

Further Afield
by Rob Harlan

After editing this journal for some six years, and having thousands of bird records pass across my desk, I can very confidently say that most records are, thankfully, straightforward. Although every editor has a preconceived filter about what is acceptable—and this varies from editor to editor—the fact remains that most records fit nicely into categories of “publish” or “don’t publish,” once compared to other records received for a given season. A flock of 24 white-rumped sandpipers probably would be published; a flock of 24 starlings probably wouldn’t. A yellow warbler at Hoover Reservoir on April 20 might be published (depending on how early other reporters found yellow warblers elsewhere), but the same yellow warbler at Hoover on June 20 would probably not find its name in print, being too routine given the date. Each record demands its own judgment, but most judgments are straightforward. To your friendly editor, “straightforward” is good.

But no one ever said that “straightforward” had to be interesting. I have assembled four bird reports here that are anything but straightforward. All have been published in various journals over the years, spanning the period from 1917 to 1962. Editors and authors have, over these years, dealt with these records several times, each time with eyebrows raised. It is not my intention here to question the decisions of others, or to question the veracity of the bird reports themselves. Instead, I simply pose to the reader the question: what would you have done with these?

The barnacle goose is an Old World species that appears in North America, albeit rarely, generally during the expected migration period from October through April. Most North American records come from eastern Canada and the northeastern US, as would be expected for a Greenland nester. Records from outside these areas, or from outside the migration period, are open to much conjecture, especially since the species is widely kept in captivity. It is no surprise that Ohio has no barnacle goose records currently accepted by the Ohio Bird Records Committee. But we do have at least one published record, perhaps with at least some merit. According to a brief 1932 notice published in *The Auk* (49(4):460), “On November 5, 1925, Mr. Chester K. Brooks... shot a fine-plumaged male... on the marshes of the Winous Point Shooting Club near Port Clinton, Ohio, at the head of Sandusky Bay. This bird was presented to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History by Mr. Brooks and is now preserved in the collection of that institution.” Dr. John W. Aldrich, the author of the piece and then Curator of Ornithology at the Museum, stated that “while it is possible that this bird may have escaped from confinement, the condition of the plumage gives no hint of this.” Aldrich also contacted “the directors of the leading zoological parks of the north central states but no records of escaped barnacle geese were forthcoming. Furthermore, the fact that the... specimen was accompanied by another of the same species at the time Mr. Brooks shot it makes the chances of its being an escaped bird much less.” In retrospect, I wonder how the number of private aviculturists in existence in 1925 compares with the number today. Also, captive individuals of migratory species may escape in one locality and attach themselves to a migrating flock of a similar species, ending up far from the escape site. In *Abundance and Distribution of the Birds of Ohio* (Peterjohn et al., 1987) this report is treated as that of an escaped bird. It does give one cause to ponder, however, given the early twentieth-century date, the presence of two

birds, and the November occurrence.

Reverse migration is a phenomenon in which migrating birds travel in the opposite direction of expected travel; it is well-documented elsewhere, but seldom observed in Ohio, particularly in the fall. Nevertheless, reverse migration may account for a peculiar series of observations made by Lawrence E. Hicks, then with Ohio State University, along Alum Creek in Delaware County on November 16, 1931 (*The Auk*, 49 (2):222, 1932). While engaged in field work along the Alum Creek bottomlands, Hicks noted two birds he identified as great crested flycatchers flying overhead at about 150 feet elevation. After briefly stopping in a tree, the birds continued flying to the southwest. A minute later, two more great crested flew over, then another, and then two more. Hicks collected one of the latter two for verification. If that were not enough, two more flew by later, for a total of nine great crested flycatchers, all on November 16. The collected specimen, which was deposited at the Ohio State Museum of Biological Diversity in Columbus, “was found to be in excellent condition with a large amount of fat,” according to Hicks. Certainly, a single great crested flycatcher on November 16 would today arouse much interest over the possibility of a western stray, most likely ash-throated flycatcher, but the specimen speaks for itself in this case. It is hard to imagine what other phenomenon could have brought nine great crested into Ohio in mid-November if not reverse migration. Hicks cites “unusually warm summer temperatures which prevailed during much of October and November.” Perhaps after heading south during the expected migration period of August and September, these birds came back north during the extended warm spell, only to be discovered heading south again by Hicks in mid-November. It is curious, though, that Hicks listed no other bird species that were out of the ordinary that day. If this was a reverse migration, did only great crested flycatchers take part, and why was Hicks the only observer to find them?

The next report certainly pushes the limits of acceptability, and possibly good-faith reporting as well. Everyone knows that black-throated blue warblers are not to be expected in Ohio during the winter months; winter records are virtually non-existent. Except, perhaps, on the Killdeer Plains Christmas Bird Count of January 2, 1966. CBCs aren’t always the most scientifically rigorous undertakings, with rare birds all too often poorly documented or not documented at all. If only this were the case with this report, it would make things a bit more palatable. But instead, observers at Killdeer Plains that day totaled 23 black-throated blue warblers, and sent their report to “CBC Central” accompanied by a “sheet of details... accurately describing in detail both male and female plumages,” according to the CBC editor in *Audubon Field Notes* (20(2):226). Our troubled editor continues, “This observation sounds incredible. Ohio must double-check this report before accepting it. National Christmas Count record only 5.” To my knowledge, very few have accepted this report as valid since its initial publication. Many times, an “incredible” report (read as “not credible”) is merely the result of an observer’s mistake, listing a bird on the wrong line or column, or submitting a typo of some kind; all are errors easily rectified with a little detective work by the editor. But this report includes “a sheet of details,” with apparently accurate descriptions of both sexes! What possible explanation does that leave us? It seems to me we have either a report that seems to defy all logic, or else a prank of some sort. If anyone is still around who can shed more light on this report of 23 BTBs, we’d love to hear the details.

Another remarkable record revolves around Ohio's only accepted record of Harris's hawk, a native of the southwestern US and points south. Although the species is largely resident, dispersals have occurred on rare occasions in the winter months, whereupon birds appear outside their normal range. It is a gregarious bird, and one that adapts well to captivity; it is a species popular with falconers. This said, our story (*Wilson Bulletin* 30(1):15-16, 1918) begins with Thomas M. Earl, a well-known Columbus area taxidermist, receiving a parcel post package from J.H. McKinley of Harrisburg, Ohio, on December 29, 1917. Although it was customary for Earl to receive specimens from McKinley for mounting, unlike normal shipments this one arrived without written comments. Earl recognized it as a Harris's hawk, and stated "I could not bring myself to think that it had not been shipped in from the Texan border by some soldier friend perhaps" of McKinley. Several weeks passed before Earl finally spoke with McKinley. The latter maintained that "The hawk in question was shot by a farmer, living some four miles southeast of Harrisburg, on or about December 24, 1917. On the morning of that day a pair of these hawks were molesting this man's poultry and had killed one or two of them when they were frightened away. In the afternoon they returned, when the farmer, armed with a shotgun, killed this one, the mate then disappearing. After lying around for several days, the hawk was then brought to town and given to me." Thus the hawk came into McKinley's possession, and finally into Earl's. The specimen still exists, and resides at the Ohio State Museum in Columbus. It bears no signs of captivity, and is in good condition. In concluding his article, Earl sums up: "It is a remarkable coincidence in name that a *Harris* hawk should have been first taken near *Harrisburg*, Ohio." (italics in the original).

It should be noted that the following is purely conjecture, and a wild one at that. It is a fact, however, that an institution known as the "Liar's Club" was commonplace in turn-of-the-century small-town America. A group of like-minded folks would gather together regularly with the express purpose of telling "tall tales," the taller the better, and all with a straight face. There was no malicious intent, but if someone from outside the club were to believe one of their tales, well...all the better. But to make sure that no one in the club would be fooled by a tale that had circulated in the outside world, club members would include an aside, or a sort of "wink-wink" acknowledgment, in each tale meant to be recognized only by club members, thus saving them from the gullibility of outsiders. An example of such a "wink-wink" acknowledgment might be something along the lines of "Isn't it curious Mr. Bass caught his record trout on Bass Lake?" or even "Isn't it peculiar that a Harris's hawk would be found in Harrisburg, Ohio?"

Not to belabor my precarious point, or risk ridicule for your old retired editor, but I find it a curious coincidence that this story ties in with bird banding. Bird banders have a widely-accepted form of abbreviating the names of bird species, used to save time when hustling to band, record, and release many birds during a busy period. For bird species with two-word names, such as yellow warbler, banders traditionally abbreviate using the first two letters of the first word and the first two letters of the second, giving us YEWA in this example. Likewise, for American woodcock the abbreviation would be AMWO, for wood thrush it would be WOTH, and for Harris's hawk it would be.....

Ohio Grassland Breeding Bird Survey

by Jim McCormac

Neotropical migrants—such as warblers, tanagers, flycatchers, etc. —have garnered their fair share of attention lately due a perception that many of these species are on the decrease. While this is probably true, neotropicals face a threat that we North Americans are largely powerless to affect—the destruction of Central and South American wintering habitat. There is at the same time another group of birds that is likely even more at risk, a risk that prevails here in the midwestern United States.

Grassland birds are familiar to most birders: meadowlarks, bobolinks, short-eared owls, and various sparrows, such as grasshopper and Henslow's. Prior to settlement and large-scale alterations of North American ecosystems by Europeans, grassland species were confined to the vast prairies of the central U.S., which extended as far east as central Ohio. In Ohio, there were several large prairie regions: the Sandusky Plains, which covered parts of Crawford, Marion, and Wyandot counties, and of which Killdeer Plains is the only substantial remnant; the Pickaway Plains, a huge prairie that occupied central Pickaway and Ross counties south of Circleville; and the Darby Plains in Madison and Union counties, including the location of the proposed Darby Plains National Wildlife Refuge. There were numerous other prairies, too—some substantial, most small, but today sharing one trait—almost all have been destroyed by agriculture or other development.

Of the nearly 1200 square miles of original Ohio prairie, less than 1% remains, giving this habitat the dubious distinction of being our rarest natural feature. Given



Large expanse of open grassland at Crown City WA showing the invasion of Asian bush-clover, *Lespedeza cuneata* (the lighter shaded areas). This introduced weed overruns enormous areas, and is largely worthless for avifauna. However, northern bobwhite and Henslow's sparrow do frequently utilize this habitat. Photo by Jim McCormac.