaon reported. The bird disappeared after the bay iced over.

A common redpoll accompanied a flock of American goldfinch visiting Stan Plante's feeders in South Russell Township. John Pogacnik spotted flocks of redpolls feeding on alder seeds along the lake behind his house in Perry Township. Pine siskins also are visiting his feeders.

A Harris' sparrow is making daily appearances at Robert Troyer's farm near Apple Creek in Wayne County. Birders are welcome, and directions can be found online at the Ohio Birds website.

A yellow-bellied sapsucker is feeding on suet at the home of Cathy Priebe in Grafton. Pine siskins and tree sparrows also are regular visitors.

A Northern shrike has returned to the traditional winter feeding grounds in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park near the Jaite site, Larry Rosche reported.

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Caption: CHARLIE NEIBERGALL ASSOCIATED PRESS Bald eagles made appearances over Lake Erie during Sunday's Lakewood Christmas Bird Count.

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