



# The Passenger Pigeon

Volume 48, Number 8

The Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

November 2012

## Program:

A Naturalist Afield – the legacy of Karl Maslowski

## Speaker:

Steve Maslowski, Wildlife Photographer & Filmmaker

## Date:

Thursday, Nov 15

7 p.m.

Sharon Woods

Visitor Center

Our speaker for November will be nationally renowned **wildlife photographer and filmmaker Steve Maslowski**. Steve's photos have appeared in several field guides, in hundreds of national publications, and he has made many wildlife films for various media outlets. Steve is a long-time member of the CBC and the son of the late Karl Maslowski, one of the founding fathers of the Cincinnati Bird Club. Steve continues the business of Maslowski Wildlife Productions that Karl began many years ago. Steve will present a program based on his Dad's Cincinnati Enquirer column called "Naturalist Afield". This column was published weekly in the Sunday edition for nearly 50-years. A compilation of the 'best' of Karl's articles was published by the Cincinnati Museum

Center in 2010, under the title "*A Naturalist Afield: reflections on Cincinnati nature, 1937-1984*".

The Cincinnati Bird Club November program meeting is a Thanksgiving holiday tradition and a way of honoring our founders. From the very beginning and for over 50 years, the CBC November meeting was treated as a special gathering. Karl Maslowski started this tradition as he and his family hosted the meeting, presented the program and provided, at his cost, trays of fresh baked doughnuts, apple cider and hot chocolate for refreshments. For years he hosted this program at his home, but as the CBC membership grew and the program's popularity soared, the location was moved to the Founders Room of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History on Gilbert Ave. When it became a little too much for Karl to handle, his son Steve, and daughter-in-law Karen, graciously continued the tradition for several years. The business portion of this holiday meeting was always the planning of the upcoming Christmas Bird Counts, always an important event of the CBC.

We will discuss the upcoming **Christmas Bird Counts** during the business portion of our meeting including dates and contacts to participate in each area count. Even if you are unable to participate in the field, remember that *feeder watchers can provide very valuable data*. You will even be able to **test your ID skills at the meeting!** We will have 20 unlabeled bird skins on view, all species which can be found in Ohio. There is no pressure in this game, as you can keep your answers and scores to

yourself. But you might want to *bring a field guide* with you. Dr. Herm Mays, curator of Zoology at the Cincinnati Museum Center, is bringing the skins from the museum collection. Herm will reveal the species identities at the end of the program.

So don't miss the fun and be sure to mark your calendar for this special holiday meeting. All your friends and family are invited to this festive bird club event. We'll even have **cider and doughnuts** for refreshments

*-Steve Bobonick*

## **CBC November & December 1<sup>st</sup> Field Trip Notes**

*(Contributed by Jay Stenger, Field Trip Coordinator)*

**Saturday, November 10<sup>th</sup>, Caesar Creek State Park**

**Sunday, November 18<sup>th</sup>, Brookville Lake & Hueston Woods State Park**

**Saturday, December 1st, Rocky Fork State Park**

Since the CBC is essentially a club for hardcore birders, the protocol for planning field trips has always been based on choosing locations that gives us the best opportunity to see the seasonal and or less common species of birds occurring during that particular month. Because we birders regularly see the common species at our feeders and in our own back yards, we expect our field trips to maximize our chances to find those species that we see less frequently.

As you know, November and early December represent the peak of the fall waterfowl migration through our area.

During this same period a number of other water related birds such as loons, grebes, gulls and Sandhill Cranes reach the peak of their fall migration as well. Winter raptors continue to move into and through the area at this season and it is a great month to find Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls, Rough-legged Hawks and an increase in Bald Eagle numbers and other more common (and some rare) raptors. Late fall migrant shorebirds such as Dunlin, snipe, yellowlegs and a few others can still be found on mudflats during November. Farm fields attract large flocks of Horned Larks and American Pipits at this season and Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings are often found among them. In fact, the month of November has a well-deserved reputation for producing rarities in our region. It is these birds that will be the focus of our three-scheduled November (and December 1<sup>st</sup>) field trips.

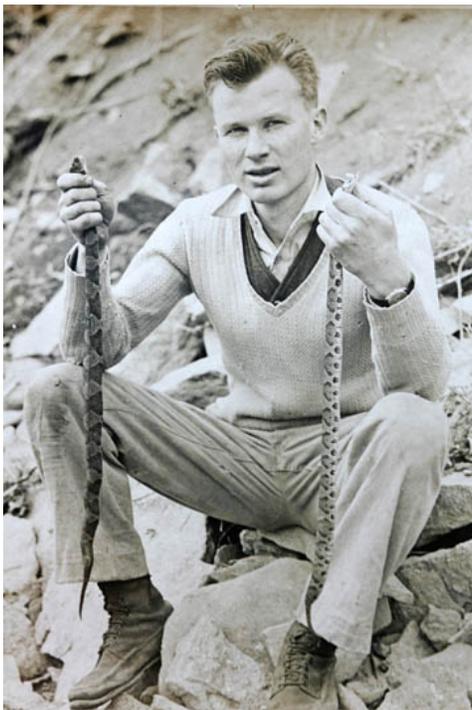
While it is possible to see these species within the I-275 circle, the greatest concentrations and diversity occurs outside of the I-275 loop on our areas large lakes and reservoirs and in the wide-open countryside that surrounds them. Quite simply, if you want to see the greatest variety and number of birds at this season these are the kinds of places you have visit.

The drawbacks on these trips of course are the time (takes a little longer to get there and back) and expense (additional miles means bigger fuel cost). Most of us can deal with the time but some of us may be turned off by the cost of a day of auto touring. If that is the case I suggest arranging a car pool in advance with some birding buddies. That way you can cut the cost considerably. You could just show up at the meeting place and hope to make arrangements there. Sometimes that works, but sometimes it doesn't.

If gas prices keep you home, I understand. But on the other hand I hope you get out on some of these types of field trips. These trips

are usually very rewarding in terms of numbers and diversity of bird seen.

This type of birding is much better if you have a scope, but if you don't have one don't let that stop you. Bird club members are well known for generously sharing their scopes and I only charge a quarter per peek (gas prices). All of November's field trips are caravanning/auto-tours, meaning that we will for the most part drive from spot to spot, stopping at various vantage points to scan the lakes and fields. Other habitats won't be ignored, but there will be little, if any, hiking. Car-pooling is encouraged, but if you are on a schedule or have to be home early it is not advised. All of these locations have ample restroom facilities. And be sure to dress warm and expect wet weather! It's better to strip off too much clothing than to be caught unprepared. Standing on the open shores of a large reservoir in wet November weather will feel 20 degrees colder than your backyard. I hope to see you out there.



Karl Mazlowski in his twenties.  
Photo courtesy afana.org.

## Field Trips

*(Contributed by Jay Stenger, Field Trip Coordinator)*

**Location:** Caesar Creek State Park

**Date:** Saturday, Nov 10

**Meet:** 8 a.m. at the Caesar Creek SP beach parking lot (see directions below)

**Leader:** Jay Lehman  
(513) 527-4701 (H)  
(513) 622-2399 (W)  
lehmanjg@pg.com

Late fall migration will be well underway and the focus of this trip will be waterfowl (ducks) and water birds (i.e. loons, grebes, gulls etc.). Over the years Caesar Creek Lake has attracted numerous rarities during the fall and there is always a good chance for a surprise to show up. Franklin's Gulls have been fairly regular in recent years and rarer gulls are always possible. Of course the diverse habitats of this large area attracts a host of other species and we also expect to find a number of raptors and migrant and winter resident songbirds.

In addition to checking many sites around Caesar Creek Lake, Jay may make stops at nearby Spring Valley Wildlife Area and the Roxanna gravel pits as well. This will be a day trip, extending well past noon, so be sure to bring a lunch and drinks. The trip will consist mostly of driving from one lake view to another, interspersed with short walks here

and there. Restrooms are available throughout the area. Scopes will be useful of course, but if you don't have one don't let that stop you from coming.

We will meet at the Caesar Creek swimming beach parking lot. From Cincinnati, take I-71 north to the State Route 73 exit # 45. Turn left (west) onto SR 73 and go about 5 miles. After crossing the SR 73 Bridge over Caesar Creek Lake, turn right at the State Park entrance and follow the signs to the swimming beach. If you have any questions about this trip or further directions feel free to contact Jay.

Visit the Caesar Creek SP website at:  
[www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/caesarck/tabid/720/Default.aspx](http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/caesarck/tabid/720/Default.aspx)

## **Location: Brookville Lake & Hueston Woods**

## **Theme: Migrant Waterfowl**

**Date: Sunday, Nov 18**

**Meet: 8 a.m. at the Park & Ride Lot at I-275 Exit #7 (see directions below)**

**Leader: Jay Stenger**  
**(513) 522-8147**  
**[jaystenger@cinci.rr.com](mailto:jaystenger@cinci.rr.com)**

The focus of this trip will be the fall waterfowl migration, which should be near peak at this date. Our trip leader Jay Stenger is planning on hitting several spots around Brookville Lake and then make the short hop

over to Hueston Woods where we will check a few spots around Acton Lake before returning home. Both of these locations are hotspots and are excellent for attracting waterfowl and water birds at this season. We expect to see good numbers of many species. The rural countryside surrounding these two large lakes has diverse habitats so we expect to find a great variety of species along the way. In addition to waterfowl we expect to see loons, grebes, gulls, Sandhill Cranes, late shorebirds (such as Dunlin & snipe), Bald Eagles, many hawks, numbers of seasonal songbirds and much more. This will be an auto type tour and will consist of driving from spot to spot interspersed with a few short easy walks. While the trip duration is long and does entail a lot of driving, the rewards, in terms of what we see, always make it worth the effort.

The trip will run into mid to late afternoon but of course you can leave at any time you like. Bring your lunch and drinks. It always seems colder around large lakes so dress accordingly. If you have a scope it will prove useful. Restrooms will be available. One important note, Indiana State Parks charges a daily per car entrance fee (\$5 resident, \$7 non-resident). At this time of year there is usually no attendants on duty but we cannot be sure of that.

We will meet at 8:00 a.m. at the park & ride lot, located right at the I-275 Exit # 7 at SR 128 marked Cleves-Hamilton. This is the first exit just west of the Great Miami River at Miamitown. We will caravan from there to the Brookville area, about a 30-minute drive. Call or email Jay if you have any questions.

Visit the Brookville Lake website at:  
[www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2961.htm](http://www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2961.htm)

Visit the Whitewater Memorial State Park (at Brookville Lake) website at:  
[www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2962.htm](http://www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2962.htm)

Visit the Hueston Woods SP website at:  
[www.dnr.state.oh.us/tabid/745/default.aspx](http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/tabid/745/default.aspx)

## **Location: Rocky Fork Lake & Paint Creek SP**

**Date: Saturday, Dec 01**

**Meet: 8 a.m. at the  
Perintown United Dairy  
Farmers on US 50  
(see directions below)**

**Leader: Mark Gilsdorf  
(513) 253-6062  
Markg74@gmail.com**

Rocky Fork and Paint Creek are probably the least visited of our regions large reservoirs by local birders. Brookville, Hueston Woods, Caesar Creek and East Fork all get more birding attention. But the Rocky Fork region is equal to and every bit as productive a birding site as any of these other hotspots. Certainly located on what we consider the periphery of our Greater Cincinnati birding area, it is only about 40 miles east of Milford and no more distant than some of the previously mentioned spots. A number of other birding hotspots such as Indian Creek WA, Paint Creek SP and the Roush Road gravel pits are located along the way, all within one mile of US 50, and may also be visited depending on time.

Waterfowl migration will still be in full swing and will be the focus of this trip, with winter raptors a close second. Gulls, Bald Eagles, Sandhill Cranes and late fall migrants and winter residents are expected to be seen. Because of the diverse habitats found in this

region virtually any seasonal species found in our region can be expected on this trip.

So join our trip leader Mark Gilsdorf for what should be a great day of exploring and birding seldom visited hotspots. Because of the distance and size of the Rocky Fork region this field trip will be an auto-tour type, which will consist of driving from spot to spot interspersed with a few short easy walks. This field trip will run into mid to late afternoon but of course you can leave at any time you like. Bring your lunch and drinks. If you have a scope it will prove useful. Restrooms will be available

We will meet at 8:00 am, in the parking lot of the United Dairy Farmers located in Perintown, on US 50, at the corner (stoplight) of Round Bottom Rd. We will caravan from here to Indian Creek

SWA, about a 20-minute drive, and from there on to Rocky Fork.

Gas/Restrooms/Supplies are all available at the UDF. To get to this meeting spot from I-275, take the US 50, Milford/Hillsboro exit # 59, and go east on US 50 about 2 miles. The UDF is on the right.

For a map and information for Rocky Fork State Park go to the following website:  
[www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/parks/rockyfrk/tabid/784/Default.aspx](http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/parks/parks/rockyfrk/tabid/784/Default.aspx)

For a map and information for Indian Creek WA go to the following website:  
[www.dnr.state.oh.us/Home/wild\\_resourcessubhomepage/WildlifeAreaMaps/SouthwestOhioWildlifeAreaMaps/IndianCreekWildlifeArea/tabid/19772/Default.aspx](http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/Home/wild_resourcessubhomepage/WildlifeAreaMaps/SouthwestOhioWildlifeAreaMaps/IndianCreekWildlifeArea/tabid/19772/Default.aspx)

# Local Calendar

## Audubon Society of Ohio

**Date:** Monday, Nov 19  
**Program:** *Teaming Research and Education for Bird Conservation*

See [www.cincinnati.audubon.org](http://www.cincinnati.audubon.org) for additional details.

## Cincinnati Nature Center

### Field Trips

November 10	Lester Peyton (at LBFT)
November 22	Lois Shadix
December 08	Mike Kravitz
December 30	CBC
January 12	Darlena Graham
January 26	Bill Stanley

See [www.cincynature.org](http://www.cincynature.org) for additional details.

## Oxbow, Inc.

**Date:** Saturday, Nov 10  
**Field Trip:** Steve Pelikan

**Date:** Tues., November 13  
**Program:** *Paleo Plants*

See [www.oxbowinc.org](http://www.oxbowinc.org) for additional details.

## The 113<sup>th</sup> National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts

*(Contributed by Jay Stenger, Field Trip Coordinator)*

**\*Note: All National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts are now FREE.** Beginning this season the Audubon Society will no longer charge the \$5.00 field participation fee. To offset this loss of income “American Birds” will no longer be printed on paper and mailed to participants and Audubon will move to an online delivery of the summary results of the Christmas Bird Counts.

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a long-standing program of the National Audubon Society, with over 100 years of citizen science involvement. It is an early-winter bird census, where thousands of volunteers across the US, Canada and 19 countries in the Western Hemisphere, go out over a 24-hour period to count birds. Last years count set an all-time high with 2,215 individual counts conducted. Those counts included a record total of over 61,000 participants.

Count volunteers search for birds within a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle while counting every bird they see or hear throughout the day. It’s not just a species tally; all individual birds are counted, giving an indication of the total number of birds within the circle that day. If observers live within a CBC circle, they may arrange in advance to count the birds at their feeders and submit those data to the count compiler. All individual CBC’s are conducted during the period beginning December 14th through January 5<sup>th</sup> each season, and each count is conducted during one calendar day.

CBC participants are organized into groups or field parties by the compiler of the count. Each field party covers a prearranged and specific area within the 15-mile diameter count circle. And everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate regardless of one's birding skills. Compilers arrange field parties so that inexperienced observers are always out with seasoned CBC veterans. You don't have to commit to the whole day either. You are welcome to participate for as long as you like, a half-day or even a few hours.

The data collected by observers over the past century allow researchers, conservation biologists, and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. When combined with other surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey, it provides a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed in time and space over the past hundred years. The long-term perspective made possible by the Christmas Bird Count is vital for conservationists. It informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat - and helps identify environmental issues with implications for people as well.

The first CBC was done on Christmas Day of 1900 as an alternative activity to an event called the "side hunt" where people chose sides, then went out and shot as many birds as they could. The group that came in with the largest number of dead birds won the event. Frank Chapman, a famed ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History and the editor of *Bird-Lore* (which became the publication of the National Association of Audubon Societies when that organization formed in 1905) recognized that declining bird populations could not withstand wanton over-hunting, and proposed to count birds on Christmas Day rather than shoot them.

There are many Christmas Bird Counts to choose from and we encourage you to take part in as many as possible. But we also hope

you can find the time to participate in at least one of our local Christmas Bird Counts listed below. If you have any questions concerning a particular count feel free to contact that count's compiler.

For more information on Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts visit the following website:

<http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>

## **2012-2013 Greater Cincinnati (Local) National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts:**

Cincinnati Christmas Bird Count (66<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Sunday, December 30, 2012  
Compiler Jay Stenger, (513) 522-8147,  
[jaystenger@cinci.rr.com](mailto:jaystenger@cinci.rr.com)

Western Hamilton County Christmas Bird Count (47<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Sunday, December 23, 2012  
Compiler Ned Keller, (513) 941-6497,  
[keller@one.net](mailto:keller@one.net)

East Fork Christmas Bird Count (30<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Saturday, January 5, 2013  
Compiler Joe Bens, (513) 353-4229,  
[joebens@live.com](mailto:joebens@live.com)

Ohio River Christmas Bird Count (26<sup>th</sup> Annual)  
Sunday, December 16, 2012  
Compiler Paul Wharton, (513) 353-3403,  
[pwharton@fuse.net](mailto:pwharton@fuse.net)

*Continued next page*

Hamilton-Fairfield Christmas Bird Count  
Saturday, December 15, 2012  
Compiler Mike Busam, (513) 755-0057,  
[mbusam@gmail.com](mailto:mbusam@gmail.com)

## Conservation

(From “Audubon,” magazine of the National Audubon Society, Nov-Dec 2012. Reprinted with permission. [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org))

### Solving the Piping Plover Puzzle

By Don Stap

Under an early morning charcoal sky, I turn my face away from the salt spray kicking over the sides of a 27-foot skiff speeding through choppy waters. We are bouncing along toward the Joulter Cays—a group of about 30 low, sandy islands a few miles north of the Bahamas’ Andros Island. I hunch down in my seat and glance at the other wet faces on this impromptu water-park ride: Caleb Spiegel, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist; Hardy Eshbaugh, a botanist who specializes in Andros Island plants; and Sue Haig, a supervisory wildlife ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey.

Haig, unable to find the windbreaker she thought she’d packed for the trip, is wetter than anyone. Water dripping off her chin, she nevertheless smiles—no doubt because she is about to see what she has been seeking for the past 30 years: a major piping plover winter hot spot, just recently discovered.

The leading authority on the tiny endangered shorebird, Haig has devoted her career to piecing together the piping plover’s natural history and full lifecycle. “I went through every museum record, every Christmas Bird Count, every piece of information you could come by to figure out where people had seen these birds in the winter, because we knew we didn’t have their winter range figured out,” she says. She walked for miles on Gulf Coast beaches and southern Atlantic shorelines in search of plovers, but this is her first trip to the Bahamas. Despite some plover sightings over the years, searching anywhere in the Bahamas—with more than 700 islands and roughly

2,000 cays (reefs made from coral, rock, and sand)—was, she says, like “looking for a needle in a haystack.”

A plump, sparrow-sized bird the color of bone and driftwood and with a black brushstroke encircling its neck, the piping plover is most often seen running along sandy shores, its legs moving so rapidly it looks like a toy that has been wound too tightly. The species breeds in three geographically distinct populations: along Great Lakes beaches, on northern Great Plains lakes and river shorelines, and on the Atlantic coastline from Newfoundland to North Carolina. Though piping plovers are relatively widespread, they’re few in number. When Haig first began her studies in the early 1980s, biologists estimated there were only about 4,000 left.

Our skiff slows to idle a short distance offshore from a cay where Walker Golder and Matt Jeffery are standing beside their kayaks. Golder, Audubon North Carolina’s deputy state director, and Jeffery, a senior program manager for Audubon’s International Alliances Program, spent the past three nights camping on the Joulter Cays. By day they walked across mudflats and kayaked in the shallows, working their way from north to south while counting piping plovers and every other bird they saw.

From the beach, Jeffery, sunglasses resting atop his cap, his face sporting a scruffy beard, calls to us cheerfully: “Did you bring the coffee?” His good spirits spring from the 230 plovers he and Golder have seen thus far—“100 at one site!” Golder says—and they still have today to explore other promising areas.

**The low-lying Joulter Cays**, occupying 4,000 square miles, are ideal piping plover habitat. Low tide exposes great expanses of sandbars and mudflats where the plovers and many other shorebirds feed on tiny marine invertebrates such as worms, mollusks, and small flies. At high tide, shorelines that rim the cays’ higher ground provide safe havens for roosting. With the tide ebbing, I look at the extensive flats, pocked here and there by pools of water. In the distance are glistening sandbars, ribbons of turquoise water, and the dark-green lines of mangroves that grow along the cays’ edges. The sky—deep, blue, splotted with clouds—is a dome without dimensions. The horizon looks like a place we could walk to in a couple of hours.

Haig can’t wait to start scouting for plovers. Golder points to a sandbar a couple of hundred yards away. “Let’s look at the mudflats on the other side,” he says. He picks up his spotting scope and leads the way. We

tromp through mud the consistency of wet cement. I try to find the right stride for the ankle-deep goop, but every few steps one leg sinks in halfway up my shin. Within 10 minutes I've lost a snug-fitting water shoe. I squat down and fish around for it. As I tug the shoe out of the mud, I lose my balance, lurch forward, and get my hands in front of me just in time to avoid a mud pie in my face.

Golder and Jeffery have been slogging through mud like this for days, often dragging their kayaks behind them. Counting shorebirds in a tropical paradise sounds easy, but clearly it's not. The days are long, and when the biologists are not paddling kayaks or trekking through mud, they're standing for long periods in neck-ache positions as they squint through their scopes.

After an hour at the sandbar, Golder estimates that 900 or more shorebirds are roaming the flats beyond it. When the tide comes in, forcing the birds into a tighter crowd, he wants to do an exact count. As soon as the water is deep enough for the skiff's outboard, we settle in among the kayaks and daypacks. Our captain, Franklin Riley, a local man who knows how to navigate this shallow water, wastes no time in getting us to within a half-mile of a nearby cay. Golder motions toward the cay's beach:

"That's the white stuff I want to get a look at." In knee-deep water, the biologists wade to a sandbar and set up their scopes. Golder, Jeffery, Haig, and Spiegel spread out and for half an hour stand like statues as they peer through their scopes. Among the gathering of shorebirds, they find 15 piping plovers.

Back at the skiff, we set off again for another site. When we get there everyone jumps into the shallow water and wades toward a sandbar, scopes over their shoulders. Here it takes an hour to count plovers, and the tally is better than expected: 81 birds in all. Although it is only mid-afternoon, by the time the biologists return to the skiff we must head back or risk getting stranded here as the tide recedes.

After dinner back on Andros that evening, Golder places a satellite map of the Joulters on the table and marks GPS readings for the latitude and longitude of each cay they visited. As he reviews the list of birds, he keeps a running count that totals 326 piping plovers—more than three times the number they spotted last year. It is becoming increasingly clear that any successful conservation strategy for ensuring a healthy piping plover population must include protecting the Bahamian islands and cays they frequent from a wide range of threats, including

development, the spread of invasive plants, and sand-mining operations.

Just 10 years ago no one knew that the Bahamas were so important to plovers. A 2001 census recorded only 35 of them in the entire chain. The census, started 10 years earlier by Sue Haig, was part of a USGS-coordinated effort to count the entire U.S. piping plover population every five years. More than a thousand participants counted the birds on their breeding territories, then a few months later spread out across the core of the plover's known wintering area to do the same—walking the beaches from North Carolina south along Atlantic shores and across the entire U.S. Gulf Coast. But winter surveyors found fewer than half the plovers tallied during the summer censuses—a serious challenge if you're trying to conserve the species. Knowing what's going on mostly in the breeding grounds is "like being blind in one eye," says Haig. "If you don't know the full story, you're going to make mistakes in the measures you'd take to protect the birds."

Haig and others suspected that large numbers might remain hidden in the Bahamas, and in 2006 Sidney Maddock, working for Audubon North Carolina, along with local volunteers, mostly from the Ornithology Group of the Bahamas National Trust, set out to cover more of the region. The survey of 66 sites delivered 417 piping plovers. Encouraged by the results, in 2011 the USGS increased coverage of the Bahamas with the assistance of biologists from there, as well as the United States and Canada, and the total rose to 1,066 birds. If the results of recent banding studies (see map, page 51)—under the direction of Cheri Gratto-Trevor of Environment Canada—are any indication, almost all of the plovers that winter in the Bahamas hail from the Atlantic Coast, and the 1,066 represent nearly one-third of the coast's breeding population.

**Understanding this link is one thing; seeing it is another.** The mysteries and marvelous feat of migration quickly become personal. So it was that six months before my trip to Andros I stood on a Long Island beach, my binoculars trained on a nesting plover 75 yards away. I squinted, looking for the bands that would indicate this was a Bahamas bird.

Kerri Dikun, coordinator of Long Island bird conservation for Audubon New York, stood next to me with a spotting scope. She had spent much of her summer monitoring 36 plovers at six different nest sites, including two banded Bahamas birds. Dikun is one of a small army of hundreds of people from 70-plus government and nongovernment agencies and

organizations that monitor and protect the breeding plovers each summer.

Up and down the Atlantic Coast, rapid housing development on beachfront property and increased recreational use of beaches beginning in the boom years after World War II have continued to encroach upon the plover's nesting sites, in the area above the high-tide line. But the program to protect nesting sites, begun in 1986 when the United States placed the piping plover on the endangered species list, has proved successful. Between 1986 and 2010 the Atlantic Coast population alone more than doubled, to 1,782 pairs, and the total population has reached roughly 8,000, a bit closer to the species' historical population, estimated to be in the tens of thousands.

And yet 8,000 birds hardly ensures the species' future. One need only recall the fate of another shorebird, the Eskimo curlew, whose populations plummeted in a matter of decades in the 19th century, from hundreds of thousands to a few dozen individuals. Indiscriminate hunting was not the only factor; loss of the grassland habitat the birds depended on during migration was another. Today the Eskimo curlew appears to exist in name only.

On my first day on Long Island, before looking for banded birds, Dikun was slated to check on some piping plover chicks that were close to fledging at Orient Beach State Park, on the northeast tip of Long Island. We drove two hours, then walked another two hours to the end of a peninsula, where a pair of the birds had moved their chicks some days earlier, far away from beachgoers. Dikun, a 28-year-old brunette, her hair pulled into a tight bun to keep it off her neck on the sweltering July day, raised her binoculars and scanned the beach ahead of us, watching for any movement among the stones and sand heaped up by waves.

"Here's where I begin to get nervous," she said. A fox had been roaming the peninsula all summer, which might explain why a week earlier one of the four chicks from this plover family went missing. Dikun stepped forward slowly. If the birds remained motionless, it would be nearly impossible to spot them. They can appear for a moment, run a few feet, then stop and simply disappear into the background like jigsaw puzzle pieces set into place.

"There," Dikun said. "There they are. And there are still three chicks." Despite the time it took to get to these birds, we watched them for only a few minutes. As ground-nesting birds, piping plovers are easily disturbed by human activity, and easy pickings for

many predators. On our walk back, Dikun showed me one of the "exclosures"—a 10-foot-diameter cylinder of turkey wire—that are erected around plover nests to keep out raccoons, foxes, gulls, dogs, and feral cats, to name a few common predators.

Near the end of our walk back, Sue Wuehler, manager of Orient Beach State Park, picked us up in a four-wheel-drive park vehicle. We approached a roped-off section of the beach posted with "keep out" signs explaining that endangered species may be nesting in the area. A man, oblivious to the park vehicle approaching, casually lifted the rope and walked inside—to pick up some stones for his daughters he said when Wuehler asked what he thought he was doing. A short but pointed lecture followed. "People see mountains and forests and they think 'nature,'" Dikun later said, "but they don't think of beaches the same way."

The following day we visited several beaches in heavily populated areas, including a private beach open to club members only—and to two Bahamas plovers. One of the banded birds ("light green-black" for the band combination on its right leg) was alone, its nest lost to predators a few weeks earlier, but the second bird ("blue-red") was holding its own. Earlier, however, this bird and its mate had moved each time someone tried to set up a protective exclosure around them, beginning a new nest at every attempt. "We had to give up on the exclosure," Dikun said. "Now we're just hoping no predators get to them."

We walked east down the beach near the waterline, staying as far as possible from the roped-off nesting area. Dikun set up her spotting scope about 75 yards away. "An adult is still sitting on eggs," she said. "That's good."

In a few weeks this bird—all of two ounces—would likely set off on a 1,000-mile-plus journey back to the Bahamas and spend the winter near where it had been banded. If that's the case, it could fight the headwinds of bad weather, locate places to rest on beaches that have not been degraded by development or "beach stabilization" projects, dodge off-road vehicles, elude predators, and all the while stay on course over open waters.

Typically, the adults leave first, followed by the young, but there would be no young for "blue-red" and its mate. A couple of weeks after I'd left, Dikun wrote to say that a predator had made quick work of the eggs.

**Something more insidious than a fox** or feral cat is creeping over the beaches in the Bahamas, a shrub with thick, smooth oblong leaves: *Scaevola taccada*, commonly called white inkberry. This alien from the Pacific—often accompanied by another invasive exotic, the Australian pine, *Casuarina equisetifolia*—is covering the sandy place just above the wrack line, destroying much of the kelp-strewn area where the piping plovers rest at high tide.

Both plants are gaining a foothold in the Joulters. And as we look for plovers at several sites on North Andros's eastern shore, we find the invaders nearly everywhere. No one has been tracking the plants' spread, but Hardy Eshbaugh, a former Audubon board member who co-led field courses on Andros for Miami University from 1978 to 1995, is shocked by how many beaches have been taken over by white inkberry since he was last here.

One local business owner is trying to help combat the invading plants. Brian Hew, owner of Kamalame Cay, an exclusive resort that caters to celebrities, removed the white inkberry and Australian pine covering his resort's beaches. And the plovers came back. When we visited him, he and Golder wound up chatting about setting up observation stations for his guests and creating artificial islands where shorebirds could roost.

In the end, the trip's piping plover grand total is 461 birds, more than five percent of the species' total population. Finding this many birds in a few days (how many more are out there?) makes Andros Island and the Joulter Cays invaluable to the Atlantic Coast population.

A few weeks later Jeffery trades in his kayak for a seat at a board meeting at the Bahamas National Trust, a non-governmental organization commissioned by the government to run the national park system\*. The new data help make a convincing case that efforts to preserve the Joulters will be key for protecting piping plovers—as well as the Bahamas' tourism-based economy. Andros Island and the cays surrounding it are among the world's premier bonefishing sites. As luck would have it, good bonefish habitat is good plover habitat. Bonefish, the Formula 1 race car among fish, provide what is often referred to as the ultimate saltwater fly-fishing experience (an experience that raked in nearly \$141 million in 2009).

Shortly thereafter, BirdLife International, a global coalition of organizations from more than 100 countries, declared the Joulter Cays an Important Bird Area, signifying that the site's habitat is essential for

one or more bird species. Perhaps the pristine beaches and sandbars, turquoise waters, and food-rich mudflats will remain untouched, lost in time. "The Joulters," after all, jokes Jeffery, "are right in the middle of the Bermuda Triangle."



Piping Plover. Photo courtesy Lana Hays.



## The Passenger Pigeon

### Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

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