



The Passenger Pigeon

Volume 49, Number 5

The Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

May 2013

Program:
Current Avian Research at
Xavier University

Speaker:
Dr. George Farnsworth

Date:
Thursday, May 16
7 p.m.
Sharon Woods
Visitor Center

Our final speaker for the 2012/2013 season will be Dr. George Farnsworth from the Xavier University Department of Biology. Dr. Farnsworth will update us on a number of recent research projects that he and his students have been engaged in. These include studying the roosting behavior of migrating Chimney Swifts, the puzzle solving ability of Northern Mockingbirds, and blood parasite survey work in Costa Rica.

Dr. Farnsworth received a B.S. in Biology from the College of William & Mary in Virginia in 1991 and an M.S. in Environmental Sciences from University of Virginia in 1994. He earned a Ph.D. in Zoology from North Carolina State University in 1998. Before coming to Xavier, Farnsworth worked as a post-doctoral researcher with Patuxent Wildlife Research

Center and taught at Meredith College and University of Houston-Downtown.

He is particularly interested in the behavioral ecology of local species of songbirds. As a Ph.D. student, Farnsworth explored the nesting behavior of the Wood Thrush. By measuring the survival rate of nests from one day to the next and the likelihood that a nesting female will attempt another nest, he was able to estimate the total productivity of the population of Wood Thrushes in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

As part of this work, he developed a behavior model that he used to ask more basic and theoretical questions about why birds lay the number of eggs that they do. After receiving his degree, Farnsworth began to address practical issues regarding techniques used to survey for birds. In many cases, these techniques involved recording the number of singing birds detected. He developed statistical models that are capable of including information about the singing behavior of birds, thus improving our ability to estimate the size of bird populations.

-Steve Bobonick



Dr. George Farnsworth. Courtesy Xavier University

Field Trips

(Contributed by Jay Stenger, Field Trip Coordinator)

Location:

Muscatatuck National
Wildlife Refuge (NWR)

Date: Saturday, May 18

Meet: 7:30 a.m.

Tanners Creek boat ramp
(see directions below)

Leader: Darlena Graham

(859) 341-4893

darlena@fuse.net

Muscatatuck NWR is made up of 7,802 acres of diverse natural habitats. Bordered by the Muscatatuck River on the south, the area comprises woodlands, pine groves, wooded swamps, marshes, small ponds and creeks, large lakes, successional brushy fields, grassland and cropland. Nine miles of roads and many foot trails meander through the area. The bird life is rich and diverse and the many breeding species will be joined by many migrants on this date. Many Cincinnati birders visit Muscatatuck on a regular basis but our trip leader, skilled birder Darlena Graham, has always had a special affinity for this place and knows the refuge as well as anyone.

About an hour's drive west from the Oxbow, Muscatatuck is well worth the drive during any season, but should be outstanding in mid-May. So come along and join Darlena for what should be a great day of birding.

This trip will last well past lunchtime so you might want to bring food and drinks. The refuge has a quality Visitor Center and restrooms are not a problem. What will we see you ask? Just about any bird that breeds in, or migrates through, Indiana on this date is possible. Shorebirds, waders, lingering waterfowl, raptors (nesting Bald Eagle), migrant and resident songbirds including many warblers, flycatchers, vireos, sparrows, orioles, tanagers and a whole lot more are expected. Many visitors are treated to seeing river otters here, a fairly common mammal on the refuge. Expect a big day's list. Binoculars (duh), sunscreen, insect repellent, food and drinks will probably make your day more enjoyable. Feel free to contact Darlena if you have any questions.

For more info on Muscatatuck NWR visit the following website:

www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=31530

Directions to the Tanners Creek Boat Ramp Parking Lot:

From I-275 take the US 50 Lawrenceburg Exit # 16. Turn left (south/west) onto US 50 and go about 3.5 miles to Tanners Creek Drive. There is a traffic light here and a McDonalds Restaurant on the corner. Turn left onto Tanners Creek Drive. Follow the road until it ends in a large Parking Lot and look for Darlena. We will caravan to Muscatatuck NWR from here.

Location:
Middle Creek Park
& Boone County Cliffs

Date: Saturday, Jun 01

Meet: 8 a.m. Parking lot
Middle Creek Park
(see directions below)

Leader:
Ann Oliver
(513) 307-0929
annieobirder@yahoo.com

Boone County Cliffs, a Nature Conservancy property and the 230-acre Middle Creek Park, a Boone County Parks property, are nestled in the wooded hills of western Boone County, Kentucky. While spring migration is just about over by this date, at least 13 species of warblers and many other song birds breed along Middle Creek. The whole region is forested, but the Boone County Cliffs particularly contains some old-growth forest habitat reliable for breeding Worm-eating Warblers. Other breeding forest birds are also expected, including Broad-winged Hawk, Cerulean, Hooded and Kentucky Warblers, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush and both tanagers. Middle Creek, which flows through the area, is loaded with Northern Parulas, Yellow-throated Warblers and numerous other breeding birds. Prairie Warblers & Yellow-breasted Chats are common in adjacent successional areas. Other interesting birds can be found nearby along KY 20, and it was just 2 miles down the road in Bellevue, KY that two Swallow-tailed Kites were found in August 2012. Will those birds return to breed?

Our trip leader, skilled birder Ann Oliver, plans to spend some time birding Middle Creek Park, then drive and make a few stops along picturesque Middle Creek Road. Middle Creek Road is an excellent birding spot, but it is narrow and has limited space to pull off. Nonetheless we should be able to walk a good bit of this lovely secluded road. From the parking lot at Boone County Cliffs, Ann will lead us up the trail to where the steep cliff trail begins its ascent. However Ann does not plan to climb the very steep part of the trail to get to the top of the cliffs on this trip. If the thought of that strenuous climb was keeping you from participating, rest assured that the walking on this trip would be classed as moderate, not strenuous. Note that there are no restrooms in any of these places. If nature calls you'll have to drive back to civilization or find a tree. The trip will probably run to about noon. Contact Ann if you have any questions.

For directions, a map and information about Middle Creek Park (a Boone County Park) go to the following Web page:

www.boonecountky.org/parks/ParkInfo/10

For further info on the Nature Conservancy's Boone County Cliffs go to the following Web pages:

naturepreserves.ky.gov/naturepreserves/Pages/boonecnycliffs.aspx

www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/kentucky/placesweprotect/boone-county-cliffs-state-nature-preserve.xml

Directions to Middle Creek Park:

From I-75: from I-75 take Kentucky 18, exit # 18, at Florence and go west. When you reach Burlington, KY, continue for 6.5 miles to the Middle Creek Park entrance, which will be on your left (south side of KY 18). The entrance is just a short distance past Middle Creek Rd.

Directions from the west: Take I-275 south and cross the Ohio River. After crossing the river take the first exit, which is KY 8, exit # 11. Turn right (west) onto KY 8, which immediately becomes KY 20 after a short distance. Continue west and then south on KY 20 for about 12 miles. At the intersection with KY 18, turn left or east onto KY 18 and go about 1 mile. The entrance to Middle Creek Park will be on your right (south side of KY 18). Middle Creek Rd. is just a short distance ahead.

Local Calendar

Audubon Society of Ohio

Program: *Bird Banding with Tim Tolford*

Date: Mon, May 20

See www.cincinnati.audubon.org for additional details.

Cincinnati Nature Center

Field Trips

May 11 Mike Kravitz
May 25 Lester Peyton

See www.cincynature.org for additional details.

Oxbow, Inc.

Field Trips

May 18 Ann Oliver
June 15 Paul Wharton

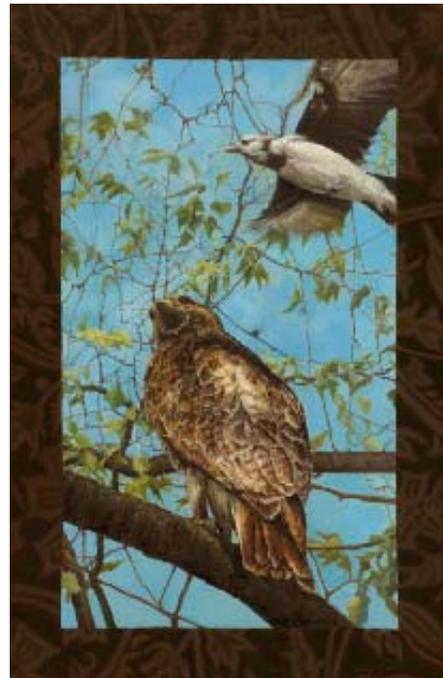
See www.oxbowinc.org for additional details.

Ohio Division of Wildlife, et al.

Program: *Mothapalooza*

Date: Jun 14-16

See www.mothapalooza.org for additional details.



Courtesy Holly Schapker

Xavier University Art Gallery

Program:
*Contemporary Works
by Holly Schapker*

Date: May 17 – Jun 16

(513) 745-3811

Benefiting Ault Park Advisory Council

Oxbow Birdathon 2013

(Contributed by Jay Stenger)

The annual Oxbow Birdathon is scheduled for **Friday and Saturday May 10th and 11th, 2013**. This is the 26th consecutive year of this event, which has become a spring birding tradition within the Greater Cincinnati birding and conservation community.

As always, the event will begin at 5:00 PM. sharp on Friday evening and end at 5:00 PM. sharp on Saturday. The registration fee remains at \$5.00 per person. At 5:00 PM. Saturday May 12th, immediately after the Birdathon ends, the Birdathon Tally and Party will begin. Plenty of cold drinks, pizzas and other food are provided at no additional cost. The Birdathon Tally & Party will again be held at our own Oxbow Inc. office that is located at 301 Walnut Street in downtown Lawrenceburg, Indiana. There is plenty of room, ample parking and is centrally located to the Oxbow. As tradition dictates, our Birdathon dates are always scheduled on the Saturday before Mothers Day (the second Sunday in May).

When Oxbow Inc. was in its infancy, members realized we needed an annual fundraiser if we were to achieve our goals and preserve the Oxbow area. So it was that the Birdathon was born and the first event took place in May 1988. Over the years Oxbow Inc. has achieved great success and today well over 1,000 acres has been protected and Oxbow Inc. is in a good position to acquire more land as it becomes available. But Oxbow Inc. continues to need your financial support. With ownership of the land comes the responsibility of stewardship of that land. These days the funds raised from the annual Birdathon are earmarked for habitat and access management and improvements. Many projects have already benefited from Birdathon funds and many other projects are on the table waiting for financial support.

But the Birdathon is more than just a fundraiser for Oxbow Inc. We see this event as a community celebration of the conservation ethic and birds during the peak of spring migration. It truly is a festive event and we encourage individuals to form teams or fly solo as representatives of Oxbow Inc. or a charitable organization of their choosing. We have also always encouraged other nature, conservation and educational organizations to participate in this event. These organizations are encouraged to form teams and use this opportunity to raise funds for their own groups. Each of these teams is asked to split any funds they raise 50/50 with Oxbow Inc. In this way both organizations benefit. We usually have at least ten or more such organizations participate in this way.

Last year's event represented the 25th year of the Birdathon and was a great success. Twenty-five teams made up of over 80 individuals took to the Birdathon field and raised several thousand dollars for habitat management in the Oxbow. Most importantly all those who participated had a lot of fun and experienced the sense of camaraderie that comes from a group effort working together for a good cause. What can be more fun and rewarding than a birding excursion with your friends on a glorious spring weekend? The answer; doing exactly that while at the same time knowing your efforts are helping to preserve the important natural area we know as the Oxbow.

So mark your calendar and help us make Birdathon 2013 a great success. We encourage you to participate in the event, but if you can't physically participate, we hope you can pledge at least a few dollars to this worthy cause. Bear in mind that the Birdathon is intended to be, first and foremost, fun. You can participate in many ways. You can go all out and try to find as many birds in 24 hours as possible or you can participate for just a few hours from your favorite deck chair in your backyard. Or you

can choose any number of ways in between those two examples. Feel free to contact me for information on how to donate or how to enter a team or yourself in the event. Thank you in advance for your generosity and help towards making Birdathon 2013 a great success.

Birdin' the Pits **by Jay Stenger**

(Originally published in the Ohio Cardinal, Vol. 31, No. 01, 2007)

It is generally agreed that diminishing habitats are the major threat to bird populations. The gradual but steady losses of wetlands, grasslands, and mature forest garner the most attention, and rightfully so. Many species that depend on these imperiled habitats are in steep decline. Urbanization has taken its toll, and the constant expansion of urban areas into the rural countryside claims many thousands of acres annually.

Fortunately, many species have apparently been able to adapt to these changes to the natural environment and can be found in all sorts of altered habitats. Urban birders learn to recognize these habitats and the birds potentially attracted to them. Airports, garbage dumps, golf courses, residential back yards, urban parks, cemeteries, dams and impoundments, sewage lagoons, cropland, railroad right of ways, and power transmission line cuts are just a few examples of manmade or altered habitats that attract birds, and of course the birders looking for them.

Maybe the most interesting of these types of man-made habitats are gravel pits. Similar sites include quarries, borrow pits, and--to some degree--retention basins and settling ponds. With the exception of a few well-known sites, the vast majority of these pits generally go unrecognized, overlooked, and

under-birded. Some of these sites may be better than others, but they all attract birds on some level and certain sites can be downright outstanding in terms of the sheer numbers and diversity of species they attract. Some are productive enough that they have become local hot spots and attract more observers than more pristine natural areas nearby. Here in southwestern Ohio (Hamilton, Butler, Warren, Clermont, Brown, Clinton, Greene, and Preble counties), the Camp Dennison and Newtown gravel pits in Hamilton County and the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pit just north of Spring Valley WA are well known and regularly birded. In the Greater Cincinnati area the Oxbow, a wetland located along the Indiana/Ohio state line, offers a couple of examples of productive borrow pits. Without suggesting that these manmade pits are preferable to the natural landscapes they replaced, they provide surprisingly productive staging areas and habitats for a number of resident and migratory species. In these days of rapid habitat loss, gravel pits and similar sites deserve recognition. And while one seldom hears the words "natural beauty" and "gravel pits" used in the same sentence, a solid case could be made that many of these sites are greatly beneficial to birds and a host of other wildlife.

Gravel pits, quarries, and borrow pits can be found scattered throughout Ohio and the entire Midwest. In southwestern Ohio, however, literally hundreds of gravel pits, both active and abandoned, are concentrated along the banks of the Ohio, Little Miami, Great Miami, and Whitewater Rivers and their larger feeder streams. Few are birded with any regularity. Many are privately owned and trespassing is forbidden. Some are concealed and off of the beaten track, and even birders are unaware of their presence. Apparently owners' fears of liability and lawsuits effectively make many abandoned gravel pits and quarries veritable wildlife refuges. Still, many can be wholly or partially scanned from roadsides or other

vantage points. Aerial maps available on the Internet provide an excellent resource for locating these sites.

As an interesting innovation, the Hamilton County Park District has recently acquired several abandoned gravel pits in western Hamilton County along the Whitewater River, which are now open to the public for fishing and nature viewing. During the two years these particular sites have been open a number of great finds have already been recorded and include blue grosbeaks (breeding), Bell's vireo (probably breeding) and grasshopper sparrows (breeding), species rare or uncommon in Hamilton County.

The concept of reclaiming open pit mines into wildlife and recreation areas is not a new one, and has been practiced in Europe for decades. On a similar but larger scale is the reclaiming of coal-producing strip mines in many places in Indiana, Kentucky, and eastern Ohio over the past twenty years. The American Electric Power Company, in conjunction with ODNR, has turned large areas of reclaimed strip mines into State wildlife areas. The AEP recreation lands near The Wilds and the Crown City State Wildlife area are two prominent examples. While it may seem strange to garner support to "preserve" a gravel pit, the concept may become a reality some day if habitat loss elsewhere continues at its current pace.

While there are differences between gravel pits, quarries, and borrow pits, the habitats they provide share many similarities. All are generally fairly sizable tracts, ranging between ten to several hundred acres. Sometimes several large pits are adjacent to or in close proximity to one another. Most pits hold at least some permanent water, although some are virtually dry. Many are completely filled with water, featuring large lakes. Some such lakes are fairly shallow, but others can be quite deep, remaining open through all but the most severe winters, as is

the case with the Camp Dennison gravel pits. Sometimes sand bars and peninsulas, remnants from previous mining operations, jut out into the ponds. Pits by their very nature are wide-open habitats, often with only a few scattered trees such as cottonwoods, locusts, and willows around the perimeters, although wooded riparian corridors or woodlands may persist nearby. These areas generally have well-drained, loose, sandy or rocky soils, and slopes on perimeters of the pits are often sparsely vegetated with a wide variety of grasses, forbs, and other scrubby and brushy vegetation in various stages of succession. Active pits usually have considerably less herbaceous growth than do abandoned pits due to the continuous mining operations and ongoing alterations to the pit. One might think the disturbances associated with active mining in these pits would result in fewer birds being present. In some cases this might be true, but it's not necessarily the rule. For example, the Camp Dennison gravel pits have been well known for concentrations and diversity of waterfowl and other species even during the peak of their active days.

There are a few subtle differences between gravel pits, borrow pits, and quarries, and a few definitions are probably in order. A gravel pit is a piece of land, most often lying along a river or stream, excavated for extracting gravel, sand, or crushed stone. These products, collectively referred to as aggregates, are used in construction. These mining operations are big business, and hard to miss by anyone exploring the rivers of southwestern Ohio. A quarry, on the other hand, denotes a site dedicated to the extraction of larger rock, such as blocks or slabs of granite, limestone, or slate. These open pits are generally steeper-sided than gravel pits and, if I understand correctly, often shallower. Such sites are more common in central northern and eastern Ohio, where local geology favors such materials. A borrow pit is an area where soil or other

material has been excavated, or “borrowed,” for use at another site. These types of pits are commonly seen along expressways throughout Ohio, where borrowed soil was used in the construction of the highway or to create nearby embankments for exit ramps. Retention basins are usually found in commercial or residential areas and often resemble gravel pits, but are intended to control run off and flooding in nearby areas. Settling ponds also have some physical similarities to gravel pits and retention basins. These impoundments are created to dispose of dredged materials taken from nearby bodies of water. Silt and water are pumped into these impoundments and allowed to settle, at times creating a permanent pond unless it is eventually filled.

Almost all these varieties of pits attract a diverse array of species throughout the year. Most of my personal experience comes from southwestern Ohio, where gravel pits are predominant, but if the prospect of making new discoveries excites readers to explore, any of these sites near where you bird should be checked, often year-long. Waterfowl, loons, grebes, and coots can be common during migration and throughout the winter if the water stays open. Other waterbirds such as gulls, terns, and cormorants are regular visitors to gravel pits during appropriate seasons, as are eagles and ospreys. American white pelicans, while rare, are more likely, but you may recall that among the few Ohio records of brown pelican, one spent a week during early May 2004 at the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pits, and others appeared at borrow pits in Hancock County in 1991 and Franklin County in 1996.

Steep-sided gravel pits and quarries usually do not offer much of the shallow-water habitat preferred by long-legged waders and shorebirds. But every pit is different. Some gravel pits have excellent shallow-water habitats and quite a few actually have mudflats, exposed sandbars and even

emergent vegetation such as cattail beds. During late summer and early fall droughts, lower water tables may expose considerable shoreline. When and where these conditions occur, expect migrant shorebirds, herons and egrets, bitterns, rails, and moorhens.

Another declining habitat that sometimes seems to get overlooked in discussions concerning land preservation is successional habitat. Here I refer to those transitional habitats that occur over a long period of time when an open habitat such as grassland, pasture, old-field or other open area slowly reverts back to a woodland habitat. When these open areas are left uncut or untended shrubs, red cedars (in southern Ohio), and other woody growth slowly invades. Eventually young trees will begin to take a foothold, and as they mature over many years a canopy eventually forms and shades out many of the pioneering plants. This natural process is referred to as succession. These successional habitats are commonly found in dry gravel pits and around the periphery of water-filled ones.

Early succession (when an open area is still mostly grass and forbs with only a few scattered shrubs and cedars) and advanced succession (when cedars, brush, and dense tangles become dominant) habitats host an interesting array of avian species. Successional habitats were once more common in Ohio, especially in rural areas. They have become distinctly uncommon as many such areas, like abandoned farms, have reverted back to woodland or been eliminated due to modern farming practices, urban sprawl, and commercial development. Most gravel pits, particularly abandoned ones, are excellent places to find such habitats and the birds associated with them. I have no evidence, only my perception, but it seems to me the successional process occurs at a slower rate, and is more delayed, in gravel pits.

This could possibly be due to the sandy, loose, or more rocky and less fertile soils found in gravel pits.

Typical breeding species and/or year round residents that either nest or forage in and around the gravel pits in southwestern Ohio include a noteworthy group of species, many of which are on Ohio's and the Audubon Society's list of threatened or species of special concern lists. This list includes Canada goose, wood duck, mallard, northern bobwhite, great blue heron, green heron, Cooper's hawk, red-shouldered hawk, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, killdeer, spotted sandpiper, American woodcock, mourning dove, black-billed cuckoo, yellow-billed cuckoo, great horned owl, ruby-throated hummingbird, belted kingfisher, northern flicker, willow flycatcher, eastern phoebe, eastern kingbird, white-eyed vireo, yellow-throated vireo, warbling vireo, horned lark, purple martin, tree swallow, northern rough-winged swallow, bank swallow, cliff swallow, barn swallow, house wren, eastern bluebird, American robin, gray catbird, northern mockingbird, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, blue-winged warbler, northern parula, yellow warbler, yellow-throated warbler, prairie warbler, prothonotary warbler, common yellowthroat, yellow-breasted chat, summer tanager, eastern towhee, field sparrow, savannah sparrow (UC), grasshopper sparrow (UC), song sparrow, northern cardinal, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting, red-winged blackbird, eastern meadowlark, brown-headed cowbird, orchard oriole, Baltimore oriole, house finch, and American goldfinch.

During the winter and migrations all of Ohio's sparrows may be found, as can American pipits, horned larks, and rusty blackbirds. Occasionally Lapland longspurs and snow buntings are also seen. Most of Ohio's migrant warblers pass through the denser vegetation in and around gravel pits, and palm and yellow-rumped warblers can be

abundant. As gravel pits are almost always located along rivers and streams, any species associated with wooded riparian corridors is always a probability when birding in and around these places.

The possibilities of what potentially breeds in gravel pits are exciting to say the least. We just don't know. But the odds tell us that we are missing quite a bit. As mentioned before, there are hundreds of gravel pits in southwestern Ohio alone, and only a few are 100% totally accessible to birders. As for the chance of getting permission to access active gravel pits, one probably has a better chance to win the lottery. Most, if not all abandoned pits are posted. To acquire permission to enter one, one would first have to know whom to ask. Of course you could always take your chances and take a fairly quick peek, but who needs that type of stressful birding? Someone with a good set of ears and the skills to recognize bird songs could probably make some interesting finds, but most birders don't make the effort. Of these hundreds of pits, I know of fewer than 10 that are regularly birded. I'm fairly certain there are more than a hundred gravel pits in southwestern Ohio alone that are never birded at all. Many gravel pits that do get looked at are usually situated near a highway, but many of those pits get only the occasional quick scope scan during migration or on a Christmas Bird Count, but they probably never see a birder during the breeding season. So, you may be asking, what's the big deal? One answer to that question is that of the few gravel pits birders do bother to check during the breeding season, all seem to have at least one pair of blue grosbeaks present. I am certain that a thorough survey of this region's gravel pits during the summer months would discover additional considerable populations of blue grosbeaks.

Blue grosbeaks are not city birds, and they have a decided preference for rural areas.

Typical blue grosbeak habitat in the eastern U.S. consists of brushy successional areas, hedgerows, and thickets along fencerows and roadsides, grassland with scattered shrubs, old fields, forest edge, transmission-line corridors, open slashings left after logging, groves, stream edges, and in the deep south multi-age pine forests. And apparently gravel pits can be added to that list. I suppose that shouldn't be too much of a surprise, as gravel pits share a lot of similarities with these other habitats. But it doesn't explain the decided preference for gravel pits that blue grosbeaks exhibit in southwestern Ohio. Here they can now be almost expected in a gravel pit, but are generally absent over wide areas of their supposedly more traditional habitats as described above.

Blue grosbeaks are predominantly a bird of the southern United States and while widespread throughout their breeding range are generally scarce or uncommon over much of it. It was apparent during the 1960s that blue grosbeak populations were undergoing a gradual northward range expansion. They are relative newcomers to Ohio. Ohio's first confirmed breeding record was from June 1940 in Adams County, and the Cincinnati area's first breeding record was in July 1974. During the ensuing years Ohio's blue grosbeak populations were for the most part restricted to southern and southeastern Ohio. Adams County seemed to be their stronghold, though by the 1990s other sites in southeastern Ohio, such as Crown City WA (interestingly a reclaimed strip mine) in Gallia County, were hosting considerable populations of blue grosbeaks. During this period grosbeaks remained rare but regular summer residents in southwestern Ohio, but were considerably more common in some not too distant locations in northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana. During the 1990s and through 2005 most Greater Cincinnati area blue grosbeak records came from

northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana. Southwestern Ohio records were decidedly scarce.

During the 30-year period from 1975 through 2005, a considerable portion of our records came from gravel pits. During that time five different local gravel pits have produced 32 summering blue grosbeak records in the Greater Cincinnati area. Many other area records came from sites that mimicked gravel pits to a considerable extent, such as major new highway construction projects and the alternately grass and riprap-covered slopes along the dams at East Fork State Park and Brookville Reservoir. All of these sites exhibited certain characteristics in common with gravel pits: wide-open habitats, with rocky and disturbed earth adjacent to grassy and weedy areas.

Anyone even casually reviewing local southwestern Ohio blue grosbeak records will notice the tremendous increase in their local populations over the past few years. The Cincinnati Birding Database shows blue grosbeaks breeding, or presumed breeding, at 15 separate locations in southwestern Ohio over the past two years. Many of these sites had multiple pairs. By comparison, in 2000 there was only one breeding pair reported over the same area. Of these 15 summering blue grosbeak sites, 11 were from either gravel pits (7) or borrow pits and retention ponds (4). Of the four other sites, three featured habitat similar to gravel pits. One of those was from the Fernald plant site that had been recently disassembled, leaving much scrubby vegetation and broken surface roads in its wake, and another was along a major highway construction site, an extension to Blue Rock Rd. Two pairs of lark sparrows also nested here in 2007. The third was along the dam and spillway at East Fork State Park. Only one site exhibited classic blue grosbeak habitat of weedy fields bordered by brush and hedgerows, and that was at Valley View Preserve along the East Fork of the Little

Miami in Milford, Ohio. Remember, there are hundreds of these types of pits in southwestern Ohio alone, and less than 5% get any birding coverage. If we are finding blue grosbeaks in most of the pits that do get birder coverage, then how many are there in the hundreds of pits that don't?

Two other rare Ohio species have shown an affiliation to gravel pits in southwestern Ohio. Lark sparrows, an accidental species in Ohio away from Oak Openings, have been reported breeding or presumed breeding at three southwestern Ohio locations since 1980. On two occasions they were discovered in gravel pits. In 1987 a pair nested in the Mt. Nebo gravel pit near Shawnee Lookout Park in Hamilton County. A pair was seen there again in 1990 but was not confirmed breeding. In late May and early June of 2004 a lark sparrow was present at the Roxanna-New Burlington gravel pit and seen by many birders who came to see the brown pelican. The third site, as mentioned before, was along a newly constructed section of Blue Rock Rd. in Hamilton County, a site that exhibited many of the characteristics of gravel pits. In central Ohio in 2007, a lark sparrow was confirmed breeding in an abandoned quarry near Columbus. The habitat the Oak Opening colony of lark sparrows uses consists of sandy soils and open weedy fields with scattered trees. Some gravel pits make a pretty good imitation of that type of habitat.

As I noted before, a territorial male Bell's vireo was found in an accessible Hamilton County gravel pit in 2006 and may have bred there. A probable breeding Bell's vireo was found in 1995 in a gravel pit along the Great Miami River at West Carrollton. Granted that is only two sites, but consider there are only six locations that have summering Bell's vireo records in southwestern Ohio. That's a 33% average for gravel pits. Without a doubt the typical habitats found in and around gravel pit are perfectly suited for this species.

Apparently blue grosbeaks have a special affinity with gravel pits and the like, and more thorough surveys of these areas during the summer months would most definitely discover additional, and maybe even considerable, populations. And don't be too surprised if a few lark sparrows and Bell's vireos show up as well. Gravel pits have great birding potential, and with three more years to go on the OBBA III we should have ample opportunity to get many of these great sites covered. But whatever the season, gravel pits assuredly will produce great birding.



Lark Sparrow. Courtesy James Ownby, ownbyphotography.com



The Passenger Pigeon

Newsletter of the Cincinnati Bird Club

Cincinnati Bird Club
c/o Newsletter Editor
15 Sherry Rd
Cincinnati, OH 45215

President: Mark Gilsdorf

email: markg74@gmail.com

Program Chair: Steve Bobonick

email: steve.bobonick@gmail.com

Field Trips: Jay Stenger

email: jaystenger@cinci.rr.com

Newsletter Editor: Harris Abramson

email: harrisabramson@hotmail.com

Treasurer: Lois Shadix

email: lcshadix@fuse.net

Park VIP: John Stewart

2012-2013 Dues:

If you haven't sent in your dues yet for the September
2012 - May 2013 birding season, please fill out the form
below and mail it in along with your membership fees.

Visit us on the Web at:

www.cincinnatibirds.com/birdclub/index.php

Bird Club Membership

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Yes I would like to receive my newsletter via e-mail. E-mail _____

_____ Individual \$12.00 _____ Family \$15.00 _____ Student (under 18) FREE

Make your check payable to Cincinnati Bird Club, and mail to our Treasurer:

Lois Shadix (lcshadix@fuse.net), 2928 Saddleback Dr, Cincinnati, OH 45244