

Further Afield by Robert Harlan

I like to look at things differently. This is not to say that I'm automatically disagreeable in the unpleasant sense; in fact, I can be downright civil if the need should arise. I prefer to examine any given subject from a variety of different angles. If one of those angles serves to gently goose the standard line of thinking, then so be it. At the very least this should make things more interesting. You'll recall the old story about the group of blind-folded folks and the elephant—everyone attempted to describe what could be sensed by touch from different perspectives. One described the trunk, one described an ear, one a leg, one a flank, and another described the tail. Although I can conjure up only a few images more unfortunate than being the person assigned the task of describing the area around the elephant's tail, the exercise turned out for the greater good. Separately, their various descriptions only added to the confusion, but when combined, a clearer image of the whole began to form. It is this clearer image that I seek. After all, how does one recognize something as "good" unless it can be compared to something worse? And it is that "something worse" to which we dedicate this column. My nominations for various Ohio "worsts" lie directly ahead. Please watch your step.

Just recently, many of us were asked by Audubon Ohio to participate in a project designed to compile a list of Ohio's most important birding areas. Participants were invited to nominate birding sites they deemed particularly valuable to birds and birders. These areas might harbor rare or endangered species. They might contain rare habitats, or significant numbers of nesting, wintering, or migrating birds. Or they might boast a long history of research undertaken locally. Through a rigorous process, 71 sites have so far been designated as Important Bird Areas. Many more valuable sites await nomination—I suggest that if your favorite spot has yet to be nominated, that you do so promptly, as once accepted as an IBA, these sites achieve a priority status for management and protection. Potentially, this project could prove very worthwhile, assuming funding, manpower, and cooperation all come together as needed. But this column isn't about Ohio's most important or best birding areas. That would be too simple. I fear that as usual, I must look at this topic from a different angle. To have good birding areas, one must logically have lousy birding areas. Have you ever stopped to consider what might be Ohio's *worst* birding area? Well, I have.

Now, first off, before any brickbats are thrown, of course I realize that it's not fair to label any area as the worst Ohio has to offer. After all, how does one define the "worst" area? Worst by having the lowest number of species present? Worst by virtue of lowest overall number of individual birds? Worst in a given season? Or perhaps "worst" could even refer to the area that is least birded and therefore most poorly known. With all these potential pitfalls in our path, we need a concrete definition for "worst." For our purposes here, the worst area is henceforth defined as: the Ohio county which, according to the *Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* (1991), contained the lowest number of confirmed or probable nesting avian species during the Atlas period. There. That is what "worst" means.

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So, after painstakingly wasting several hours poring through the *Atlas* and compiling the number of confirmed or probable nesting species for each of Ohio's 88 counties, it was finally determined that Ohio's worst birding area straddles the Lake Plains and Till Plains regions along the Indiana border, lying immediately below Paulding County and immediately above Mercer County. However, so as not to offend either birder living in said county, we will not name that county directly. We will politely say only that the name of this particular county begins with "Van" and ends with "Wert." No more.

Just how bad is our mystery county, which interestingly enough was named after Revolutionary War hero Isaac Van Wart? Bad enough, I suppose, that a clerical error has caused the county's name to be misspelled for over 200 years. But that is beside the point. In truth, it's probably not so bad there after all, assuming you like soybean fields and dislike trees. According to the cold hard facts, however, only 76 species were tallied there as confirmed or probable breeders in the county's Priority Blocks during the six *Breeding Bird Atlas* years. Compare this to the statewide average of 103 species per county, and the top-scoring county, Lucas, which weighed in with a whopping 154 confirmed or probable nesting species.

Now, it must be stressed that comparatively little intensive birding has been undertaken in our unnamed lowest-scoring county. In fact, it is one of our most poorly-known sectors of the state birdwise. It must also be said that the likelihood is great that some tasty local birding spots simply didn't fall within the boundaries of the county's six *Atlas* Priority Blocks, and therefore a goodly number of localized species might have gone undetected. Actually, the St. Marys River corridor, a site in southern Van Wert County (oops, I didn't mean to mention it by name), has already been accepted by Audubon Ohio as one of our state's Important Bird Areas. Other nooks and crannies look enticing on the various topographical maps covering the county; enticing enough, in fact, to inspire me to attempt at least one special birding weekend to Van Wert County this summer, with an eye toward searching for nesting species. Actually, it might prove interesting and educational if other concerned birders were to do likewise this year. I'm guessing that with some intensive effort, as a group our species list might approach the upper 80s or even hit the lower 90s, thereby removing from this area the stigma of being the worst Ohio birding county. Then, that ignoble distinction would fall to...oh, never mind. Some knowledge is best kept to oneself.

Now let's choose a smaller target, shall we? While still on the delicate subject of the worst birding Ohio has to offer, it should be pointed out that the lowest-scoring of the 764 Priority Blocks for the *Breeding Bird Atlas* was not in Van Wert County. No, that honor belongs to the Dayton North Block in Montgomery County. State-wide, Priority Blocks averaged 78 confirmed, probable, and possible nesting species. The Dayton North Block, however, stumbled in at 48 species and, quite frankly, observers canvassing this block should consider it a job well done to discover even that many, heavily urbanized as the area was, with basically only one small riverside city park to provide any reasonable variety in habitat. And yes, I can vouch for this first-hand, as I was one of those valiant observers.

In retrospect, perhaps the list could have been higher if more time had been spent birding the riverside park. However, the first time I attempted to bird the area, my car was trapped in a small parking lot behind a locked gate, and I was forced to call the police to let me out. It seems the lot was not meant for public use, and had been opened only briefly for a city maintenance truck to gain access to the park. Apparently, the maintenance employee locked up the gate after leaving, and hadn't noticed my car sitting there. The only other vehicle in the lot. The car with the "State of Ohio" license plates. The *bright white* state car. The bright white state car that I had parked *right next* to the maintenance truck. Considering how the maintenance crew overlooked my car, I suppose that it might be possible I had overlooked some species in the park as well. I didn't go back.

And now, continuing our theme of things different, my nomination for Ohio's most maddening and baffling published "rarity" article. This is not intended to imply that the birds in question were misidentified. Actually it's hard to say whether they were correctly identified or not, as there are simply not enough data to go on. Just enough tantalizing hints are included in the article, however, to indicate that perhaps at least some were correctly identified. Beats me, though. The article in question appeared in West Virginia's journal *The Redstart* 28(4), but concerns Ohio's spring migration of 1961. The article, entitled "Black-throated Gray Warblers Invade Muskingum County," contains the following data: in early May 1961, Muskingum County "was hit hard by several violent windstorms which originated in the Southwest." Shortly after these events, the author and his wife (both of whom who shall here remain nameless) heard an unfamiliar warbler song that reminded them of a song of the black-throated green warbler, a "zee zee zee zee zee." When seen through binoculars, the singer "had a black throat, white on the cheek, white wing-bars and black streaks on the sides." The author identified the bird as a male black-throated gray warbler, which would of course be an extremely rare, but nonetheless plausible sighting, although the supporting details do not point conclusively to black-throated gray or, for that matter, black-and-white or blackpoll warblers.

But here's where things get even more interesting. The author continues: "Our first Black-throated Gray Warbler was seen on May 8. Later that day we heard and saw another one. The next day we saw another individual of this species. On May 13 we saw eight of them. By this time the bird had become rather common and was seen and heard in various habitats in almost all parts of the county. We continued to see and hear Black-throated Gray Warblers until May 25, when the last one was seen." Egads.

The author acknowledges that to his understanding this species was not reported by other birders in the area. He also maintains that "[m]any good, close observations" were made "from every angle." Approximately half of those seen were males and about the same number were females. The female differs from the male in that it has little or no black in the throat." Furthermore, "[m]ost of the time the birds were seen in the tops of rather large deciduous trees. They were quite active...I would say there were more pugnacious than most wood warblers, as I observed them scrapping with other warblers on several occasions." This feisty, tree-top activity mentioned

here is strikingly similar to that of the widely-seen male black-throated gray warbler that inhabited the Baldwin Lake area near Cleveland in late April and early May 1992, and is certainly not an expected behavior of the limb-creeping black-and-white warbler. Blackpoll warblers are more likely tree-top denizens, but their song hardly resembles any song of a black-throated green warbler. I simply cannot force myself to accept the possibility that so many black-throated grays were present, but enough tantalizing evidence is presented to lead one to believe that the species could very well have been present. I remain maddened and baffled, but that's not so unusual for me.

And, finally, I submit my nomination for the most inane and vacuous article published in Ohio. It appeared in *The Ohio Cardinal* 24(2), and you have just finished reading it. My apologies to all.

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This snow goose was keeping good company at the Carlisle Reservation duck ponds in Lorain Co. Photo by Paula Lozano on 24 February 2001.