



Passenger Pigeon

Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

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Christmas Counts

Here are details on several local Audubon Christmas counts. Each of these counts requires a fee of \$5.00 payable to National Audubon Society, which is used to help offset the costs of conducting the counts and publishing the results. If you live in one of the count circles, you can report the count from your feeders, even though you don't want to participate in the whole count. There is no charge for feeder watchers, or for participants under age 18.

If you object to the NAS fee, there are some alternatives. The Hamilton County Park District conducts a free count in all the county parks on Saturday, December 13. You can contact them at 521-7275 to sign up for your favorite park. Or, the Northern Kentucky Bird Club conducts several counts which are not reported to National Audubon, so they don't have the NAS participation fee. Those are December 20 at Warsaw, December 27 at Burlington, or January 1 at Falmouth. Contact Lee McNeely at (859)586-7520 for more information on those counts.

East Fork Lake CBC: Sunday, December 14. Contact Joe Bens at 353-4229 or cinci.rr.com. The area is centered on East Fork Lake, and includes other nearby locations in Clermont County.

Ohio River CBC: Saturday: December 20. Contact Joe Bens at 353-4229 or cinci.rr.com. The area is centered on the Oxbow, and includes the Oxbow, Shawnee Lookout, and nearby areas in Ohio, Indiana and northern Kentucky.

Hamilton-Fairfield CBC: Saturday, December 20. Contact Mike Busam at 755-0057 or mjb@schaffer.cc. The area includes Gilmore Ponds, Hamilton Riverside Park, Joyce Park, Drabo Gravel Pits, Kerns Nursery, and parts of the Great Miami River.

Western Hamilton County CBC: Sunday, December 21. Contact Ned Keller at 941-6497 or keller@one.net. The area includes Miami-Whitewater Forest, Mitchell Forest, Winton Woods, Mt. Airy Forest, and Spring Grove Cemetery.

Cincinnati CBC: Sunday, December 28. Contact Jay Stenger at 522-4245 or jaystenger@cinci.rr.com. The area includes the Cincinnati Nature Center, Lunken Airport, Woodland Mound, and other nearby areas in eastern Hamilton County and western Clermont County.



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Three Years of the Voice of America

Grassland Breeding Bird Survey: 2001-2003

contributed by Mike Busam

2003 was the third consecutive year I've run a breeding bird survey in the grassland areas at the Voice of America Park in West Chester. Among the breeding grassland birds and summer residents are sedge wren, savannah sparrow, Henslow's sparrow, bobolink, red-winged blackbird, and eastern meadowlark.

Overall, the "core" species that first brought the VOA to attention in 2001, savannah sparrow, bobolink, and eastern meadowlark, have all experienced declines over the course of the survey. But Henslow's sparrows, which were first discovered at the VOA in July 2002, were present throughout the entire 2003 season. It's possible that succession of portions of the VOA fields from primarily cool season, non-native grasses to a weedier, shrubbier habitat has favored Henslow's sparrows over the core species. Sedge wrens, which weren't found at the VOA until July in 2001 and 2002, were also present for the entire 2003 season. Controlling invasive species and managing the VOA grassy fields will be a challenge, but both Butler County MetroParks and West Chester Parks and Recreation are interested in creating a long-term management plan for the VOA's grassland birds.

Of the core species, savannah sparrows seem to have declined the most noticeably. The June and July declines over the course of three years are striking. The average weekly savannah sparrow count for the month of June dropped from close to 20 birds a week in 2001 to 16.6 in 2002 to 5 in 2003. The average weekly July count over the three year period declined by more than 50 percent. An average of 10.8 savannah sparrows were counted weekly in July 2001. In 2002 there were approximately 9 birds making the survey each week. But in 2003, the

survey averaged 5 savannah sparrows a week during July.

The decline in savannah sparrow numbers could be partly the result of increased development on the VOA property, particularly the construction of a thirty-plus acre lake on the MetroParks' portion of the park, which began in late May and continued through the summer. Yet the lake project wasn't in an area that had previously been "savannah-rich" in past years, so other factors, including succession of the grass fields, are probably at work. One side note worth mention is that on May 22, 2002, Rick Dage and I found a savannah sparrow nest containing 5 eggs on the east side of the VOA.

Bobolinks also showed a decline in numbers between 2001 and 2003. Since breeding bobolinks are most active and easily seen and counted during June, it could be significant that there was a decline in the average weekly count of bobolinks during June from 43 in June of 2001 and 2002 to 24.5 birds on the average trip in June 2003.



Bobolinks undertake a dramatic and rapid molt when they finish breeding in early to mid-July. Adults undergo a near-complete molt and replace all their flight feathers. Tail feathers are often dropped all at once. During their molt adults have difficulty flying and tend to stay in cover until they grow new flight feathers. This accounts for the low average weekly July counts of 22.5 bobolinks for 2001 and 2002, as compared to the weekly June counts of 43 birds in 2001 and 2002. Perhaps the good news here is that while average counts throughout the 2003 season were lower than in the previous two years, the July 2003 doldrums of 19.3 birds per week isn't too much lower than either 2001 or 2002. Unfortunately, during August, when bobolinks begin forming flocks and preparing to migrate, the 2003 weekly average of 22 birds is well below the 2001 and 2002 combined weekly August average of 40 bobolinks.

In contrast to savannah sparrows, the decline in the numbers of VOA bobolinks might well be directly the result of the lake construction project on the north end of the park. During late-July and August of 2001 and 2002, flocks of bobolinks could usually be found in the area just above what were then three small to medium-sized ponds along Hamilton-Mason Road. This area was radically changed in 2003 by the construction project that joined the three ponds into one large lake. I'm not sure if the lake construction had an impact on breeding bobolinks—I suspect that other factors are in

play—but I'm pretty sure that the disturbance throughout much of the northern portion of the park had a negative impact on the numbers of birds that gathered at the VOA in August prior to migrating. The August flocking period prior to migration would include not only the VOA breeders and their offspring, but also migrants from outside the area. Perhaps the construction project and the loss of habitat made the VOA less attractive to migrant bobolinks? I don't know the answer.

Bobolinks are rarely parasitised by cowbirds, but on July 16, an adult female bobolink that had yet to start molting was being followed closely by a juvenile cowbird. I had a brief look at what I thought was begging behavior by the young cowbird while it was perched next to the female bobolink on a wild parsnip plant.

Eastern meadowlarks also declined over the first three years of the survey. However, the average count of 26.3 birds per week for August 2003 was the highest August count yet at the VOA. The 2001 and 2002 August averages were 15 and 18, respectively. Otherwise, this species, too, showed an overall decline in numbers from 2001 through 2003.

Unlike the other core species, eastern meadowlark is the only species that might be considered a year-round resident of the VOA, since flocks of two dozen or more meadowlarks can often be found even in cold and snowy periods during the winter. However, the birds that



winter at the VOA are not necessarily the same birds that breed there.

Other Birds of Note:

Sedge wrens were at the VOA during the entire 2003 season from April 23 through August 27, with between 1 and 8 birds present on any given survey date. The high count was 8 sedge wrens on July 23. In 2002, by contrast, sedge wrens were not detected until July 10 when 4 birds made the survey. (Chris Potensky and Tom Mulki found the first sedge wren of the year on July 4); by August 4, there were 17 sedge wrens scattered around the VOA. Bill Hull reported the August high count of 20 sedge wrens, and also observed a sedge wren building a nest. Sedge wrens also appeared at the VOA in 2001, but sightings were limited to a period that lasted from July 25 through August 15, with a high count of 4 birds.

I'm not aware of any Henslow's sparrow sightings during 2001, but in 2002 a single Henslow's sparrow was reported from the north side of the VOA by Neill and Jason Cade on July 30. Later I learned that Ed Roush and Larry Gara reported 7 Henslow's sparrows on July 7. Roush and Gara found the birds on the southeast side of the VOA, scattered in an area between the picnic shelter, Tylersville Road, and the soccer fields in the southeast corner of the park near the intersection of Tylersville and Butler-Warren roads. As I recall, much of this area, which is south of the "no mow area" set aside for breeding birds, and which is also the most heavily-used portion of the park, was mowed sometime in July 2002. Maybe this forced the Henslow's sparrows to move into the northern portion of the VOA. I found 4 Henslow's sparrows, the first for the survey, on August 7. Five birds were tallied on the 14th and 2 birds on the 21st.

In 2003, Henslow's sparrows were recorded on every survey date from April 23 through August 12. The high count was 18 birds on July 23. I saw the first juvenile Henslow's sparrow of the year on July 16. The majority of

Henslow's sparrows were concentrated on a slight hill approximately 100 yards north of the parking pull off opposite Ballfield A.

The Future of the VOA:

West Chester Parks and Recreation and Butler County MetroParks are both committed to creating a long-term management plan for the areas of the park that will remain in grass. It's estimated that as much as 200 or more acres of contiguous grassland will be left over, even after all the current development plans are completed. The recent failure of the West Chester parks levy leaves a lot of development plans—and grassland management plans—up in the air. But what is clear is that commercial and recreational development in the area is on the rise and will not slow down anytime soon. The entire southwest corner of the VOA is now a strip mall; Miami University has plans to develop an area off of the Cox Road entrance adjacent to the strip mall; paved walking trails, a thirty-plus acre lake, and a mountain of earth over one hundred feet tall are new landmarks in the northern portion of the VOA. There is a fenced-in dog exercise area along Butler-Warren Road in the east end of the park, and plans for additional recreational fields, paved trails, and parking lots are in the works. Almost every bit of open land around the VOA property has been developed, with the exception of a small area on the north side of Hamilton-Mason Road near the Route 129 exchange on I-75—and that won't stay undeveloped for long. The VOA is a landlocked oasis, at present. One hopes that enough acreage will be left over for it to remain a breeding site for grassland birds, and that the populations of birds using the VOA for breeding or migration will be viable and healthy. Nonetheless, I'm more optimistic about the prospects for the VOA than I was two years ago. There's still hope.

I'd like to thank everyone who has helped with the survey over the past three years. Bob Lacker and Jeff Brown were particularly helpful during the 2003 season.

Contributors Wanted



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 by the 20th of the month. If possible, I would prefer them by eMail to keller@one.net. But if that's not possible, you can also send them to 7899 Bridgetown Road, Clevs OH 45002.

Are Your Dues Due?

If you haven't sent in your dues yet for the September 2003 - May 2004 birding year, this is your last issue of the Passenger Pigeon. To keep receiving this magnificent publication, just fill out the form below and mail it to Peg.

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