



MAGEE MARSH, OHIO - May 10-14, 2010
Trip Report and Photos by Adrian Binns

This trip focused on the so-called "Warbler Capital of the World," on the shores of Lake Erie in the Northwestern region of Ohio. We came to witness the wonderful spectacle of spring migration, and, as you can imagine, we were not the only ones here! Many birders came to this destination to experience "The Biggest Week in American Birding," an annual event hosted by Black Swamp Bird Observatory, centering around Magee Marsh, Crane Creek and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge.



Ann Hannon, from San Diego Audubon Society, joined me to experience the Big Week event, and visit the hotspots. We flew in from opposite coasts, but arrived in Detroit within a few minutes of each other. Over the next several days, we explored Magee Marsh, Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, Black Swamp Bird Observatory, Maumee Bay State Park, Metzger Marsh, Oak Openings, and surrounding birding locales. We were amazed and delighted by the diverse habitat, the variety of species, and the sheer numbers of individuals that descend upon this area to partake of the food, water and shelter resources provided by these critically important areas for avian migration and breeding.



On our first evening, we stopped briefly at the Ottawa NWR Visitor's center and Black Swamp Bird Observatory (BSBO), made famous in part by Kenn and Kim Kaufman, who live and work in Ohio. We felt the chill of the evening wind blowing off of Lake Erie, but a brilliant male Baltimore Oriole (*left*) feeding on an orange on the edge of the parking lot perked us up. From this one spot we soon had Brown Creeper, Warbling Vireo, Black-and-white and Palm Warbler all in the same tree – a small taste of the treats awaiting us. We would come to know these places well in the next few days.

The next morning – and unfortunately each one thereafter – we arose to unseasonably high amounts of rain and chilly temperatures. Undeterred, we dressed appropriately, downed hot coffee, and set-off to experience the migration for which this area is so famed. We spent much of our time at Magee Marsh, just north of BSBO. Here the elevated boardwalk meanders through a deciduous wood forest, and many of the birds come so close you can almost touch them. Almost immediately, a brilliant “flame throated” Blackburnian Warbler (*right*) alighted barely fifty feet away, just above my head – a great start to the trip! It didn’t take long to see a lot of birds; I had barely covered a couple hundred feet, and already had great looks of Yellow-rumped, Nashville, Palm, Black-and-white, and Black-throated Blue Warbler. Veery’s were feeding close to the boardwalk, with at least one calling, and we had good visual comparisons of Philadelphia and Warbling Vireos, despite the low, overcast lighting conditions. A few White-throated Sparrows sensibly spent their time tucked inside of a dense willow shrub.



We encountered many other birders, all drenched, but in high spirits with the astonishing variety of species at close range. The numbers were lower than the 1,500 reported a few days ago, but there was plenty to keep us busy. Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, American Redstart, Yellow and Blackpoll were all within arm's reach, at one time or another. I spotted a Common Yellowthroat and Northern Waterthrush poking around the perimeter of a swampy spot, and heard a singing Northern Parula before taking a break.



A visit to Oak Openings, located southwest of Toledo, was a highlight of the trip. This sandy, 5-mile wide swath of sparsely wooded dunes and ridges is called “One of America’s Last Great Places” by the Nature Conservancy. The endangered Cerulean Warbler, a target for this location, was immediately found singing near the parking lot. The namesake oaks were teeming with birds, including Yellow-rumped Warblers, White-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy Woodpecker, Red-eyed Vireo, a Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawk, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, as well as one of only a couple of Summer Tanagers that nest this far north. The habitat varied between patches of woods and open, grassy meadows, hosting Chipping and Field Sparrows, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Towhee, Blue-winged Warbler, and a surprise fly-over Belted Kingfisher. These majestic oak savannas are home to Red-headed Woodpeckers, and Pileated Woodpecker. The sparse, sandy barrens have supported an isolated breeding population of Lark Sparrows for almost a century, considerably further east than their normal range in the prairies west of the Mississippi. Eastern Meadowlark, Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrow, along with a handful of Bobolinks were seen near the Toledo Airport, one of the few remaining patches of grassland large enough to support these species.

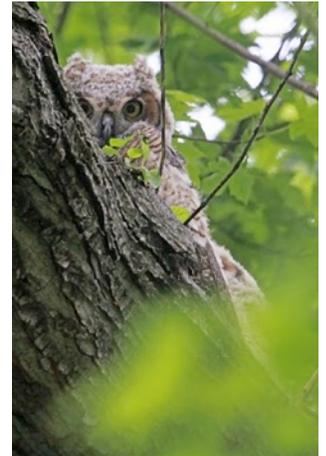


Each visit to the magical Magee Marsh brought something new and different for us to admire. Migrants seemed to panic when they flew in at dawn, saw the lake in front of them, and decided it might be better to spend one more day in the woods before crossing into Canada. Our list swelled with sightings of Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Brown Thrasher, Baltimore Oriole, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and many more. The warbler list seemed endless, including Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, Palm (*left*), Yellow, Bay-breasted, Orange-crowned, Golden-winged and Cape May Warbler.

In rainy, still conditions, the birds seemed more active at lower heights, closer to the eager onlookers. By contrast, a light wind had many birds feeding at the tops of trees, and perhaps a few less numbers. The diversity remained, no matter what the conditions, in particular of warblers, vireos and thrushes. We got great looks at Wilson's Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Pine Warbler, Ovenbird, American Redstart and Northern Waterthrush, as well as Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Blue-headed Vireo, one Yellow-throated Vireo, Swamp Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, and several Least Flycatchers. Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrush showed themselves well. Not one, but three brilliant Blackburnian Warblers foraged among the leaves overhead! We watched a male Prothonotary Warbler work on his nest cavity in a broken tree stump. He was kept busy collecting moss for nesting material, courting his mate, and avoiding an angry Red-winged Blackbird.

In addition to all the avian species, we also found a Beaver feeding on overhanging leaves, a Midland Painted Turtle, and a rather shy Mink crossing the boardwalk at Magee. When the sun finally showed, butterflies appeared, including Commas, Question Marks, Red Admirals, and American Snout.

An afternoon exploration of Ottawa NWR added some new species to our growing list. This 9000-acre refuge protects critical marsh and estuarine habitat along with some of the last remnants of Great Black Swamp bordering Lake Erie. With high water levels, we found a handful of Dunlin, Solitary and Least Sandpipers, a few Great Blue Herons and over 50 Great Egrets. The trail behind the visitor's center led us through a beautiful swampy woodland where we found Swainson's, Gray-cheeked and Wood Thrushes, and many Veery's. Two juvenile Great Horned Owls (*right*) had branched out and were roosting on a thick horizontal limb high up in a maple tree.



Adjacent to Ottawa NWR, we visited the 550-acre Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area, birding the small, one-acre wood-lot and cattail marsh. Amongst the cattails, an Eastern Phoebe and Least Flycatcher hawked for insects, while American Redstart, Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue and Tennessee Warblers foraged in the deciduous trees. The reported American White Pelican was not located, but we glimpsed Gadwall, American Coot, Common Moorhen, Pied-billed Grebe and a pair of Trumpeter Swans. A breeding plumage Black Tern was seen flying along the wide channel. Purple Martin and Northern Rough-winged Swallow were added to the plethora of Tree and Barn Swallows already seen.





West of the refuge, the bare, arable fields of Krause Road hosted Horned Lark, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Ring-necked Pheasant (*left*), amongst many Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. Along these roads we also found Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Eastern Bluebirds, and a singing Field Sparrow.

At Maumee Bay Nature Center, perched on the edge of Lake Erie, we were thrilled to see a Canada Warbler as our first bird of the morning! We located over a dozen Nashville Warblers, a pair of Scarlet Tanagers, and a Common Nighthawk roosting in one of the trees. On the ‘beach’ area surrounding the inland lake, nine Common Terns were roosting, sheltered from the wind, and a lone Caspian Tern flew over. Several Shorebirds foraged along the water’s edge, including Dunlin, Least and Spotted Sandpiper.

One evening found us on dusk vigil for American Woodcock behind the Black Swamp Bird Observatory. About a dozen birders waited patiently for a woodcock to land on the winding path ahead of us. We were not disappointed when a single bird alighted at the edge of a puddle barely 40 feet away, then waddled to the edge of the next puddle. From here we could see and hear it “*peenting*” in the hopes of attracting a mate.

We never tired of Magee Marsh, experiencing different sightings at each visit. It is difficult to describe the sheer numbers of birds – and birders – and the proximity of avian activity. We didn’t know where to look first, and our attention was constantly shifting from one marvelous bird to another! On the boardwalk every gathering of birders had their own pocket of six to ten species on which to concentrate, most without having to lift their glasses! One group had a Mourning Warbler, another a Black-billed Cuckoo. Canada’s were common, while a Hooded - being a new warbler for this week - drew a great deal of attention. A female Golden-winged (*right*) was another favorite.



Amidst all these amazing experiences, one stood out above all others. On our last day at the famed Marsh, while ogling many birds, someone caught my attention walking by at rapid pace, saying “Kirtland’s along the East Beach. Kenn.” I grabbed a startled Ann and proceeded as fast as possible. I repeated the announcement as I went - “Kirtland’s. Follow me”. Some did, and others remained enthralled with the warbler show, perhaps bewildered by my comment.

A steady line of birders worked their way along the beach to where the only birder that was not on the boardwalk had found a male Kirtland’s Warbler. Fittingly, it was none other than the event’s host and resident, Kenn Kaufman. A group growing larger by the minute was gathered in front of a open stand of short sumac, watching a most cooperative Kirtland’s Warbler. The bird was foraging along the branches, brush pile and on the ground, occasionally breaking into full song for our benefit.

With the wonder of cell phones and twitter technology, word spread quickly to the event leaders. Over the course of the next several hours, a steady stream of participants worked their way to ‘the spot’ to see this mega-rarity away from its breeding grounds. An estimated 2,500 people saw this bird on that day, definitely the biggest attraction of the week.

By the end of this special trip, we had tallied 31 species of warbler, including incredible views of the Kirtland’s. We enjoyed an amazing diversity of species, many at very close range. Truly, we experienced the “Biggest Week in American Birding!”



Ottawa NWR



Prothonotary Warbler, a breeder in wet deciduous woodlands



Veery



Black-throated Blue Warbler