Further Afield
by Rob Harlan

We now rejoin our long adventure to determine Ohio's Bird of the Century. In our previous episode:

In March 1900 a Pike County boy shot the last passenger pigeon ever taken in the wild. It had been eating the boy's corn. In a unique expression of "season's greetings," a Columbus-area farmer shot Ohio's only recorded Harris's hawk during late December 1917. It had been harassing his poultry. In May 1929, a vagabond Leach's storm-petrel somehow found its way to Dayton. Apparently engrossed in seeing the sights, it flew headlong into an immovable object and didn't get up in the morning. After an exhausting trans-Atlantic flight in November 1935, a Eurasian woodcock soon found itself in a Geauga County cook-pot. And in October 1947, Milton B. Trautman, a notorious scientific collector of birds, saw a great gray owl in Ottawa County but didn't shoot it.

Considering the grim record outlined above, I'm glad I wasn't a rare bird in Ohio during the first half of the twentieth century. But perhaps Dr. Trautman's hesitance to pull the trigger on that owl was a portent of more positive things to come. Indeed, none of the birds in the accounts that follow ended belly-up in a museum tray. While I have no doubt that much of what we know today has come only with the study of museum specimens, I also believe there is much to be learned from the living bird, and much satisfaction and excitement as well. Read on.

1950-59

The year is 1950. Harry S. Truman is our 33rd President. North Korea invades South Korea on 25 June 1950. With the Korean armistice of 27 July 1953, America enters a period of strong economic growth and the rise of suburbia. Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus on 1 December 1955. On 21 April 1956, "Heartbreak Hotel" becomes Elvis Presley's first single (of 17) to reach #1 on Billboard magazine's Hot 100 chart. The Soviet Union launches Sputnik on 4 October 1957. In 1959, Alaska and Hawaii become our 49th and 50th states.

Somehow it just doesn't seem right that our most over-the-top outlandish bird ever came from a decade perhaps best remembered for its tranquil equanimity. In fact, I'd guess that the majority of Ohio birders (*Cardinal* readers excepted, of course) have never even heard of the species in question. A mostly resident species that nests primarily along the sandy shorelines of South American rivers and lakes, it has nevertheless somehow also found its way to Illinois in 1949 and New Jersey in 1988. Why, of course—we're speaking of large-billed tern. Put yourself in the shoes of Vincent P. McLaughlin and his two compatriots, who together were watching a migration of terns at Evans Lake, just south of Youngstown, on 29 May 1954. They noted three terns together on a sandbar—a Caspian, a common, and a mystery. The third tern was intermediate in size, with yellow legs, a dark back and cap, and, most tellingly, an out-of-proportion "top-heavy" yellow bill. Although none of the observers recognized the species, McLaughlin had the presence of mind to sketch the bird on the spot. He subsequently sent the sketch to Kenneth C. Parkes at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, who identified the bird as the fairly unmistakable large-billed tern *Phaetusa simplex*.

As far as we know, the bird was never seen again. Interestingly, the 1988 New Jersey bird was discovered 30 May, while the Ohio bird of 1954 was found just a day earlier on the calendar, on 29 May. Do I sense a pattern? Well, maybe not, but we do at least have a bird with a total score of 11 points (see our ranking scale in the last issue, 23 (1):22 & 27), with three points for being our only state record, one point for having only written (or, in this case, sketched) details, two points for having been seen only by the original small party, and five points according to the American Birding Association's rarity code scale.

Large-billed Tern
by Ben Winger

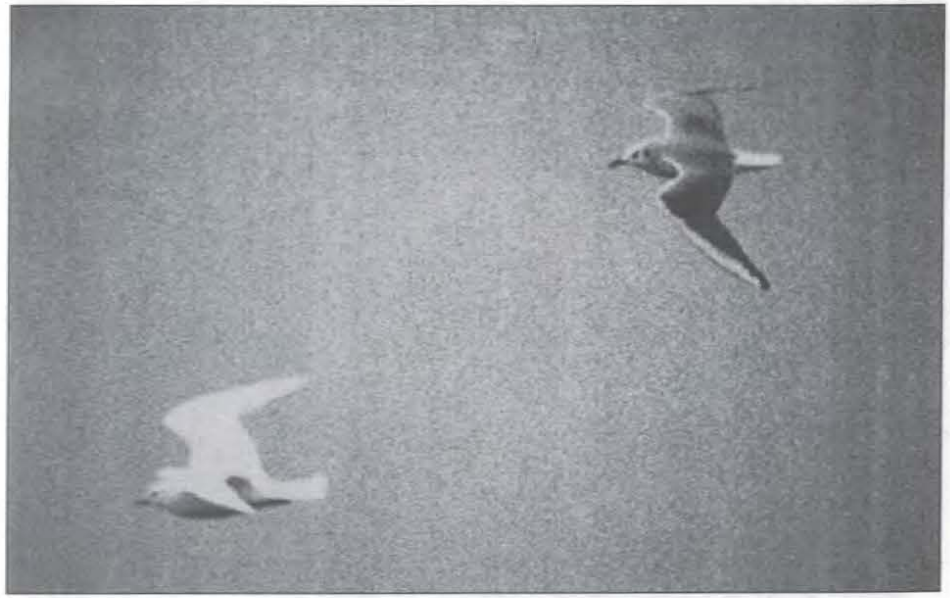
The year is 1960. Dwight D. Eisenhower is our 34th President, followed in January 1961 by John F. Kennedy. The Cuban missile crisis is touched off on 22 October 1962. Dr. Martin Luther King gives his "I have a dream" speech in Washington 28 August 1963. On 1 February 1964, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" propels the Beatles to the #1 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for the first time, a feat they were to repeat 17 more times during the sixties. North Viet Nam attacks two American destroyers 2 August 1964, plunging the US into war for the remainder of the decade. Dr. King is assassinated in Memphis 4 April 1968. Neil Armstrong becomes the first human to walk on the moon 20 July 1969.

The so-called "Red Menace" seemed omnipresent in the 1960s, whether in Cuba, Southeast Asia, China, or the Soviet Union. Communist advances were a very tangible concern. In fact, one Siberian outlander, a red-necked stint, even made it as far as Ashtabula County. On 21 July 1962, Jon Ahlquist noticed a small peep with a decidedly reddish head and neck feeding along the Walnut Beach mudflat in the company of semipalmated and least sandpipers. But in keeping with the politically charged mood of the day, the stint's North American congeners gave it the proverbial cold shoulder, frequently chasing and pecking at it, as if they somehow knew that it didn't belong. And when the flock was briefly flushed, the stint flew alone. But at least no one shot at it, which was a step in the right direction. Instead, Ahlquist took diagnostic photos and shared the bird with several other birders that day and the next, establishing this sighting as the first US record outside Alaska. Although the species has since proven to be a regular vagrant, especially along our Atlantic coast, an inland sighting is still truly extraordinary. We'll rank this bird with a total score of 12 points, based on three points for being our only record, two for having diagnostic photos taken, three for being widely viewed, and four according to the ABA rarity code.

This red-necked stint, observed on 21-22 July 1962 at Walnut Beach, Ashtabula Co., provided the US with its first record outside of Alaska. Needless to say, it was Ohio's first and has been dubbed the bird of the 1960s. Photo by Jon Ahlquist.

The year is 1970. Richard M. Nixon is our 37th President. Four Kent State University students are shot by National Guardsmen 4 May 1970 during a protest over the war in southeast Asia. Five men break into the Watergate office complex in Washington 17 June 1972. President Nixon resigns 9 August 1975. South Viet Nam formally surrenders 30 April 1975. The US celebrates its Bicentennial 4 July 1976. The Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Middletown, Pennsylvania suffers a partial meltdown 28 March 1979.

Speaking of meltdowns, Jim Hoffman probably had one when he discovered an adult ivory gull along the Cleveland lakefront 17 December 1975. Apparently driven by inclement weather to the refuge of the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company's hot water outlet, the bird remained through 19 December to be seen by many. Diagnostic photos were obtained, and the bird sometimes cavorted as close as 15 feet to observers, allowing study of its black legs and eyes, it short, thick, gray bill tipped with yellow, and its all-white plumage. A nice week-before-Christmas present, I'd say. With records in about 15 of the lower 48 states, this sighting represents our only confirmed visit by this denizen of the Arctic pack-ice, and grades out with a total score of 11 points, with three for being the only state record, two for being captured in diagnostic photos, three for being widely viewed, and three according to the ABA rarity code.



Jim Hoffman discovered this adult ivory gull on 17 December 1975 at the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company's hot water outlet. It remained until 19 December, to the delight of numerous observers, and was photographed by Jean Hoffman (with a Bonaparte's gull nearby). This is Ohio's only record and, of course, the bird of the 1970s.

The year is 1980. Jimmy Carter is our 39th President. Sixty-three Americans are taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran 4 November 1980. Minutes after Ronald Reagan is sworn in as our 40th President, the hostages are released after 444 days in captivity. The space shuttle Columbia, the world's first reusable spacecraft, is sent into orbit 12 April 1981. The space shuttle Challenger explodes during lift-off 28 January 1986, killing all seven aboard. The Soviet Union teeters on the brink of collapse, and the Berlin Wall falls in November 1989.

Clearly in an effort to escape the political fragmentation in Eurasia, Ohio's only brambling sought sanctuary at the Bath feeders of Helen and Horace Harger in Summit County on 31 March 1987, reappearing irregularly through 7 April. This beautiful male was seen by many of the faithful over the course of its stay, and was diagnostically photographed as well. Our thanks go to Larry Rosche for rectifying its initial identification as a sunflower-seed-snarfing, late-March bay-breasted warbler, which admittedly would have been interesting as well. No disrespect is meant to the well-meaning Hargers, who graciously withstood a week's onslaught of onlookers at their home, keeping their feeders constantly primed for action. Looking back, it was well worth the 13 hours of standing in the snow, waiting for the bird to reappear. It did, and we all went home happy. Frozen, but happy. This Eurasian finch has now been identified in about 20 states, but only once in Ohio, and has earned a total score of 12 points, with three points for being the only state record, two for being diagnostically photographed, three for being widely observed, and four according to the ABA rarity code.

Taking advantage of well-stocked feeders, this brambling was viewed by many during its visit in Bath, Summit Co., from 31 March to 7 April 1987. Not only is it Ohio's only record, it is the bird of the 1980s as well. Photo by Larry Rosche.

The year is 1990. George Bush is our 41st President. Iraq invades Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Operation Desert Storm forces Iraq to surrender 27 February 1991. The disintegration of the Soviet Union begins in earnest in August 1991. O.J. Simpson is found not guilty of murder 3 October 1995. Later that month, Atlanta Braves outfielder David Justice hits a home run to defeat the Cleveland Indians in the 1995 World Series, leaving Robert N. Harlan a broken, bitter shell of a man. President Clinton misbehaves. At the close of 1999, the world's human population is estimated at 6 billion, up from 1.6 billion in 1900.

As you can tell, it turned out to be a rather uneventful decade. But not for Ohio birders, however, as this was the only ten-year span that failed to produce a single clear-cut Bird of the Decade. Two sightings earned 12 points, an Adams County plover and a Seneca County alcid. Why a northern lapwing would choose to fly from Eurasia only to land in a winter wheat field near Panhandle, Ohio on 29 December 1994 is beyond me. Birds sometimes do silly things, such as leaving for good some twenty minutes before Tom LePage and I could complete our four-hour drive from Cleveland to Panhandle the next morning. *C'est la vie.* Nonetheless, it was widely seen, as in addition to its discoverer Martin McAllister at least 20 more people did observe it during its two-day stay. Surprisingly, however, no one apparently was able to get any photos, a factor that influences not only the rankings for this decade but for the century as well. To the best of my knowledge, this sighting represents the furthest incursion into the US inland by this species. We'll give it a total score of 12 points, with three for being our only state record, one for being a sight record only, three for being widely observed, and five according to the ABA rarity code.

The second bird to earn 12 points in the nineties appeared in the optics of Dan Webb, a Heidelberg College student doing a routine waterfowl survey at Beaver Creek Reservoir 12 November 1996. He consulted Vic Fazio, who rushed over to see the bird, and it became apparent that this individual represented the Siberian race of marbled murrelet, rumored soon to be split into a species of its own, the long-billed murrelet. And so it was. All in all, some 300 observers came from far and wide to relish this wayward bird through 18 November, and many behavioral notes and diagnostic photos were obtained. With more than 15 records away from the Pacific coast, perhaps this bird wasn't totally unexpected, but was nonetheless thoroughly enjoyed by all. And so this sighting is awarded a total score of 12 points, three for being our only state record, two for being diagnostically photographed, three for being widely observed, and four according to the definitions used in the ABA rarity code.

Well, now what? Back in the first installment of this article, I outlined my methodology for discovering an *objective* Bird of the Century, based on four comparative ranking scales. "The bird with the highest total score wins," I wrote, "either in determining the bird of each decade, or…the Bird of the Century. Simple enough." Oh, how blissfully naïve I was back in the golden days of a few months ago, when I first started laying out this series. It all seemed so straightforward then. But then something happened, something utterly pernicious and horrific. The competition ended in a tie.

A five-way tie, to be exact. Nobody likes a tie. In sports vernacular, it is said to be as exciting as kissing one's sister (not that I've ever tried this, you understand). Clearly, something had to be done to ease the logjam. A winner had to be chosen. An undisputed king must be crowned. And after all the noble designs of objectivity, it

seems we were going to have to make a *subjective* decision after all. Fasten your seat belts, please.

We are left with five birds, each with a total score of 12 points: Eurasian woodcock, red-necked stint, brambling, northern lapwing, and long-billed murrelet. I'll eliminate the woodcock first. You'll recall that its identification was partially based on bones. According to Peterjohn's *The Birds of Ohio,* however, "This skeletal material was deposited in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, but it is no longer in the museum's collections and its whereabouts is unknown." Oops. Next to go is the lapwing, because apparently no photographs were obtained. If they had been, this bird would have graded out at 13 points, and would thus be the undisputed winner. At least this offers some measure of revenge against a bird that had the gall to leave 20 minutes before I got there. Hah. Next to go is the red-necked stint, a species that is now pretty much annual a few hours' drive away on the Atlantic coast. Sorry, comrade. Now we are down to two challengers, the brambling and the long-billed murrelet. And since I've always felt some distaste for feeder birds, especially those that make me wait thirteen hours before I see them, it seems we have a winner. And finally—in reverent hushed tones of course—we present the Bird of the Century, the Seneca County long-billed murrelet, seen and studied by some 300 people from 12 November to 18 November 1996.

We've come a long way in the 1900s, from shooting our last passenger pigeon (for eating corn) and capitally punishing our only Harris's hawk (for harassing poultry); all the way to a weeklong group hug and learning-fest over a drably-plumaged Asian alcid. I don't know what that passenger pigeon would tell us if he could speak, but I think he might at least acknowledge that we are headed in the right direction on our perpetual road trip. That it might be too late for his kind, but not for ours. And that's a pretty good way to start a new century, I should think.

The 1990s were good years for vagrant bird species. In fact, two species tied for the Bird of the Decade—northern lapwing and long-billed murrelet. Forced to abandon his professedly objective criteria, the author crowned this **long-billed murrelet** the Bird of the Century. This bird was cooperative for over 300 onlookers and stayed at the Beaver Creek Reservoir, Seneca Co., from 12-18 November 1996. Photo by Vic Fazio.

The 1999-2000 Christmas Bird Counts

by Ned Keller

This year, the 100th year for the Audubon Christmas Bird Counts, we report the results from 62 count circles. Two of them are centered outside Ohio, but include substantial portions of their areas in Ohio. Five of the counts are "unofficial" counts. These counts are conducted along the same lines as the official counts, but for various reasons the participants choose not to report them to the National Audubon Society. We want to thank the compilers of all the counts, official or otherwise, for taking the time and effort to send their results to us for this report.

Each column in the report is headed by the name and date of the count. The number in parentheses corresponds to the numbered circle on the accompanying map. We have dropped the regional groupings this year. With the increased number of count circles, we could no longer fit the results onto two sets of pages (a northern group and a southern group); and instead of trying to find three geographic ranges that made sense, we just lumped all the counts into one alphabetic listing. We have added two additional columns, for total individuals on all counts, and for number of circles reporting each species.

We received documentation for many particularly rare birds. Those records are marked by an asterisk in the report. As always, we report the information sent to us as received by the compilers, even when documentation was omitted. We did, however, drop a few obvious exotics, and corrected a couple of obvious errors. We included reports of trumpeter swans, even though they are almost certainly part of the introduced population. This species is likely to become established at some point, so we might as well start keeping track of how many winter here.

This past year, Ohio counters found a total of 1,087,541 individual birds of 147 full species, plus three more species during count weeks. Seventeen of those species were represented by only a single bird, and five more species appeared on only a single count. At the other end of the spectrum, 14 species were found on all 62 counts. The most common species, European starling, was represented by 196,010 individuals.

Counters at Millersburg found 89 species to lead the state this year, followed by Toledo with 87 species, Elyria-Loran with 83 species, Cuyahoga Falls with 82 species, and Cincinnati, Gypsum, and Mansfield with 80 species each.

Northern harriers were tallied on 45 CBCs in Ohio. This male was photographed at Killdeer Plains WA, Wyandot Co., by Len Powlick during the winter season.