

Book Review: Peterjohn's *The Birds of Ohio*, Second Edition

by Rob Harlan

Bruce G. Peterjohn. *The Birds of Ohio: with the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas*. Second edition, revised and updated. 2001. The Wooster Book Company. Paperbound, 637 pp, 8.5 x 5.5 in., one black & white photo. Price \$21.95.

Almost a hundred years ago in 1903, Lynds Jones and William Leon Dawson independently authored comprehensive books on the birds of Ohio. It took 86 years for another book on such a scale to appear on the subject, Bruce G. Peterjohn's 1989 effort *The Birds of Ohio*. Now, only twelve years since his first edition, Peterjohn has penned a second, presented as "revised and updated," and now including many maps from *The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* of 1991. One might ask, "why come out with a second edition so soon after the first?" and "is it worth another \$21.95 to acquire the second edition, when the first is still relatively current?" Only Mr. Peterjohn can answer the first question, but my answer to the second is an unequivocal "yes."

Twelve years isn't a very long time in the study of natural history, but much can happen in that span, as is well-evidenced by Peterjohn's second edition. A wealth of pertinent material has been published on the status of Ohio's birds in the period from 30 June 1988 (the cut-off date for his first edition) to 31 December 1999 (that for the second edition). This material has for the most part appeared in the state and local journals *The Ohio Cardinal*, *The Bobolink*, and *The Cleveland Bird Calendar*, as well as the national publication *American Birds* and its successors *National Audubon Society Field Notes* and *North American Birds*. Peterjohn has attempted to keep close tabs on these publications, and has seamlessly integrated the new material he has gathered into the text of the first edition, making adjustments as necessary. Most species accounts have been updated, many significantly; at the same time, some accounts remain untouched, essentially those for which little or no new information has become available, such as extinct species or those for which there is still only one state record. I admit surprise at the depth of the new material. Many significant adjustments to our understanding of bird movements and overall status have been incorporated into the second edition.

The integration of new material is all the more remarkable given the fact that Peterjohn left Ohio about 1991 for Maryland, and has lived away from Ohio since that time. He apparently lined up a long-distance network of a few Ohioans who provided him with much of the information and publications he felt he would need to adequately update the first edition. This system worked surprisingly well, although it was not foolproof, as we shall see later. Interestingly, during his absence from the state, Peterjohn apparently has not contacted any Ohio Bird Records Committee (OBRC) Secretary or any Editor of *The Ohio Cardinal* to seek or confirm information; why he chose this "disconnected" method is baffling to me. Even more perplexing is his choice to ignore the OBRC almost entirely, not even directly acknowledging its existence, although he was certainly aware of its deliberations. Formed in 1991, soon after Peterjohn left Ohio, the OBRC has functioned

continuously since then, providing a peer-review platform for hundreds of noteworthy records to date. The choice to bypass the OBRC was of course a personal one, but one that in essence formed a one-man committee consisting of Peterjohn alone, a committee that in some cases apparently made decisions without documentation from the OBRC archives that might have been helpful. Although its author is certainly an extremely capable judge of birding data, the absence of the peer-review process is definitely a weakness in this book.

The new second edition has a dramatically different look and feel when compared to the first. The latter, a hardbound tome measuring 12 x 9.25 inches and containing over four dozen full-color artworks by noted illustrators William Zimmerman and John Ruthven, certainly had a "coffee-table book" quality. The art was first-class, and I did enjoy it at first, but quickly became irritated by its presence, as the book would naturally fall open to the unnumbered pages containing the artwork, hindering my efforts to quickly locate the species account I was seeking. These artworks are gone from the new edition, leaving only the meaty text material, a nice full-color Zimmerman rendering of the thrush family on the plastic-coated paper cover, and a black-and-white photo of Peterjohn in the endpapers. No more hybrid coffee-table book x reference work here, this edition is all business, and I applaud this decision, not only for convenience's sake, but also because it cuts the price of the second edition to less than half the price of the first.

The new version of the work, now more user-friendly as a reference tool, is friendlier in another sense. Upon opening it I noted a sense of moderation in much of the wording. For example, in the first edition Peterjohn describes spring migrant Louisiana waterthrushes thus: "While there are innumerable May sight records of migrant Louisianas, these reports undoubtedly pertain to misidentified Northerns." In the new edition, this is modified to "While there are innumerable May sight records of migrant Louisianas, these reports primarily pertain to misidentified Northerns." A slight difference perhaps, but now a more accurate portrayal, and one that is certainly less polemic.

This is not to say that certain observers will not be put off by the absence of their sightings here. Peterjohn admittedly takes a conservative approach throughout the book, and has published records based on his assessment "of the available information supporting each report, the relative difficulty of positively identifying the species in the field, the precedence for similar reports at statewide, regional, or larger geometric scales, and the abilities and reputations of the observers" [p. xx]. It is thus important to keep in mind that at times when Peterjohn makes a statement such as "There are no adequately documented midsummer records" of Cape May warbler [p. 430], what he may actually be implying is that there are no adequately documented midsummer records *in his opinion*; there may be published midsummer records, but these may not live up to his standards of approval. This is a subtle difference, but a real one, and reinforces the importance for any researcher of not simply relying on a single source for information. A researcher working on summer records of Cape May warbler for the lower 48 states may consult the second edition and accept Peterjohn's statement at face value; more thorough researchers will

endeavor to look into the subject more deeply in this case, perhaps finding a published midsummer record acceptable to *their* standards. Always be prepared to dig.

One of the biggest assets in the new second edition is the presence of 170 maps from 1991's *Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas*, now out of print (this work is available on the internet courtesy of the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves at <<http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/odnr/dnap/OhioBirding/OhioBirding.htm>>—Ed.). These maps were created after the publication of the first edition of *The Birds of Ohio*, and appear here without updates. Readers should keep in mind that the *Atlas* data were collected from 1982 to 1987, and so are at least some fourteen years old. This does not detract from the overall usefulness of the maps, most of which very effectively illustrate a nesting species' range across the state. Unfortunately, the reduction in size of the maps as presented obscures the differentiation between "probable" (a box filled with three horizontal lines) and "confirmed" (a solidly-filled box) statuses; one would probably need a magnifying lens here to accurately assess these differences without referring back to the *Atlas* itself. All in all, though, the addition of the maps is very welcome.

And now on to the text, and at 637 pages, there's plenty of text to examine. The book begins with Prefaces to both editions, covering three pages. The Introduction consumes 13 pages, covering a variety of topics such as Ohio's physiography, vegetative communities, and climate; a brief review of Ohio's ornithological history; a discussion of references used; definitions of status and abundance designations; and a county map of the state. Three pages of Acknowledgments follow. A 15-page list of Species Accounts (actually a table of contents) is new to the second edition.

In this edition Peterjohn covers 409 species he considers acceptable for inclusion. This is up from 390 species in the first edition, adding brown pelican, northern lapwing, snowy plover, slaty-backed gull, Ross's gull, royal tern, black guillemot, long-billed murrelet, common ground-dove, smooth-billed ani, boreal owl, gray flycatcher, Say's phoebe, violet-green swallow, mountain bluebird, Bicknell's thrush, spotted towhee, painted bunting, and Bullock's oriole. By contrast, the OBRC accepts 408 species, which form the official state list [*Ohio Cardinal* 24(2):115]. One species on the official list, the white-winged dove, appeared and was accepted by the OBRC after Peterjohn's 31 December 1999 cut-off date. Peterjohn includes two species, the slaty-backed gull and Bicknell's thrush, that are currently not accepted by the OBRC. More on these two later.

One thing is absolutely certain—Peterjohn cares deeply about his subject. The amount of effort and the range of research invested make this crystal clear. A 41-page Bibliography covering more than 750 citations gleaned from over 150 years of birding literature attests to his dedication. Data from all these sources have been acquired, examined, and distilled in the species accounts, constituting an enormous undertaking, and any shortcomings must be kept in perspective with the sheer immensity of the project.

Each of Peterjohn's 409 species receives a thorough treatment in the species accounts, ranging from an appropriately short seven lines for anhinga and Wilson's plover to more than three pages for, of all things, herring gull. According to my

reckoning, 31.7% of species receive one page or less of treatment, 53.8% between one and two pages, and 14.4% more than two pages. The most important test for any reference work is its ability to answer questions effectively. For the vast majority of questions for which it may be consulted, *The Birds of Ohio* will provide a precise and correct answer. In a typical account, Peterjohn deals with the species' abundance from the early days to today, with its range within the state over the period, migrational peaks and windows, and a thorough examination of nesting behavior, all as applicable. The accounts are loaded with information, all at one's fingertips.

Before we begin to examine the accounts more thoroughly, a word or two—or ten—about errors. Of course this book has errors—most birding literature does, whether we recognize it or not. In a work of this magnitude, transcriptional errors are virtually unavoidable in regards to species, numbers, locations, dates, and observers reported. Any bird record should contain at least these five bits of information. So, in the preparation of a state monograph, for instance, compiling records from published journals requires that the author not only transcribe all these bits of data accurately, but also assume that the editors of these journals themselves transcribed them without error. And who is to say that the original observers reported everything correctly? Of course this sort of error is regrettable and should be avoided whenever possible, but in truth errors of this sort (at least when dealing with the commoner species or occurrences) are fairly insignificant in the big picture. I have no doubt Peterjohn would have corrected any such nagging errors had he known about them; somehow, though, he missed several corrections offered by Tom Kemp in his review of the first edition [*Ohio Cardinal* 13(1):27-29], namely factual errors which could have been cross-referenced, in regard to eastern screech-owl, northern hawk owl, and rusty blackbird, for instance. One final thought on errors: Peterjohn's omission of any potentially noteworthy records does not automatically signify an error or indicate that he missed the report; he may simply have decided to omit the record based on his standards as outlined above. Errors seem to be an unavoidable fact of life, but keep in mind that not everything that *seems* to be an error *is* an error.

One mildly irksome point is the treatment of recent first state records. I feel all recent first state records (say, those since 1975) should include the name(s) of the observer(s) making the discovery. After all, finding a first state record is no easy task, and doing so gets more difficult all the time as species are added to the list. After a quick tally, I noted 40 species new to Ohio from 1975 to date by Peterjohn's reckoning; for 13 of these (or 32.5%) the accounts do not directly identify the discoverer(s). I thought it might be appropriate to honor these folks here: Pacific loon (J. Kirk Alexander and John Pogacnik), brown pelican (Susan Sprengnether), Ross's goose (John Pogacnik and Bill Windnagel), Swainson's hawk (Don Tumblin, Jim McCormac, and Bruce Peterjohn), curlew sandpiper (Tom Bartlett), mew gull (Bruce Peterjohn, Larry Rosche, Ray Hannikman, et al.), California gull (Bruce Peterjohn et al.), lesser black-backed gull (Jim Hoffman), slaty-backed gull (Bruce Peterjohn, Mary Gustafson), smooth-billed ani (David J. White), varied thrush (F.W. and Marilyn Fais), western tanager (John Pogacnik), and painted bunting (Victor

Fazio). Strangely, the names of observers for Pacific loon, Ross's goose, Swainson's hawk, curlew sandpiper, mew gull, and western tanager were all included in the first edition, but omitted from the second.

And now for some thoughts regarding the particulars of various species accounts. I will attempt to point out only those aspects that I feel are most pertinent to a more accurate portrayal of a species' status in Ohio.

Glossy ibis [p. 40]—The first state record is noted to be of two birds taken in Cleveland in 1848, and the statement is made that one of these specimens still resides in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. However, as early as 1950, if not earlier, this specimen was examined by H.C. Oberholser and J.P. Visscher and found to be in fact a white-faced ibis, complete with white feathering surrounding the facial skin. Several years ago, I visited the CMNH and examined this mounted specimen with curator Tim Matson. To our eyes, the specimen best fits white-faced ibis. A job for the Records Committee, apparently.

Redhead [p. 82]—A mention is made of a western Lake Erie nesting population which "probably does not exceed 6-18 pairs during most years." I am not aware of any regular nesting population in Ohio since the publication of the *Breeding Bird Atlas*, and feel that this estimate is significantly inflated. It is my opinion that the second edition tends to overestimate the numbers of nesting pairs of Ohio's rarest breeders with some regularity, and that the publication of numerical ranges such as that given above might serve to imply that much of what appears is based on factual material, while it is more likely based on conjecture.

Tufted duck [p. 84]—Although I have mentioned that I find transcriptional errors to be of generally minor consequence, one in the account for such a rare species should be noted. The correct date for the Cleveland bird deemed to be a tufted duck x scaup hybrid should be 2-5 April 1989, not 1996.

Yellow rail [p. 147]—The comment that this species' spring migration usually occurs in two peaks piqued my interest, and I tested this theory. The two peaks mentioned extend from 15 April to 5 May and again from 15 May to 30 May. After a literature search, I accounted for 34 published spring records from 1880 to 2000, which ranged from 31 March to 31 May. Of these, 21 birds (61.8%) occurred in the 15 April-5 May period. However, only two records fall during the period of the latter "peak," and actually one of those was from 31 May, just outside the listed threshold. But even if we include both records, that still provides only 2.9% of records during this second 15-30 May period, which does not seem a very significant peak to me. Although Peterjohn certainly had access to unpublished records during his tenure as Middlewestern Prairie Region Editor for *American Birds*, primarily during the 1980s, I would think this putative peak should be reflected somewhere in the published literature with some regularity, but I can find no evidence of this. Actually, the true peak seems to fall between 16-25 April, during which ten-day period fully 50% of these published records occur.

Baird's sandpiper [p. 196]—Contrary to the statement that there are no Ohio spring specimen records, the Ohio State Museum of Biodiversity possesses OSUM #9420, a male collected by Milton B. Trautman on S. Bass Island on 15 April 1956.

Long-billed dowitcher [p. 205]—The assessment of the fall migration of adults through Ohio illustrates one of the more dramatic changes in status from the first edition to the second. The first edition states that "Recent records give a preliminary indication" of this species' status, and that "adults are rare migrants, normally reported in groups of 3 or fewer" in the western Lake Erie marshes. By the second edition, however, now supplied with a better understanding of the situation, Peterjohn states "The first adults may return by July 20-30 but most appear in August. As many as 100 have been noted at Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area by the first week of August, and these numbers may increase to 250-400+ by the end of the month. These adults undergo their postbreeding molt along western Lake Erie, and usually remain through late September or early October." Unfortunately, given the present state of the Metzger Marsh mudflats (under water or ridden by *Phragmites*), it seems doubtful this species will be able to make use of it in the near future. This is a great loss, and it occurred just when we may have finally figured out the true status of dowitchers in the area.

Laughing gull [p. 218]—It would have been useful to mention that all 28 laughing gulls at Cleveland and Lorain on 12 August 1985 were juveniles.

Franklin's gull [p. 219]—The second edition sometimes uses the status of "accidental" too liberally in my opinion. In the Introduction [p. xxi], Accidental is defined thus: "Has single records or a very small number of records without an established pattern of occurrence." However, the species account for spring Franklin's gull states that they are "accidental visitors to the interior counties" while noting that there are "approximately twenty inland records." A "casual" status, as defined, would seem to be the better fit here and elsewhere. Indeed, three Franklin's gulls were recorded at inland locations in the spring of 2001, and three in spring of 2000.

Slaty-backed gull [pp. 235-36]—This is by far the most controversial inclusion in the second edition. This hotly-debated individual stirred conflicting opinion at the time of the sightings and continues to do so to this day. This record has twice been rejected by the OBRC (based in part on invited commentary by world gull experts), and has also been overwhelmingly, though not universally, questioned by other gull authorities and those familiar with the species. These commentaries have been offered in print and more informally over the internet. A hybrid origin has been suggested as a possible source for this troubling individual. I feel the inclusion of this species is unfortunate at the very least, and underscores the benefits of the peer-review process, as well as the controversial atmosphere that may prevail in the absence of such a process.

Golden-crowned kinglet [pp. 384-85]—Peterjohn does a very good job of sorting out the various conflicting reports concerning this species' first known nestings in Ohio.

Bicknell's thrush [p. 395]—This species is not presently accepted by the OBRC. Peterjohn bases his acceptance on a 1939 examination of the 1933 specimen, one made without more recent identification refinements. The OBRC has studied this specimen (although it has not formally voted on it), and found the measurements to

be not as definitive as one could desire. This would be an extremely rare bird in Ohio, and a very significant record for the interior US, and is deserving of a thorough examination based on current identification standards.

Varied thrush [p. 403]—The statement that the latest spring record was of a bird that “remained at a Parma Heights feeder through April 6, 1996” is misleading; actually this record is noteworthy more for the fact that the bird was never seen to visit a feeder, unlike almost all other Ohio records.

Swainson’s warbler [p. 458]—Certainly a very rare bird and one that can be difficult to document well. The statement is made that “There are also four undocumented spring records from the Cleveland-Akron area”; however, I am aware of documentations for two of these records, from May 1963 and May 1971. Hopefully the OBRC will provide long-overdue reviews for these records in the future.

Western tanager [p.480]—Similar to the above, a statement is made that “there are three undocumented sight records” for northeastern Ohio. I am aware of documentations for all three of these records; they also need to be assessed by the OBRC.

Spotted towhee [p. 480]—The OBRC accepts the first state record of this recently-split species as 4 May 1996 in Seneca County. Peterjohn’s acceptance of a 29 March 1946 record made by “three experienced birders” is somewhat puzzling, especially since he goes on to mention that “No other details are available for this sighting.”

Clay-colored sparrow [p. 487]—Here is a case where I suspect Peterjohn’s long-distance data-collection methods let him down. He cites two summer records, from Summit County in 1994 and Erie County in 1999, and states “While Clay-colored Sparrows remain accidental summer visitors, the establishment of a breeding population is a possibility.” I believe the omission of an absolutely indisputable nesting attempt at Battelle-Darby Creek Metro Park in Franklin County in June and July of 1996 was due to a lack of information rather than a deliberate decision. I assume he simply did not see the appropriate issue of *The Ohio Cardinal* [Vol 19(4)], a theory further supported by the absence of that issue’s seasonal summary from the literature cited.

I hope all of the above does not leave a negative impression of this monumental work. Obviously, differences of opinion will arise, and negligible errors always seem to creep into any project. The fact that so few major concerns are present should indeed be a testament to the painstaking effort and craftsmanship evident in the second edition of *The Birds of Ohio*. Even if you already have the first edition, you will want the second. Just keep in mind that you don’t always have to “go by the book.” Now go buy the book.

7072 Parma Park Blvd.
Parma Hts., OH 44130

A Review of B. G. Peterjohn’s *The Birds of Ohio* (Second Edition, 2001), with Emphasis on the Southwestern Counties

by David C. Dister

Like many birders, I was surprised that *The Birds of Ohio* (1989) had been revised by the author, Bruce Peterjohn, after only a decade. Once I heard that this edition was to appear without the beautiful artwork but would instead include reduced versions of the breeding bird atlas maps, it became clear that this would be a wholly new reference. And as *The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* (Peterjohn and Rice 1991) is out of print, this was perhaps a timely decision.

At first glance, this compact 637-page book immediately appears “birder-friendly.” As a paperback, it is a book I would not hesitate to take on birding trips, or even leave in the car permanently. Who knows when a sighting will make one wonder, “could this bird be a new record?” Peterjohn’s latest effort is most welcomed.

The area covered in this review involves all or part of 12 southwestern Ohio counties designated as such by Peterjohn (1989): Hamilton, Butler, Preble, Clermont, Warren, Montgomery, Brown, Clinton, Greene, Adams (glaciated), Highland (glaciated), and Fayette. The principal source documents I consulted include *Birds of Dayton* (Mathena et al. 1984); *Birds of Southwestern Ohio* (Kemsies and Randle 1953); *Birds of the Hamilton County Park District* (Austing and Imbrogno 1976); and the aforementioned works by Peterjohn. *Birds of the Oxbow* (Styer 1993) was rarely consulted for this purpose as the vast majority of sightings do not specify whether they pertain to Ohio or Indiana locations, though most are likely in Indiana. Finally, quarterly issues of *The Ohio Cardinal* (TOC) from 1988 to 2000 were consulted.

The enormous amount of data presented in the 409 species accounts in *The Birds of Ohio* is impressive. However, it is unfortunate that the author chose not to update the atlas maps based on updated information that appears in the species accounts (for example, especially under-represented are pileated woodpecker and eastern phoebe on atlas maps for Montgomery County). On the other hand, there are many occasions in which published extralimital records are not included for lack of documentation (written, photograph, or specimen), which I believe to be a prudent strategy. On the whole, I found relatively few errors in comparing the source documents mentioned above and Peterjohn’s accounts, though about a dozen species accounts appear to have discrepancies, most with records in *The Ohio Cardinal*. In the Introduction, a geographical error from p. xxii of the first edition was not corrected: “6. Southwestern Counties: ...Greene, and Clinton, and west...” should instead read, “...Greene, and Fayette, and east.” A citation error for Pacific loon at Caesar Creek Reservoir should read “Conlon & Harlan, 1997;” not “Conlon & Harlan, 1996b” (the latter does not appear in the bibliography). Peterjohn displays his conservative approach in regard to a winter record for yellow-crowned night-heron for 26-29 December 1966 (Mathena et al.1984) that apparently was not documented; thus he states “There are no verified winter records for Ohio.”