Book Review: *The Birds of Ohio*, Second Edition, by Bruce G. Peterjohn

by Jim McCormac

The first edition of Bruce Peterjohn's *The Birds of Ohio* appeared in 1989, and was rightfully hailed as the definitive work on Ohio ornithology. Serious Ohio birders have this book, and consult it regularly. Its excellence derived from the author's intimate knowledge of Ohio's bird life, gained from several decades of active field experience throughout the state, as well as from exhaustive research of the literature on the topic. A thorough look through that first edition reveals very few mistakes or errors of omission. It deservedly stands as a benchmark for state bird monographs.

The passage of only eleven years sees the release of the second edition of *The Birds of Ohio*. Although little more than a decade seems a remarkably short period of time between revisions, this new release is welcome if for no other reason than that the first edition had gone out of print and was becoming difficult to find. Touted on the cover as "Completely Revised & Updated," the new version does have a wealth of new information, but to call it "completely revised" overstates the case. Ten years is but a brief period when looking at overall changes in bird distribution and abundance, and Peterjohn's approach to the material has not changed in the slightest. Indeed, beyond the extensive updated material, the rest of the text seems unaltered from that of the inaugural edition, save for minor stylistic changes.

As I have been involved with the Ohio Bird Records Committee (OBRC) for a number of years, serving as its Secretary for the last three, I focus here on Peterjohn's treatment of Ohio's rare avifauna. By OBRC criteria, a significant percentage of Ohio's bird life falls into this category, as we list 112 species requiring adequate documentation before they can be added to the official records. These species are not recorded more than two or three times during any recent year, and generally will not find their way into the published literature if not accepted by the OBRC. Careful documentation of reports of these species is important for a number of reasons: extralimital occurrences, for example, can be precursors of range expansions caused by large-scale environmental changes. In addition, rare species are of great interest to birders, as many of us actively seek out the unusual, chasing such birds when they are discovered.

Peterjohn left Ohio for the east coast in the early 1990s, shortly after the publication of *The Birds of Ohio*'s first edition. As he has made only sporadic birding trips back to Ohio since that time, much of the new material for this edition has understandably been acquired second-hand. Less understandably, he seems to have relied upon a quite small network of informants to provide him with updates, while apparently consulting various birding journals to glean additional material. His communications have been less than comprehensive, however, and many birders who could have provided a great deal of useful information were never contacted. For example, he never made inquiries about rare bird reports submitted to the OBRC, either to me or to my two predecessors over the previous decade. In cases in which he disagrees with the Committee's decisions (see p. xx of the Introduction), I

am not aware of his ever having requested the opportunity to review the relevant documentation—written accounts, photos, etc.—in the OBRC's freely-accessible archives. While the author of a work such as *The Birds of Ohio* must be concerned with accuracy and will ultimately be held accountable for errors, when an individual chooses to act as the final authority and ignores the collective wisdom of peers, mistakes will happen. This is, in part, why virtually every state now has a bird records committee to provide an unbiased and balanced approach to the task of assessing exceptional records.

While the first edition of *The Birds of Ohio* was far from infallible, it was notably lacking in serious errors. The same cannot be said of the new edition. There are numerous errors of omission here, in addition to a few very questionable inclusions of species new to the state. Most, if not all, of these problems result from the author's lack of involvement with the Ohio birding scene, coupled with his disregard for the opinions of others regarding the identification of certain Ohio rarities. I limit my comments here to records occurring during the 1990s, material that became available between the first edition and the stated cutoff date for inclusion in the new one, 31 December 1999.

One discrepancy shows up in the total number of species cited for Ohio, which Peterjohn has as 409. The official Ohio list, as maintained by the OBRC, comprises 408 species. One of them was added to the Ohio list after Peterjohn's cutoff date—white-winged dove—but his treatment of Ohio's avifauna is less conservative than the Committee's, adding two species considered but not accepted by the OBRC. One, Bicknell's thrush, he includes based on a 1933 record from Lucas County. The specimen is in the OSU Museum, and was critically examined by myself and other OBRC members, who found that exact measurements, conducted in our presence by the curator, fell more within the range of gray-cheeked thrush than Bicknell's. These records are in the OBRC archives. We believe it is not a clear-cut example of Bicknell's, and probably a gray-cheeked, and have chosen not to include it on the Ohio list.

The other surprising inclusion is slaty-backed gull. Perhaps no other Ohio record has produced the controversy this one has. Peterjohn found the bird in question on 28 and 29 December 1992 in Eastlake on Lake Erie, and he states that what was "probably the same individual" was photographed in Lorain on 8 February 1993. A careful review of the documentation shows that these observations were indeed of the same bird. This record became the most protracted and paper-generating report the OBRC has ever received. Ultimately the record was rejected unanimously in 2000, following an extensive interchange of comments between members and outside experts consulted [then-Secretary Tom Bartlett offered a summary of the Committee's reasoning in *The Ohio Cardinal* 17(3) 113-114 –*Ed.*]. Some of the world's leading authorities on gulls were consulted, and offered opinions to the Committee; all agreed that whatever this bird was, it was not a slaty-backed gull, or at least a pure-blooded one. The prevailing opinion was that it likely was of undetermined hybrid origin. In any event, in light of numerous expert opinions expressing strong doubts of this bird's identification as a slaty-backed gull, and its eventual non-

acceptance by the OBRC, there seems to be no reasonable explanation for its inclusion in this work.

Many of us are intensely interested in rarities, and publications such as *The Birds of Ohio* serve a valuable function in elucidating the vagrancy patterns of such species. Thus, it was with great surprise that I learned that this second edition was not only planned, but also nearly completed by the time most Ohio birders were made aware of it. Most authors attempting such a work—especially those residing in another state—will be in contact with all the people who might be able to add useful information, subscribed to all the relevant publications, and making public appeals for interesting data, but there seems to be little evidence Peterjohn did these things. This has unfortunately led to many errors of omission in this edition. While I detected too many inaccuracies to cite here in full, a few examples are offered:

Brown pelican—The new edition includes a 1996 report that was rejected by the OBRC, principally because it was based on very sketchy information for this very rare visitor.

Golden eagle—This is no longer a review species, but I was surprised to find that the bird's apparent over-wintering at The Wilds in Muskingum County during the past three years was not mentioned, as this is quite noteworthy.

Black-necked stilt—This shorebird is a mega-rarity in Ohio, so it is important to note that 1995 saw three indisputable records, not two as cited.

Common raven—Inexplicably absent is the 1998 Lake County record, which was documented in part by a photograph.

Spotted towhee—There are actually three accepted records of this western species from the 1990s, rather than the two cited.

Clay-colored sparrow—This species seems to be undergoing a gradual range expansion, and may soon be verified as a successful Ohio nester. Therefore it is surprising that Peterjohn doesn't mention the pair that attempted nesting in Franklin County—even building a nest—despite the fact that this record was published in *The Ohio Cardinal* in 1996 (Watts and Albin, 19(4):104-105).

While the number of questionable reports, and errors of omission, in the second edition of *The Birds of Ohio* is not alarmingly high, there are enough to raise eyebrows, particularly in contrast to the comparatively error-free and painstakingly researched first edition. So, is this book worth buying? Emphatically yes, as it serves up a wealth of knowledge of Ohio's avifauna, while providing valuable updates since the original edition. Does it continue the latter's tradition of relentless accuracy? Unfortunately, no.

Ohio Department of Natural Resources
Division of Natural Areas and Preserves
1889 Fountain Square Court
Columbus, OH 43224

Short Note: The Roughest Ruffed Grouse

In late March on the Edge of Appalachia Preserve in Adams County my 5 year-old son Eli Bird Bedel and I arrived at the preserve gate to find a male ruffed grouse. We were delighted to see the grouse approach the car, offering a perfect opportunity to study the bird's magnificent feather patterns. Little did we know at the time how familiar this bird was to become.

On subsequent days the grouse regularly appeared at the gate in full breeding splendor. We finally decided to see if it would allow us to approach on foot for even closer study. When we tried, it circled us, pecked nervously at vegetation, and made low clucking noises. At other times, it walked nearly sideways, its ruff partially extended, its crest erected and its tail fanned. When we squatted, the bird rushed us, thudding our boots with its wings. We were thrilled.

As time passed, the bird appeared nearly every day, becoming more aggressive and determined. On several occasions when Eli turned and ran away, the bird pursued on foot, then took flight and like a shot hit his back with its feet. If we extended a hand or foot toward him, he would counter with a flurry of beating wings, scratching the earth with his claws. We soon recognized the signs of an impending attack: he lowered his crest, made a guttural growl, then squatted and leaped forward. It was amazing. The bird not only chased whoever was found around our gate, but any visitor to the nearby cemetery as well. One evening we returned from a night of toad-watching around 11:00 p.m. We heard rustling in the woods, nervously groped for a flashlight, and found the grouse in hot pursuit even in complete darkness!


Chris Bedel

He later took up habitual car-chasing. If we made it past the wing-beating of our boots as we got in and out of our vehicle to open and close the gate, we had to contend with an attack on the tires. He'd jump, kick and smack the tires with flailing wings as we attempted to pull away. The bird had no fear, and at times held cars hostage, running amuck around the vehicles' wheels. Feints and bursts of speed had to be employed to escape without running over the bird. Alas, even once on our way we weren't safe, for the bird would run at great speeds down the road after us. Instead of giving up as we pulled away, he'd take to the air and fly at full speed