

THE BIRDS OF OHIO -- 150 YEARS LATER

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If Ohio's early settlers were alive today, they would scarcely recognize the state in which we now live. Considering that the pioneers of the late 1700's and early 1800's faced an Ohio wilderness that was over 90% forested, today it is obvious that man has made overwhelming modifications on Ohio's natural landscape.

The history of Ohio's bird life provides an excellent measure of these changes. Since every bird species faces some sort of population constraints based on habitat requirements, avian populations, therefore, are forced to adjust to man's alterations of the environment. Forest inhabiting birds, such as the Broad-winged Hawk, Wild Turkey, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-eyed Vireo, Cerulean Warbler, and Ovenbird must have declined drastically in numbers over the years, if only because of a reduction in suitable nesting habitat. Forest-edge occupants, such as the Gray Catbird, American Robin, Yellow Warbler, and Song Sparrow, however, most likely have greatly increased with the gradual clearing of the woodlands. The Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Grasshopper Sparrow, and other open field inhabitants must have also benefited with the rise of agriculture. Over time, some of these population adjustments have been negated. Nonetheless, most Ohio bird species have been affected by man's influence, positively and/or negatively, to some degree.

Fortunately, we have a fairly detailed record of the changes in Ohio's avian populations. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the first attempt to enumerate Ohio's birds--Jared P. Kirtland's 1838 list, published in the 2nd Annual Report of the Ohio Geological Survey. Kirtland listed 222 species of birds then recognized as occurring in Ohio. While the admittance of several records would be considered questionable by today's standards, the great majority of accounts are straightforward. By consulting the ornithological literature published since 1838, we can trace any population changes that may have taken place in the intervening 150 years. Many of Kirtland's entries closely parallel current abundance and distribution conditions, but several notable exceptions stand out. Some of these "exceptions" are detailed in the accounts that follow.

SWALLOW-TAILED KITE

Famed naturalist Alexander Wilson was the first ornithologist to comment on the Swallow-tailed Kite's occurrence in Ohio. Wilson, in 1812, called this species ". . . very abundant in South Carolina and Georgia, and still more so in west Florida, and the extensive prairies of Ohio and the Indiana Territory." (Wilson, p. 447). Reflecting back on his first visit to Ohio in 1810, Kirtland, writing in 1876, stated that ". . . then the Swallow-tailed Hawk, in flocks of a dozen or more, may occasionally be observed, reconnoitering over fields of dead and girdled timber and diving down to capture Garter Snakes, then numerous in all our partially cleared fields." (Christy, p. 83). Evidently the status of the Swallow-tailed Kite had already changed by 1838, as Kirtland remarked "A few years (ago) the Swallow-tailed Hawk was to be seen, during the summer, in considerable numbers in Portage and Stark counties. From some unknown cause it has, of late, ceased to visit these localities." (Kirtland, p. 178). John Kirkpatrick, in 1858, concurred, but added "The prairies in Crawford County were formerly a favorite place of resort, and occasionally a specimen may be found there still. Further south it becomes more plentiful, and may sometimes be seen in small flocks during the Spring." (Kirkpatrick, p. 363). Kirtland noted a nesting near Portsmouth, Scioto County in 1850 and a specimen taken near Bucyrus, Crawford County, in 1863, but stated that none were found in Ohio during 1869. (Christy, p. 83). According to J. M. Wheaton, no more records were obtained until August 22, 1878, when a kite was collected in Licking County. (Wheaton, p. 419). In his Warren County list of 1891, Raymond W. Smith stated "The older residents of the County well recollect a Swallow-tailed Hawk that was formerly of quite common occurrence . . . which was, unquestionably, this species." (Mathena, et al., p. 47).

Lawrence E. Hicks, in 1935, wrote that the kite ". . . formerly occurred regularly and presumably nested in Portage, Stark, Crawford, Marion, Pickaway, Fayette, and Ross counties, and probably a number of others." He also stated that another specimen was taken August 29, 1898, in Ross County. (Hicks, 1935:144-45). Rather than indicating a small remnant nesting population, the two August specimen records may, in actuality, represent post-breeding wanderers from the south. The only valid published 20th century record is of a documented individual at Fremont, Sandusky County, on May 26, 1975, although at least two unpublished sightings have been reported in recent years.

While the Swallow-tailed Kite's range once extended as far north as Minnesota, the birds now breed almost exclusively in the extreme southeastern United States. (Compare Green, p. 500, and Clark, p. 27). Causes of this range retraction are confusing, but probably include human persecution, deforestation, drainage of wetlands, a decrease in prey availability, and unfavorable local weather conditions.

GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

The history of the Greater Prairie Chicken in Ohio closely parallels the fates of other populations in nearby states. In 1838, Kirtland stated, "The prairie hen is found in considerable numbers in the northwestern part of our State." (Kirtland, p. 184). Supporting this statement, an early settler remarked that ". . . in 1835 he saw more than five hundred Prairie Chickens at one time in Toledo . . . and thousands together on the open lands within six miles of Toledo." (Campbell, p. 97). Apparently a significant population decline took place in the forty-odd years after this report, causing Wheaton to state that, as of 1879, ". . . it is now very rare, though a few remain in the vicinity of Toledo, and in Erie, Ottawa, Crawford, and Marion Counties." Small numbers also lingered in Franklin, Delaware, Wyandot, Wood, Union, Madison, Fayette, and Pickaway Counties. (Wheaton, p. 446, and Hicks, 1935: 147-48). Most, if not all, of these birds disappeared by 1900. In 1903, William Leon Dawson eulogized, "The life history of the Prairie Hen of Ohio will probably never be written, certainly not unless someone is at great pains to interview the older hunters of the passing generation, and succeeds in piecing together scraps of information which have lain long dormant in memory." (Dawson, p. 436). By the late 1920's and early 1930's, however, the expanding Prairie Chicken population in southern Michigan pushed some birds back into Ohio, with reports coming from Ottawa, Fulton, Henry, and Wood Counties. (Hicks, 1935: 148). These birds soon faded into nonexistence, as ultimately have populations in surrounding states. A 1933 attempt to restock in Marion County failed.

It is likely that Ohio Prairie Chickens were limited initially to the original prairie habitats. As man cleared the woodlands adjoining these openings, Prairie Chickens were able to expand to some extent. (DeVos, pp. 498-99). Gradually, though, intensification of farming practices and hunting pressures eliminated this species from Ohio.

RING-BILLED GULL

It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of Ohio's Ring-billed Gull population in the 1800's, but it is obvious that incredible population fluctuations have taken place since then. Kirtland listed Ring-bills in 1838, but failed to elaborate. In 1882, Wheaton believed Ring-bills to be "a . . . common spring and fall migrant, perhaps formerly summer resident on Lake Erie" but felt it significant to mention his two records from central Ohio, a lone Cincinnati specimen, and a large flock in April 1874 at Buckeye Lake. (Wheaton, p. 549). By 1903, Dawson wrote "Nothing has been added to our knowledge of this Gull since Dr. Wheaton's time, and indeed its numbers must have greatly decreased since he wrote of it. . . ." (Dawson, p. 552). The well-traveled Lynds Jones of Lorain County also stated in 1903 "I have looked for this gull in vain. It is reported as rare everywhere in the state." (Jones, pp. 29-30). However the populations had grown considerably by 1950, as Ring-bills were termed locally abundant migrants and winter visitors in Cleveland (Williams, p. 69) and fairly common migrants and uncommon winter visitors in central Ohio. (Borrer, p. 20). Currently, Ring-bills are "A common-abundant permanent resident along Lake Erie where nesting is restricted to several sites in Ottawa and Lucas Counties" and fairly common-common migrants inland. (Peterjohn, et al., p. 16).

Evidence for this significant increase is given in a 1986 study of winter population trends of gulls on western Lake Erie from 1950 to 1984. In this article, Richard A. Dolbeer and Glen E. Bernhardt state that "The breeding population of Ring-billed Gulls . . . was virtually exterminated from the Great Lakes region . . . by the early 1900's. The population recovered somewhat after about 1925, and remained fairly stable from 1940 to 1960. Since 1960, there has been a major increase in breeding populations." The authors also identified a spectacular " . . . approximate 10-fold increase in the pre migratory Ring-billed Gull population on the south shore of Lake Erie from the early 1950's to the late 1960's. . . ." Cited as likely causes for the increase were a temporary decline in water levels (thus increasing the availability of nesting situations), good numbers of food-fish, and the birds' adjustment to using agricultural fields and land fills as food sources. Moreover, "Based on the population trends from Christmas Bird Counts, the limit . . . has not been reached yet." (Dolbeer and Bernhardt, pp. 1097-1102).

PASSENGER PIGEON

The demise of the Passenger Pigeon has been well documented by many writers. W. E. Clyde Todd effectively summed up the situation, remarking

" . . . ope is imbued with a sense of irreparable loss suffered by the naturalists of the country in the passing of the Pigeon. Undoubtedly, it was one of the most abundant birds (if not indeed the most abundant) on the American continent in the early days. The unbelievably vast numbers in which it was wont to appear; the extent of its daily flights; the enormous area, the unusual density, and in particular the shifting character, of its communal roosting and nesting places, were features of its life history that were unique. Here was a species so perfectly fitted to its environment and to existing conditions that, although a pair laid but a single egg . . . and although its enemies were legion, it had increased in the course of time to such an extent that it bade fair to overrun the continent by sheer force of numbers. The story of its passing is a shameful record of human cruelty, avarice, and indifference--a story one wishes had never been told." (Todd, pp. 267-68).

The Ohio history of the Passenger Pigeon is representative of the overall history of this bird. Several accounts exist of the famous hordes of birds prior to the 1860's. By 1882, Wheaton stated that the Pigeon was "Formerly an extremely abundant summer resident and migrant, appearing at all seasons. Now, much less abundant and irregular." (Wheaton, p. 441). In 1903, Jones called the Pigeons of " . . . casual occurrence during the migrations (Jones, p. 85), and Dawson lamented that "'Last records' are coming in from various quarters, but they are mainly from ten to twenty years old." (Dawson, p. 435). Actually, the last specimen was obtained in southern Pike County on March 24, 1900. Slight records of Pigeons after this date are problematical. Apparently, the last living Passenger Pigeon died September 1, 1914, at the Cincinnati Zoo.

Many factors, such as overhunting and habitat destruction, contributed to the decline of the passenger Pigeon. However, a recent study suggests "The precipitous decline of the Passenger Pigeon from 1871 to 1880, and the birds subsequent extinction, was an inescapable demographic consequence of the relentless disruption of the nesting colonies, which resulted in repeated nesting failures." Thus, entire " . . . cohorts died without the opportunity to replace themselves." (Blockstein and Tordoff, p. 845).

CAROLINA PARAKEET

Although the Carolina Parakeet will always be associated with the Passenger Pigeon, surprisingly little is known about the Parakeet by comparison. Apparently, Parakeets were once numerous summer residents in southern Ohio, especially along the bottom lands of the Ohio River and its tributaries. Smaller numbers occurred in the northern half of the state and possibly nested. While most reports were from the warmer months, Wilson observed several flocks along the Ohio River in February. (Wilson, p. 248). Sometime between 1800 and 1850, the population began to decline drastically. In 1831, John James Audubon stated that parakeets were very rapidly diminishing in number, where twenty-five years ago they were plentiful, scarcely any are now to be seen." (Wheaton p. 405). The last verified sightings from Ohio included a flock of twenty-five to thirty birds in Columbus in July, 1862 (Wheaton p. 405) and a specimen taken October 9, 1884, at Newark, Licking County. Recognizing the importance of accuracy in this final record, Jones justly cautioned "It is not impossible that this was an escaped cage-bird." (Jones, pp. 222-23). Although sight records would continue for many years, the last verifiable Carolina Parakeet died, like the Passenger Pigeon, at the Cincinnati Zoo, on February 21, 1918.

Factors resulting in the extinction of the Carolina Parakeet are many, but include habitat destruction, overhunting, capture for the cage-bird trade, and pressure from agricultural and millinery interests.

COMMON RAVEN

In 19th century Ohio, the Common Raven's loss was the American Crow's gain. With the spread of civilization and the consequent increase of farmland, the Raven disappeared along with Ohio's wilderness character. The Crow, on the other hand, took full advantage of this newly vacated niche, and despite zealous hunting pressure, increased greatly to its current status. Evidence of these population changes begins with comments of Alexander Wilson, circa 1811, concerning " . . . a Journey during the months of August and September, along the Lakes Erie and Ontario." Wilson stated "The Ravens were seen every day, prowling about in search of the Dead fish . . .but I did not see or hear a single Crow within several miles of the lakes. . . ." (Wilson, p. 675). By 1853, M. C. Read noted that, even in their stronghold of northern Ohio, Ravens were " . . . not so numerous as they once were, but (are) still frequently seen." (Williams, p. 100). Kirtland noted that by 1864 Ravens were "Becoming very rare." (Christy, p. 87). Although the last Ohio Raven specimen was taken in Paulding County, on February 8, 1890 (Hicks, 1935:161), reports continued from the northwestern counties at least until 1903, when Jones, regarding sightings in Fulton County, stated "Apparently it has been in the habit of nesting in that corner of the state and in the adjoining parts of Indiana. Doubtless the next decade will witness its complete extinction from the state." (Jones, pp. 127-28). At least one Raven has been documented in Ohio since then, this being an individual seen three times during the winter of 1946 near South Bass Island, Ottawa County. (Trautman, p. 275). With Raven populations on the rise in nearby localities, it is not unreasonable to expect further Ohio sightings in the future.

"CINCINNATI WARBLER"

A fascinating sidelight on Ohio's birds is the story of the enigmatic "Cincinnati Warbler". Quoting Karl Maslowski:

"On May 1st, 1880, Dr. Frank W. Langdon, world famous neurosurgeon and amateur ornithologist who compiled the first list of Cincinnati birds, shot a small, black, olive-green and yellow colored male warbler . . . near Madisonville (Hamilton County). It was unlike any warbler previously seen by any naturalist. Accordingly, Dr. Langdon described the bird as new to science and named it appropriately enough, the Cincinnati Warbler." (Kemsies and Randle, p. 43).

Further discussion (See Wheaton, pp. 589-90) led to the conclusion that the bird was actually a hybrid of the Blue-winged and Kentucky Warblers. Interestingly, a second specimen was collected in late May, 1948, in Cass County, Michigan.

Any commentary relating to the history of Ohio's birds would not be complete without some mention of the Kirtland's Warbler. On May 13, 1851, Kirtland was given an unusual warbler collected by his son-in-law at the Kirtland farm in Rockport (now Lakewood), Cuyahoga County. Recognizing the specimen as something out of the ordinary, Kirtland presented it to Spencer F. Baird, who later named the bird "Sylvicola kirtlandii" after his friend. (Mayfield, p. 5). It seems fitting that this bird of great scientific interest should always be identified with a man who had such an enormous impact on the history of Ohio's birds.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Readers may be interested in a recent Cincinnati warbler article published after completion of this article. See WILSON BULLETIN Vol. 100 (2):285-89.



CINCINNATI WARBLER (*Helminthophaga cincinnatiensis*)