



Passenger Pigeon

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Tommy Schroeder's Kingbird

by Mike Busam

Tommy Schroeder and his mom were merely out looking for a few photogenic Red-winged Blackbirds that day. It was July 1 and judging day for 4-H projects at the Butler County Fair was fast approaching. Thirteen-year-old Tommy was working on a Birds of Ohio project for 4-H, and Red-winged Blackbird was still on his list. Thus far, he'd found Red-wings to be uncooperative subjects, and he hoped today would be different. Tommy and his mother Diana were driving along Morgantaller Road, near their home in St. Clair Township, eyes peeled for a cooperative Red-winged Blackbird. As they were checking out the fields along Morgantaller, they noticed a bird sitting by itself atop a short fence, just a few feet off the narrow road. They drove up alongside the bird and were surprised it didn't fly away. Tommy snapped a few pictures with his 35 mm camera and they had them developed the next day.

On July 10 Tommy and his mom and dad came out to a Cincinnati Audubon field trip I was leading at the Voice of America. I had been swapping emails with Di about local birding spots where Tommy might go to get some good photographs. When I got there, with just moments to spare before the trip began, Di handed me a photograph and asked me to identify the bird. To my eyes, the bird on the fence was a Western Kingbird. I also figured it was a photo they'd taken while on vacation out west—it was clearly *not* a local kingbird. I was stunned to hear it was

taken less than five minutes from their house in Butler County. "But we haven't seen it since July 6," Di said. The field trip was starting, and Di said she'd give me directions to the site when the trip ended, but she and Tommy and her husband had to leave early that night to pick up Tommy's sister. We exchanged phone numbers and she told me she'd give me directions the next day, Thursday.

When you have children in 4-H and it's Fair time, you're busier than a Wilson's Phalarope on a fly-covered mudflat. Due to the Schroeder's various 4-H and Fair commitments, Di and I weren't able to get in contact until Saturday, July 13. All during that time I was looking at the photo, wondering if the bird was still there, but with no idea where it actually was! I couldn't very well post the photo and then admit to local birders that all I knew was "it's somewhere in Butler County, St. Clair Township...I think...It was sitting on a fence alongside a road. Hope *that* helps."

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October Field Trip

On Saturday and Sunday, October 26 and 27, Darlena Graham will lead a field trip at Jasper-Pulaski Wildlife Area, in northern Indiana, to watch Sandhill Cranes, migrant waterfowl, and other fall migrants and winter residents. Jasper-Pulaski annually attracts tens of thousands of migrant Sandhills. In 1999, they were joined by an adult male Common Crane, its Sandhill Crane mate, and their two hybrid offspring. Perhaps we'll find something equally rare this year.

The tentative plan will be to meet at the Jasper-Pulaski headquarters, and then move on to nearby Kankakee to search for waterfowl. We'll return to Jasper-Pulaski later in the afternoon, after the marsh has been closed to hunters, to walk the marsh trail. Then in late afternoon, we'll go to the observation tower to watch the Sandhills stream in from the surrounding areas until dusk. This is a spectacle which should not be missed. We will return there again before dawn Sunday morning, and watch while the Sandhills mass before moving out to forage for the day. Then we'll hit some other spots on the return trip.

October Best Bird Contest

Paul's monthly prizes will go to the birders who see the last hummingbird and the first junco of the year. The basic rules are the same as always: you must see the bird in the Greater Cincinnati area, you must be present at the meeting to claim your prize, and Paul can change the rules whenever he wants to.

We will meet at refuge headquarters at 12:30 p.m. (Cincinnati time), to allow for the 250-mile drive. Take I-74 to Indianapolis. When it merges with I-465, stay with I-74 as it circles west and then north around Indianapolis. When the two split, take I-475 North to I-65 North, heading towards Chicago. After passing Lafayette, exit at U.S. 421 North. After another 40 miles, shortly after passing the tiny town of Medaryville, turn left onto Indiana 143, and watch for the refuge entrance on your right. We will meet at the refuge headquarters, not at the observation area.

There is primitive camping available on the refuge, but motels in the small towns near the refuge are scarce. Your best bet may be to make reservations at Lafayette. Check with AAA or your favorite internet search engine for motels. Since the days will be getting short, we won't plan to break for a meal on Saturday until dark, so bring plenty of snacks to tide you over.

Welcome New Members

Several new members have joined since last spring. Welcome to Win Ahrens, Libby Bassett, Eileen Kruer, Wanda Nichols, Jim Perry, Tommy Schroeder, and Sarah Shell. We hope to see you at several of our field trips and programs this year.

Hotline Signup

There's still time left (barely - no later than October 15) to get your name on the telephone hotline list for this year. Call Jay Stenger at 522-8147 (work) or 522-4245 (home) to sign up. Remember that you must sign up every year, you won't be automatically continued from last year. And also remember that if you do sign up, you are promising to call the person behind you on the list, whenever you get a call.

October Program

Using a digital slide program, Columbus naturalist and birder Joe Hammond will share tales of his recent trip to Israel. In addition to birds, many aspects of the region's natural and cultural history will be discussed. Joe is a member of the Columbus Audubon Avid Birders, and has been a co-leader of field trips since January 1998. He is the Design Manager for The Ohio Cardinal, a position he has held since May of 1999. He has published articles about birds and birding in The Ohio Cardinal and The Bobolink, and bird photographs in The Ohio Cardinal and The Columbus Dispatch. Joe is a co-author of the popular and just published Ohio Bird Records Committee Checklist of Birds of Ohio. He was Interpretive Naturalist at Highbanks MP, Franklin County Metro Parks from July 1998 - April 2002. In April 2002, Joe was a seminar speaker and field trip guide at Longaberger Bird Watching Weekend here in Ohio. He taught a course on Natural History of Florida at Grand Valley State University in May, 2001, and maintains a natural history related website on the internet. Joe has traveled throughout North America as well as Costa Rica and Israel.

We will be back to our usual schedule of the third Thursday of the month. So this month, the meeting will be October 17, at 7:00 p.m., at the Sharon Woods visitor center.

Future programs:

November - Maslowski presentation.

December - no program.

January - members' bird slides.

Hummer/Bird Study Group

by Ted Ellis

Judy and I had been looking forward to visiting the Hummer Group banding site at Ft. Morgan, Mobile Bay, Alabama ever since we joined at the Midwest Birding Symposium in 1998. We finally got there in April 2002, and it was well worth the wait! In a two week period 64 species numbering 1864 birds were banded. Nearly 5000 visitors including school children from five southern States were introduced to the wonderful world of birds. Bob and Martha Sargent along with a number of volunteers including Wildlife Biologist Mary Gustafson of the Bird Banding Laboratory in Laurel, Md patiently explained the purpose of the operation. Visitors were allowed to release the banded birds and given the opportunity to adopt the released bird. They then received a Certificate of Merit with a polaroid picture. Judy chose an Indigo Bunting and I went one better with a Painted Bunting.

The Group has generated much little known data on the life histories of hummingbirds since it's beginnings some 15 years ago. Equally important has been their educational activities not only at the banding sites but at seminars across the country. The next Ft. Morgan banding session will be October 12 to October 25. A membership is not required and there is no fee except a nominal entrance fee to the Ft. Morgan State Park. Nets are deployed pre-dawn and visitors are welcome any time of day. There are accommodations at nearby Gulf Shores. The address is HBSG, PO Box 250, Clay, Alabama 35048-0250, E Mail HummerBSG@AOL.com. Memberships are as little as \$15.00 for a family and includes a quarterly newsletter that is worth every penny of the membership fee. For further particulars phone or E Mail the undersigned—Ted Ellis 513 755-6041 or E Mail tedteddy5@aol.com

The 2002 Gilmore Ponds Great Egret Fish Fry & Frog Fest

by Mike Busam

They came for the water and stayed for the food. August 2002 was a remarkable period for Great Egrets at Gilmore Ponds. From August through early September, there were as many as 60 Great Egrets in West Pond alone. Also during this time were three to four juvenile Little Blue Herons, and one juvenile Snowy Egret, the latter of which was present from August 18 through September 2. Great Blue Heron numbers were also high, and observers regularly reported between 30 and 50 “Big Blues.”

In Ohio, Great Egrets breed in the western basin of Lake Erie. The majority of breeders are in colonies on West Sister Island in Lake Erie and Turning Point Island in the Sandusky Bay. (Turning Point Island can be seen from the Jackson Street Pier and other vantage points in downtown Sandusky). In 1995 there were an estimated 1,120 Great Egret nests on West Sister, and 20 to 30 pairs of egrets on Turning Point Island (Bruce Peterjohn 2001, *The Birds of Ohio*). Otherwise, breeding Great Egrets are scattered around the western basin, a pair here, a pair there. There are only a few records of breeding Great Egrets in Ohio away from western Lake Erie: Lake St. Mary’s hosted one to two pairs from 1942 through 1944 (Peterjohn 2001). However, during the summer of 1998, a year in which the Mill Creek Black-Crowned Night Heron colony was at Gilmore Ponds, Paul Wharton and Jeff Hays found two Great Egret nests on June 26. These nests were presumed destroyed along with the rest of the heronry by weather and/or predators between July 17 and 29, 1998. As a result, an extremely rare southern Ohio record for breeding Great Egrets was never confirmed.

To get an idea of how unusual a year this was for Great Egrets at Gilmore Ponds—and all of inland Ohio, for that matter—consider that away from Lake Erie, inland concentrations of 15 to 25 Great Egrets are considered noteworthy. (Prior to this summer, 40 egrets in September 1998 was the high count for Gilmore Ponds, but otherwise high counts never reached higher than 24 until this August). Bruce Peterjohn notes that “a flock of 64 Great Egrets migrating Over Tuscarawas County on October 15, 1995, was the largest [inland] report in recent decades.” In fall 2001 the inland high count for Ohio was 13 egrets (*The Ohio Cardinal*, vol. 25, no. 1). So why were so many Great Egrets at Gilmore Ponds this summer?

Before we get to that, though, it should be noted that at the regional level, as opposed to just the state of Ohio, the Oxbow has recorded higher Great Egret concentrations than any other site in the Cincinnati area. The status of Great Egrets at the Oxbow is similar to that of Gilmore’s egrets in that the numbers of birds reported year-to-year began increasing in the mid- to late-1990s. Looking at the results from a database search on Ned Keller’s “Birding in Cincinnati” website, late 1990s high counts at the Oxbow ranged from 20 to 69 birds, well above the maximum spring and fall records of 13 and 11 egrets, respectively, reported in David Styer’s excellent book, *Birds of The Oxbow*, published in 1994. Unlike Gilmore Ponds, however, Great Egret numbers seem to peak at the Oxbow in September, rather than August. This is likely due to differences in seasonal water levels, abundance of food, and other factors.

The Froggy Bottom Channels

In the fall of 1999 four channels were scraped out in West Pond and a fifth was dug along the edge of North Woods. The plan was to

create pools to hold water through the summer season for the benefit of plants and aquatic animals. Though 2001 was a fairly dry summer, continuing a trend set during the bone-dry summer of 1999, the channels in West Pond, particularly the one along North Woods, held some amount of water for the entire season.

Beginning in April 2002, a series of heavy rains triggered floods along the Miami-Erie Canal and Walker's run, which flooded all of North Pond and West Pond. For a number of weeks, most of the canal dike was impassable without hip waders, and after the heaviest rains, the canal dike was literally dangerous to wade through, period. Despite the strong drought this past summer, the water from the April and May floods kept West Pond filled all the way through the summer season and into August. It's easily the wettest year at Gilmore Ponds since 1998.

The water of 2001 and 2002 allowed a large number of Bullfrogs to breed successfully. According to Wayne Wauligman, "Bullfrog eggs are laid in July and hatch shortly thereafter. Depending upon food availability, oxygen, and temperature, they transform (metamorphosize) the following summer. Thus, they need water from July of their birth to the July or later of the following year. This is also true of Green Frogs except their larvae can survive if the pond dries up by burrowing into the pond bottom and estivating there."

Huge numbers of Bullfrog larvae were thus available for egrets and herons this summer—they had their pick of last year's batch, which were transforming into young frogs this summer, as well as the offspring of the adult Bullfrogs who laid eggs this July. As the water in West Pond drew down, the water remaining in the channels literally teemed with Bullfrog larvae. Many of these larvae bore cuts and gashes they received from egrets and herons. Pools in other spots near the gravel pit and the Gilmore Road parking lot dried out in early August, leaving behind uncountable

thousands of Bullfrog larvae thrashing around in huge piles in the wet mud, sounding like giant bowls of Rice Krispies.

While Bullfrog larvae offer food for egrets and herons, a big hatch of Bullfrogs is very bad news for Leopard Frogs, a species in decline throughout our area and apparently absent from Hamilton County. Adult Bullfrogs are avid predators of Leopard Frogs.

Discriminating Egrets say "Make Mine Piscine"

Despite the large numbers of Bullfrogs at Gilmore Ponds this summer, it's likely that the main course—at least the most desired meal—for egrets and herons was fish. The spring floods allowed adult carp, sunfish, and even catfish, to make their way into Gilmore Ponds from the canal or Walker's Run, lay their eggs, and then make their escape out of the Ponds before the waters drew down. Along with Bullfrog larvae, the last puddles of water in West Pond were filled with sunfish, carp, and to a lesser extent, catfish fry. Many of these fish also showed signs of having had close encounters with egrets and herons.

It's a bit of a mystery where all the fish come from that make their way into Gilmore Ponds. Possibly, they swim from the Great Miami River, through Pleasant Run and into the canal during periods of high water. There might also be enough fish that survive year long in East Pond, which is an old ice pond that doesn't dry out, or perhaps even in the gravel pit in the northwest corner of the preserve, to restock West Pond with fish when the canal floods. Such floods allow fish access to the Ponds. We do know that there are large-mouthed bass and other game fish in the area: Wayne Wauligman found a good-sized large-mouthed bass that was impaled on a stick in a beaver dam in Walker's Run a few years back. These game fish could come from private ponds along Walker's Run upstream from Gilmore

Gilmore Ponds, continued

Ponds, or perhaps they too are permanent residents in East Pond.

Besides benefiting birds, periods of high water and excellent fish and frog productivity drastically reduce the numbers of mosquito larvae that hatch during the summer. After the usual spring spike of mosquitoes, summer 2002 was relatively mosquito free at Gilmore Ponds. Only when West Pond drew down and most of the fish fry and frog larvae died or were eaten, did a couple small rain showers create suitable wet areas for mosquitoes to develop in a relatively predator-free environment.

So... the lesson of summer 2002 is that if you mix lots of water, fish, and frogs, you have an excellent chance of enticing a “bumper crop” of Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, and even a Snowy Egret, to spend weeks of their fall migration at a wetland like Gilmore Ponds. But first and foremost, ya gotta have water!

(I'd Like to thank Wayne Wauligman for the information on the life cycles and habitat needs of local frog and fish species, as well as for identifying Bullfrog larvae and fish fry for me, Charlie Saunders, and Nancy Saunders at Gilmore Ponds this summer. Any mistakes in this article were made by me! —Mike Busam)

Tommy Schroeder, continued

After I posted the information and Tommy's photo on Saturday the 13th, David Russell from Miami University found the bird the following Monday and took photographs that proved it was a Western Kingbird. In Tommy's photo the white outer tail feathers blend into the

background, making it difficult to positively identify the kingbird. Prior to David Russell's photos, some suggested the kingbird could be a Couch's or Cassin's Kingbird. Once David Russell's photos made the rounds, birders from around the state descended upon St. Clair Township—some even [gasp!] crossing south of the I-70 “Good Birding” divide, proving that every now and then we actually find a few birds in southwest Ohio. (Gee whiz. Who'd a thunk it?).

Tommy Schroeder's Western Kingbird is only the third or fourth summer record for Ohio, and a likely first record for Butler County. Of Ohio's 50+ Western Kingbird sightings, most are from the spring or fall migration periods. There is one breeding record from Lucas County in 1933, which is the furthest east Western Kingbirds have ever bred (Peterjohn, *The Birds of Ohio*, 2001). And it would probably have stood alone as southwest Ohio's best bird of summer and fall 2002 had it not been for a group of four pink long-legged waders that arrived at Rocky Fork Lake State Park about the time birders had their last views of the St. Clair Township Western Kingbird.

Tommy's 4-H project was selected to go to the Ohio State Fair, where he earned an “Outstanding of the Day” award and finished in the top six, overall. Tommy has been actively birding for only a few months, but he did an excellent job getting a photograph of the Western Kingbird and then, just as importantly, getting the word out about his find. During the time the bird was around, Tommy visited the site numerous times and met many of the birders who traveled for a glimpses of the Western Kingbird. I don't think anyone spent more time observing this bird than Tommy Schroeder, and it's likely he'll be a birder for life.

Contributors Wanted

Passenger Pigeon by eMail

You can choose to receive your copy of the Passenger Pigeon by eMail instead of getting a paper copy through the regular mail. Getting the newsletter by eMail will save the Bird Club the expense of printing and mailing your copy, and you will receive it several days sooner than the paper copy would arrive. You will need to have the free Adobe Acrobat Reader installed on your computer. If you do not already have it, a free copy can be downloaded from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>.

To sign up for this service, send an eMail to the editors at keller@one.net. You can switch back to a paper copy at any time.

The Passenger Pigeon needs your help! Don't worry, we're not hitting you up for money. Instead, we need your contributions in the form of articles or artwork for our newsletter. Or should we say, *your* newsletter. Please send your submissions to Ned or Kathy by the 20th of the month. If possible, we would prefer them by eMail to keller@one.net. But if that's not possible, you can also send them to 7899 Bridgetown Road, Cleves OH 45002.

Are Your Dues Due?

If you haven't sent in your dues yet for the September 2002 - May 2003 birding year, just fill out the form below and mail them in. If you've already sent your dues, why not give the form to a birding friend who isn't a member?

Bird Club Membership

Name _____

Address _____

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____ Student \$6.00

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