

Dike 14 a perfect backdrop for winter sightings

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AERIAL VIEW

Only animal tracks — coyote, deer and mouse — disturbed the sparkling beauty of a half-foot of fluffy snow at the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve on Sunday.

Twenty-five birders gathered with leader Nancy Howell of the Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society for a walk through the 88-acre peninsula also known as Dike 14.

The conditions were perfect: clear, calm and sunny, which made 11 degrees feel like 40.

We blazed a trail through the snow around the perimeter. The lake was frozen to the horizon. The only sounds to disturb the idyllic quietude were the downshifting trucks on the shoreway a half-mile to the south.

With high expectations, we trudged silently ahead, our senses acute as we rounded every curve in the path. Even the most common birds appeared bright and beautiful in such habitat.

Flocks of robins streamed by overhead, flying east to west, apparently in search of fruit-bearing trees and bushes.

Great black-backed, herring and ring-billed gulls glowed in the sunlight, destined for open water at the East 72nd Street warm-water release site.

In such a serene setting, the slightest movement or the tiniest chip call caught our attention.

An American tree sparrow pecked away at a seed-laden stalk, wary but hungry enough to ignore us after a while.

A mixed flock of woodland species passed through a stand of cottonwoods. Chickadees, titmice, downy woodpeckers, cardinals and blue jays probed the bark and remnant remains of tent caterpillar nests.

A marauding Cooper's hawk brought a wave of silence, but the raptor passed through empty-taloned.

The resident mockingbird awaited as we exited the gate.

Note: The Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve/Dike 14 is fenced, gated and not open to the public without an escort. Efforts are under way to change that situation. Stay tuned for developments.

Sightings

With Lake Erie icing over, the busiest birding location on the lakefront was at East 72nd Street over the weekend. An Iceland and several lesser black-backed gulls broke the monotony of thousands of herrings and ring-billeds Sunday morning. A glaucous was reported in the afternoon. Waterfowl included common goldeneye, scaup, redhead, canvasback, bufflehead and black ducks, plus hooded and red-breasted mergansers.

Columbus birder Robert Royse reported common merganser at Sims Park in Euclid; Iceland and glaucous gulls at the Eastlake power plant; and a black scoter among the waterfowl at the Avon Lake power plant.

John Pogacnik's feeders were hopping in Perry Township with a gray catbird, pine siskin and Eastern towhee.

Just like clockwork, the long-eared owls are returning to their traditional winter roosts at the Caley Reservation in Lorain County, Ed, Sandy and Alex Wood reported.

Flocks of snow buntings and horned larks were feeding in the cornfields in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Clyde Witt said.

A horned lark is coming to the feeders at the North Chagrin Nature Center, Marcia Polevoi said.

White-winged scoters were among the waterfowl at Summit Lake in Akron, Gregory Bennett reported.

Northern shrike sightings came from Homer Township and the Bath Nature Preserve, per Greg Emmert and Sandy Brown.

A long-tailed duck made an appearance at Berlin Reservoir in Portage County, Ben Morrison reported.

Bird tours

Jump-start your spring migration list on a weeklong birding and nature trip to the Apalachicola National Forest and surrounding hot spots on Florida's Gulf Coast, Tuesday, April 13, to Tuesday, April 20. I'm joining veteran naturalist and tour guide Bob Faber leading the trip, sponsored by Discovery Tours of Cleveland. Faber knows the best trails and habitats at the state's largest national forest, whose 571,088 acres are home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, Swainson's warbler, gopher tortoise, rare orchids and carnivorous plants, and the highest concentration of black bears in Florida. The tour also includes visits to unspoiled St. George Island, Cape San Blas — one of the most beautiful wild beaches in the country — and a riverboat trip at Wakulla Springs State Park. Trip limit is 12 people. For information or to register, call 1-800-590-2669.

Editor's note: Aerial View will take a vacation for a few weeks while I watch birds in the Andes Mountains, Llanos and coastal forests of Venezuela. If you promise not to find an ivory gull at East 72nd Street while I'm gone, I'll write all about it when I return. Aerial View returns Thursday, Feb. 4.

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Bird walks

Saturday, explore the Wilds with the Ohio Ornithological Society. To register, send an e-mail to wilds@ohioedbirds

.org. The Kirtland Bird Club will be arranging carpooling.

At 9 a.m. Sunday, search Geauga County's Amish country for rough-legged hawks, snow buntings and other winter visitors with members of the Blackbrook Audubon Society. Meet at the Best Lake parking lot, on the west side of Ohio 44, south of Chardon. Call Jim McConnor at 440-257-2507 for more information.

Bird news

Check out this cool video of a rufous hummingbird coming to a feeder in Mansfield, dnr.state.oh.us/Default.aspx?tabid=22344.

Reader Jim Fleet wrote to expound on the joys of participating in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project Feederwatch. To sign up, go to birds.cornell.edu/pfw/.

Cornell also is sponsoring a citizen science project as part of its campaign to Celebrate Urban Birds. Birders are urged to demonstrate how birds survive during the winter with photos, artwork, video, stories or poems. "It's unbelievable how even tiny birds can survive being outdoors 24/7 in places where winter is cold and snowy," said project leader Karen Purcell. "We want to see how they're getting along." Prizes include binoculars, bird feeders, a bird-song calendar, books, posters and cards. Go to birds.cornell.edu/celebration/.

Photo Caption: JERRY TALKINGTON SPECIAL TO THE PLAIN DEALER Northern mockingbirds are extremely territorial, defending fruit sources such as this rose bush from all hungry invaders. This

bird is a reliable sight at the gate to the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve, aka Dike 14.

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