



MAGEE MARSH & KIRTLAND'S WARBLER - TRIP REPORT 2015

By Adrian Binns, May 2015

Day 1 / May 16 - Pearson MetroPark

[78 degrees, overcast, light short drizzle, SSE 5 winds]

Spring migration is in full swing in northwestern Ohio, as neotropical species are winging their way to northerly breeding grounds. With much anticipation, I picked up Carl, Karin, Sarah, Sylvia and Margie at Detroit Airport this afternoon, to begin our tour of this world-famous migrant hotspot (Linda's flight had been re-routed, so I returned to the airport later in the evening to retrieve her).

It is only an hour's drive to Ohio, and after checking into our hotel, we began birding at nearby Pearson MetroPark in the town of Oregon. Pearson is a lovely little jewel in Toledo's regional park network, which preserves significant natural and historical resources. Spanning several square blocks, it encompasses extensive mature woodlands, providing habitat and food for hungry migrants and other wildlife. During our short pre-dinner visit, we enjoyed a wonderful warbler show that started with a Cerulean calling over our heads as we got out of the van. We soon located the bird and reveled in exceptional views of a male. A male Bay-breasted showed well, occasionally singing as it moved through the lower section of a tall maple. We saw colorful Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Red-eyed Vireo, and heard singing Wood Thrush.

We relaxed at the park's "Window on Wildlife" feeder station, and marveled at the beautiful setting with a pond and woodland backdrop. We enjoyed watching Eastern Chipmunks scrounge for seeds below the feeders and an Eastern Fox Squirrel drinking from the waterfall. A plethora of eastern passerines visited the feeders, including Tufted Titmouse, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue Jay, Northern Cardinal, and Mourning Dove. Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers showed-up together, making for a nice size comparison. Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Chipping Sparrow visited the station, along with lingering winter visitors, White-crowned Sparrow, and a lone Pine Siskin. A Canada and a Wilson's Warbler hopped through trees behind the feeders, along with several American Redstarts. This latter species is the most abundant warbler at the moment, with numbers arriving nightly.

An hour passed quickly, and it was difficult to leave this wonderful location, but we had to pull ourselves away to get to dinner, and for me to pick-up Linda from the airport. On our way back to the van we could hear Nashville and saw Blackpoll Warblers - a wonderful start to our tour of the aptly-described "Warbler Capital of the World!"

Day 2 / May 17 - Magee Marsh; Ottawa NWR; Metzger Marsh

[Foggy start, overcast, pm storm, 62-81 degrees winds SSE 4]

This morning we headed straight to Magee Marsh, the epicenter of warbler migration in northwestern Ohio. Last night's southerly winds helped many birds continue their northward journey, and soon we realized that their comrades had not yet arrived to replace their numbers!

Nevertheless, we walked the infamous 3/4 mile-long boardwalk and finished the day with 17 warbler species, amongst others. Yellow Warblers were most ubiquitous, and we encountered several on nests around the marshes and woodlands. Other breeders included Common Yellowthroat and stunning Prothonotary Warblers, one of which we watched bring material to her nesting cavity in a trunk 18 inches above the water level. Of the migrants, American Redstarts were the most numerous followed by a handful of Black-throated Blue, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll and Canada Warblers. We managed to track down one each of Northern Waterthrush, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped and Black-throated Green Warblers. We were especially delighted to see two American Woodcocks feeding amongst the leaf litter - life birds for Linda, Sylvia, Lauren, Karin and Carl.

While warblers were slow by Magee Marsh standards, we did very well with flycatchers enjoying excellent views of Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and an Acadian Flycatcher foraging amongst the canopy of a young ash tree. Least and Willow Flycatchers, both located by sound, were sighted at a distance. Gabriel Lugo, my fellow Wildside Tour Leader, was on the last day of guiding for the "Biggest Week in American Birding" festival, and called us over to see a Great Horned Owl roosting in a cottonwood tree. We rounded out the morning with three Sandhill Cranes flying over, several Swainson's Thrushes foraging along the forest floor, and brilliantly-colored Baltimore Orioles feasting on oranges set out for them near the car park.

After a picnic lunch sitting on tree trunk benches, overlooking a calm Lake Erie, we headed to the adjacent Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. Recent heavy downpours and a wet winter yielded high water levels and short supply of mudflats. Along the wildlife drive, our first stop produced half a dozen Blue-winged Teal, two Lesser Yellowlegs and a Least Sandpiper. On the large impoundment, we saw a few Pied-billed Grebes and the first of several Common Gallinules. A Caspian Tern flew past, just as we sought cover in the van from a passing rain storm. Once that cleared, we spotted a pair of Black Terns flying ahead of us along the channel paralleling the road. Several Trumpeter Swans, re-introduced in the mid-1990's, were seen in the distance, and we stopped to look at a closer pair, with one was on a nest. We took the opportunity to review the finer features of identification between this species and Tundra Swan. Swamp Sparrows and Marsh Wrens were singing loudly along the drive, encouraging us to stop and look for ones close to the road. While Marsh Wrens would not come out of hiding, a Swamp Sparrow showed off well, perching on stalks within its nesting territory. While watching the sparrow, an Alder Flycatcher was spotted and identified by its call, contrasted with the "*fitz-bew*" of nearby Willow Flycatchers. Pairs of Eastern Kingbirds were numerous and animated.

Our final stop of the day was Metzger Marsh, an expansive 558-acre marshland on the south end of Lake Erie, adjacent to Ottawa NWR. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources manages the land for waterfowl and other wildlife. Here we observed a number of Gadwall and American Wigeon paddling among resident Mallards. A large group of distant shorebirds included a hundred or more Dunlin, a few dozen Short-billed Dowitchers, and a breeding-plumage Black-bellied Plover. Occasionally the shorebirds and ducks would all frantically whoosh into the air, flushed by one of the five Bald Eagles hunting the marsh. In a small woodlot at the end of the entrance road, we found another Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, along with Canada, Black-and-white, Cape May, a female Blackburnian and two Palm Warblers. We'll aim for better views of some of these warbler species tomorrow, but all-in-all, it was a fine day of birding in northwestern Ohio!

Day 3 / May 18 - Pipe Creek, Camp Perry Beach, Magee Marsh, Maumee Bay SP
[71-82 degrees, cloudy, winds SSW 7-12]

Our spring migration tour continued this morning along the southern shore of Lake Erie at Pipe Creek, near Cedar Point. A small woodlot burst with bird song and activity, while the marshes held a few lingering waterfowl, namely Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, and American Coots. A Caspian Tern hunted over an impoundment, while Common Terns and a Bonaparte's Gull were seen very well. We were pleasantly surprised to see about a dozen Spotted Sandpipers taking off from the water's edge as we walked along the dike path. Willow Flycatchers sang from prominent perches to define territories.

The woods were alive with Carolina Wren, Great Crested Flycatcher, a Philadelphia Vireo, a female Scarlet Tanager, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, and Blackpoll, Black-and-white, Yellow, Bay-breasted, Tennessee, and Wilson's Warblers. Along a treeline separating the marsh from the path we had good looks at a male and female Mourning Warbler, along with Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Green Warblers. Other passerines included Indigo Bunting, Lincoln's Sparrow and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

After lunch we stopped in at the Camp Perry beach which produced a lone Honed Lark resting on the gravel, and a Semipalmated Sandpiper and Spotted Sandpiper working along the shoreline. We were delighted to watch a close Bald Eagle descend to the water and catch a fish.

We returned to the Magee Marsh boardwalk, now a familiar location for our group, where a handful of warblers were feeding at lower levels than previous days. This was much appreciated by those among us who were feeling the effects of 'warbler neck!' American Redstarts remained the most abundant, followed by small numbers of Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia and Wilson's Warblers. We followed loud, 4-noted songs to track down colorful Prothonotary Warblers near their cavity nests in the wet woods. Individual Ovenbird, Black-throated Blue, Canada, Blackpoll, and Bay-breasted Warblers showed well, but it was a brilliant male Blackburnian that stole the show! With patience, we all got to see a female Hooded Warbler who ignored the calendar to show up at this late date.

Our last birding stop was Maumee Bay State Park, where we took a short walk to the swamp behind the nature center. Several Eastern Phoebes and a drake Wood Duck showed well, while Indigo Bunting, Willow Flycatcher, Wilson's and a Canada Warbler were foraging in willows with four American Redstarts. The highlight here was red morph Eastern Screech Owl "trilling" from its perch thirty feet from a nest box. Peering closely, we could just see the top of its mate's head, a gray morph. It's always a treat to end the day with an owl, or two!

Day 4 / May 19 - Oak Openings; Magee Marsh
[46-54 degrees, overcast, W winds 12 mph]

This morning we explored Oak Openings, the largest of Toledo's expansive MetroPark system, encompassing about 4,000 acres. Featuring a diversity of habitats and wildlife, Oak Openings is a year-round paradise for naturalists and birders, and we were eager to add new species to our list. It was sunny and brisk as we began birding in the grasslands, and soon engrossed in excellent views of Eastern Meadowlarks, singing Grasshopper Sparrows and an up close Henslow's Sparrow. Sparrows were certainly the order of the day as we could hear a Savannah and encountered the first of many Field and Chipping.

Clouds rolled in shortly afterwards and winds made it feel raw. In these conditions we were thrilled to find one striking Lark Sparrow on a low shrub sheltered from the wind; Sarah spotted it, and we were all able to see it in the scope. This is the eastern edge of Lark Sparrow range, where the birds breed in areas of exposed sandy soil, remnants of ancient glacial lakes.

Walking in mixed woods and secondary scrub growth habitats, we heard a lone Blue-winged Warbler, and encountered many Indigo Buntings, American Goldfinch and Baltimore Oriole. Two male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks chased each other in dispute over a nearby female. Carl snapped a photo of an Eastern Bluebird with larvae in its mouth, as we noticed its nest - a woodpecker hole near the top of a broken tree.

A number of paths wind through picturesque open woodlands with scattered white and black oak trees. On one path we encountered several confiding Red-headed Woodpeckers, including one that flew into its nest hole then peered out at us. Our target along this stretch was Summer Tanagers and we soon were able to track a pair that were singing. We noticed burnt grasslands nearby, signifying habitat management techniques to benefit wildlife.

Heading towards the "Window on Wildlife" viewing station, a Broad-winged Hawk circled over the treeline. We were grateful for the warm indoor space to thaw our chill and enjoy a picnic lunch while watching lively feeder and stream-bathing activity out the windows. White-breasted Nuthatches, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse and Pine Siskins all made regular visits along with Red Squirrel, Gray Squirrel and several Eastern Chipmunks.

After lunch we strolled the wet woods that surrounded an edge of Mallard Lake. We heard a male Hooded Warbler getting closer, but it was difficult for everyone to see, as it moved constantly. Eventually it settled into a couple of adjacent trees for a wonderful view. In the distance we heard a Pine Warbler, and it never got any closer!

After warming up with coffee, tea and hot chocolate at Tim Horton's, we made a late afternoon stop to the now-familiar boardwalk at Magee Marsh. Much to our delight we found a few species at eye-level! None were more satisfying than a Tennessee Warbler that was holding a rolled-up leaf with its foot, so that it could unfold and feed on insects inside with its bill. American Redstarts continued to outnumber other warblers, and we enjoyed good looks at Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, and Chestnut-sided Warblers, along with a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Eastern Wood Pewees and a Gray-cheeked Thrush that we would find in the same area the next day!

The evening ended with a delightful Mexican dinner at Cinco de Mayo.

Day 5 / May 20 - Krause Road; Vic's Farm; Boss Unit; Camp Sabroske; Magee Marsh; Meinke Marina
[39-55 degrees, Partly Sunny, NNW winds 9 mph]

On our last full day in northwestern Ohio, we started the morning scanning agricultural fields along Krause Road. Horned Larks and Savannah Sparrows walked on the ground, while barn swallows swooped overhead. A handful of Hooded Mergansers were seen in residential ponds as we drove on to our next stop, Vic's Farm.

Walking the grasslands at Vic's Farm we soon encountered Eastern Meadowlark and several Field Sparrows. A very pleasant surprise was three Henslow's Sparrows, all heard and seen well. Several male Bobolinks put on a stellar show, calling as they rose in flight at the first sign of a potential mate. The property is managed for grassland species and the strategies are clearly successful, as evidenced by all of these declining species. Karin's sharp eyes picked out a distant Orchard Oriole, which we all saw well in the scope.

Two short stops rounded out the morning: The Boss Unit, part of Ottawa NWR, held Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and a Spotted Sandpiper, and Camp Sabroske, where we saw an adult Black-crowned Night-Heron. At the latter, trees lining the impoundment were surprisingly devoid of migrants with the exception of singing Blackpoll and Tennessee Warblers.

We enjoyed afternoon luck at the Magee Marsh boardwalk - an obligatory stop each day of the tour - where the Prothonotary Warbler pair was still attending their nest from yesterday. The south side of the Big Loop was the most productive area; some species were seen ridiculously close, at eye level and arm's reach! A male Blackburnian flashed his bright orange throat, and Wilson's, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, and Tennessee Warblers showed in greater numbers than yesterday. Female Blackpolls had arrived, and Bay-breasted and Black-throated Blue Warblers were present. Other passerines included Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood Pewee, and copulating Baltimore Orioles. We heard our first Cuckoo, a Black-billed, but were unable to locate it. All in all, this afternoon's warbler show was the best of the trip.

During the last hours of the day we watched shorebirds moving around a wet field at Meinke Marina. A single breeding plumaged Black-bellied Plover stood apart from a group of Semipalmated Plovers, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Dunlins. We admired these long-distance migrants who brave perilous journeys to cross two continents to reach their breeding grounds.

Day 6 / May 21 - Michelson Road, Houghton Lake Sewer and Flats; Hartwick Pines
[48-66, mostly sunny, W winds 5 mph]

This morning we embarked on the final leg of our warbler tour, heading north into the upper part of the mainland Michigan. We stopped to bird along Michelson Road near Houghton Lake, finding it relatively inactive, though we could hear Eastern Wood-Pewee, Red-eyed Vireo, Chestnut-sided and Bay-breasted Warblers, and the ubiquitous American Redstart. An Ovenbird showed well near the road, and we were pleased to see Northern Flicker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at their respective nest holes about a hundred feet apart from each other.

The Houghton Lake Sewer Ponds are a good place to find lingering ducks this time of year, and today was no exception. We saw Lesser Scaup, Northern Shoveler, Redheads, and a female Hooded Merganser. Bonaparte's Gulls comprised the majority of the gulls, more than a hundred were present, including one in full alternate plumage. Shorebirds included a few Spotted and Least Sandpipers, Dunlins and Semipalmated Plovers, along with excellent views of a White-rumped Sandpiper.

Nearby, the Houghton Lakes Flats, really a marsh, was full of water. Ospreys perched on their platform nests, while a couple of Black Terns flew over. Sylvia spotted a Sandhill Crane close to the road, which enabled us all to get a wonderful look.

We reached the Grayling area by mid afternoon. A Broad-winged Hawk flew over tall maples and hemlocks, welcoming us to beautiful Hartwick Pines State Park. At the visitor center feeders, we admired a number of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and several pairs of Evening Grosbeaks. Other species included Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Blue Jays and Black-capped Chickadees, along with Eastern Chipmunk, Red Squirrel and the black morph of Eastern Fox Squirrel foraging for seeds on the ground. We walked a paved path through majestic old growth forest, looking and listening for wildlife. Barred Owl, Black-throated Green and Pine Warblers were all heard calling, and we had good looks at Scarlet Tanager and Brown Creepers.

We checked into our hotel for the night, eagerly anticipating tomorrow's experience with Kirtland's Warbler on the breeding ground - a major highlight of our tour!

Day 7 / May 22 - Kirtland's Warbler tour; Nayanquing Point SWA
[34-55, sunny, W winds 5 mph]

We awake early to return to Hartwick Pines for the mandatory Kirtland's Warbler orientation. We were greeted by Kara, a smiling representative of Michigan Audubon. She showed us a short video about the Kirtland's habitat and conservation strategies. We then followed her as she guided the groups' car caravan to the Jack Pine habitat where the Kirtland's breed. A short walk through the 6-7 foot tall Jack Pines lead us straight to a singing male, one of several we heard. He was most cooperative perching for excellent views from an exposed perch. We watched his mate picking up nesting material as she moved back and forth low in the pines. During our two hour visit at Staley Lake we also heard Hermit Thrush and saw Eastern Bluebird, Raven, Dark-eyed Junco, Nashville and Yellow-rumped Warbler. At Chase Bridge we were pleased to add Vesper Sparrow and Brown Thrasher to list.

From Grayling we headed south on our way to Detroit making a final birding stop at Nayanquing Point SWA, a wetland on the western shore of Lake Huron. We soon found our target Yellow-headed Blackbird amongst the cattails and had two individuals fly by us, much to Karin's delight. A chorus of Swamp Sparrow and Marsh Wren was music to our ears as we watched a distant Peregrine circling.

Our final list consisted of 9 mammals, 9 butterflies, 5 odonata, 8 reptiles, 4 amphibians and 166 avian species included 29 warblers. Driving to the airport our last bird, a Pileated Woodpecker, flashed its red crest in quick flight across our route. It was a fitting end to a trip filled with colorful birds and great experiences.