

Further Afield

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Everyone referred to it simply as “the impoundment,” or sometimes “Gordon.” More precisely, it was Gordon Park Impoundment, a diked dredge disposal area on the Cleveland lakefront; a last repository for the most gruesomely tainted sludge scooped up from the bottom of Cleveland Harbor by the US Army Corps of Engineers, a wasteland created especially to contain a witches’ brew too noxious to be barged out and dumped into a comparatively pristine Lake Erie. I remember it well. It was delightful.

A prime lakefront location, an ever-changing variety of habitats, and a dedicated corps of birders all combined to make the area a rarity factory, the likes of which I’ve never encountered before or since, anywhere. Although small in size, the area was situated on a natural flight line and provided a suite of habitats that birds weren’t able to find elsewhere in the vicinity. It was a spot rarities simply could not afford to pass by, and the birders were there to keep track—eared grebe, American white pelican, tricolored heron, yellow rail, king rail, piping plover, sharp-tailed sandpiper, curlew sandpiper, least tern, Le Conte’s sparrow, Smith’s longspur, and so on. This is a nice list—an above average list.

But things change. Over time, people stopped referring to the area as “the impoundment” or “Gordon,” and somehow in recent years it has become known as Dike 14. How and why, I don’t know. But a name change does not seem entirely inappropriate for an area that has been in constant flux since its creation; morphing from open water to open mudflat with marshy margins, to a bur-infested weedy wetland, to a brushy young willow and cottonwood forest. Even this natural progression was often altered as fresh batches of slurry were pumped into the impounded area, initiating the chain of maturation all over again.

Even though Gordon Park Impoundment has become Dike 14, and the habitat therein has matured, the birds still flock to it, although with stricter public access birder presence there has diminished over the years. Despite fewer reports, it clearly still has the potential, with improved access, to be one of the hottest birding hotspots anywhere in Ohio. I would, in fact, still place it in my top ten list of hotspots, along with, in no particular order: Conneaut Harbor, Headlands Beach State Park / Fairport Harbor, the Crane Creek complex of Magee Marsh Wildlife Area / Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area / Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, Hoover Reservoir, Miami-Whitewater Wetlands, the Lake Erie islands, Shawnee State Forest, and wherever the next new species for Ohio appears, settles in, and stays long enough for me to see it.

Those are Ohio’s current hotspots, in my opinion. But birding, like Gordon Impoundment, is all about change. What were the hotspots 25 years ago? 50 years ago? Are the hotspots of 50 years ago still as hot today, or have our current hotspots only recently heated up? Fortunately, we have an idea, thanks to two books that have fallen out of style in recent years, books that even if you happen to have them on your shelves, you may not have given a second thought for years. Surely most

birders have used, or are at least aware of, the series of bird finding guides made famous by their creator, James A. Lane, the so-called “Lane Guides,” now adopted by the American Birding Association as “ABA Bird-Finding Guides.” Typically, these guides cover only a portion of a state, or at most an entire state. But before these in-depth guides were created, Dr. Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. (1907-2001) took it upon himself to cover *all* the states, and with the assistance of knowledgeable local birders did a remarkably thorough job.

Pettingill’s *A Guide to Bird-Finding East of the Mississippi* was published in 1951, while its western companion hit the market two years later. These volumes were real eye-openers for thousands of birders, and set the stage for intensive birding ecotourism that continues today. A second edition was published in 1977; taken together, they provide an excellent benchmark to compare which sites were hot roughly 50 years ago, and roughly 25 years ago, with the best that today can offer.

The 1951 first edition devotes 34 pages to Ohio bird-finding sites, and includes a five-page introduction to the Ohio chapter. The chapter itself is broken down into regional coverage, with headings for Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Hebron, Lebanon, Logan, Painesville, Port Clinton, Portsmouth, Put-in-Bay, St. Mary’s, Sinking Spring (yes, Sinking Spring), Toledo, and Youngstown. Each of these headings is further refined with detailed descriptions of various nearby sites, boldfaced by Pettingill, and also boldfaced here.

The First Edition

As we examine the first edition of 1951, we note the Cincinnati heading has eight birding areas described in some detail. We learn that **Spring Grove Cemetery** “is one of the best places [in the Cincinnati area] for year-round birding.” **Sharon Woods** also “gives gratifying results at any time of year.” **California Nature Preserve** is depicted as “an excellent place for summer-resident birds.” Brief mention is made of a large black-crowned night-heron colony, containing 150-200 nests, along the southern boundary of Greenhills. For migrant shorebirds and ducks, Pettingill recommends “the sand banks and bars” at the mouth of the **Big Miami River**. Further east, the mouth of the **Little Miami River** offers similar results, but just be sure to “[p]ark the car near the farmhouse on the west bank and ask permission there to walk downstream by way of dirt roads through cornfields for about one mile to the woods at the mouth of the River.” Probably the best spot on the Ohio River for waterfowl is the stretch “between **Pond Run Creek** and **Twelve Mile Creek**,” some 20 miles southeast of Cincinnati. Finally, he recommends “a series of gravel-pit lakes, known collectively as the **Remington Gravel Pits**,” near the town of Remington, which serve as “a choice spot” for loons, grebes, and diving ducks.

In the Cleveland area, the first edition devotes one paragraph each to the **North Chagrin**, **Rocky River**, and **Hinckley Reservations** of the Cleveland Metropolitan Park System; of course, there is the obligatory Hinckley turkey vulture reference. The Cleveland lakefront curiously rates only one paragraph, with mentions of **Gordon Park**, **Edgewater Park**, and the hot water outlet at East 71st Street (now usually referred to as East 72nd Street). **Shaker Lakes** also receives one paragraph, with equal emphasis on waterbirds and landbirds (one sentence each).

Eight Columbus sites rate boldface mention. **Greenlawn Cemetery** is “[o]ne of the outstanding places for transient landbirds” in the area. Transient waterfowl are to

be looked for on the **Scioto River**. **O'Shaughnessy Reservoir**, "a favorite area for Columbus bird finders," rates three paragraphs, and one learns that "one may count on seeing 25 different species" of waterbirds during migrations in March and November. I confess to having never heard of **Jeffery Park** and **Flint Ravine**, which receive one paragraph each. Columbus Metropolitan Park District properties include **Highbanks** ("an inviting, undisturbed wilderness"), **Blendon Woods**, and **Blacklick Woods**, "a splendid relic of the original forest cover," often spoken of by local birders "in glowing terms."

The only focus of the Hebron heading is **Buckeye Lake**, meriting no less than seven paragraphs, including one regarding the shallow eastern end of the lake, where least bitterns and king rails nest in the "vast cattail marsh." The lake is also haven for a "surprising number of waterfowl" during migrations; hopefully, one could arrange a visit during late October and early November, "the time for Canada Geese."

The **Fort Ancient State Memorial** near Lebanon is deemed noteworthy due to a variety of nesting species "near the northern limits of their ranges," including black vulture, summer tanager, Bewick's wren, northern mockingbird, white-eyed vireo, Kentucky warbler, and yellow-breasted chat.

The area judged "without question the best place in central Ohio for a wide variety of landbirds in any season" is the **Hocking County State Parks**, better known to birders as the "Sugar Grove Region." It is home to "deep narrow gorges with cliffs of massive coarse-grained sandstone, cool ravines, fascinating caves, lovely waterfalls, and magnificent forests." Although the area has lost the Bewick's wrens and (Bachman's) pine-woods sparrows then reported to be present, the remainder of the description surely still rings true today.

Painesville sports the area then known as **Black Brook**, but better known today as Mentor Marsh and Mentor Headlands. Although the marsh has certainly been degraded, the "varied habitats and the tendency of birds moving northward to 'bunch up' on the Lake Erie shore" are still valid, as is the statement that "it is not unusual to find here, in the course of two hours, well over 100 species."

East Harbor State Park near Port Clinton rates one paragraph. Things seem to have changed there, though: "boats may be rented for exploring the marsh, where, in May and June, Pied-billed Grebes, Black-crowned Night-Herons, American Bitterns, Least Bitterns, Mallards, Black Ducks, King Rails, Virginia Rails, Soras, Black Terns, Long-billed Marsh Wrens, and Red-wings can be found." Today, there is really no marsh to speak of, although mallards and red-winged blackbirds can still be found there, if you should so desire.

Have you visited **Roosevelt State Park** near Portsmouth? The answer is "yes" if you have birded Shawnee State Forest, as we now know it. Undoubtedly, its "cover of second-growth trees" has matured over the years. **Ohio Brush Creek** is also listed under the Portsmouth heading; the bird finder is directed here to "the only known place in Ohio where one may find Chuck-will's-widows." Perhaps this is not the only place anymore, but it is still the traditional favorite.

The vicinity of Put-in-Bay gets three bold-facings. **South Bass Island** rates two paragraphs, where the "outstanding ornithological attractions...are the hawk and small landbird migrations." While hawk movements are "impressive only in the spring," the landbird movement, "though very spotty in both spring and fall, is best

observed between 1 May and 20 May, 20 September and 10 October, during the first three hours of daylight on cloudy, windy, or rainy days." Pettingill adds "strangely enough, the directions of the flights both in the spring and in the fall depends on the direction of the wind. If the wind is from the north, the birds fly northward; if the wind is from the south, they fly southward." Presumably this still holds true today, but has anyone noticed this in recent years? **Kelleys Island** is mentioned primarily for "two cattail marshes known as Kelley's Pond (near the village on the south shore) and Carp Pond (near the west shore)." **Middle Bass Island** boasts "three fine marshy areas." Just southeast of South Bass lies "a limestone islet called **Starve Island**," home to a common tern nesting colony.

"Probably the best area for year-round bird finding in west-central Ohio is **Lake St. Marys**"; indeed, it rates four paragraphs in this edition. Again, we read a long list of long-lost marsh nesters, and landbirds "ranging from Ring-necked Pheasants and Upland Plovers to Dickcissels and Grasshopper Sparrows" are noted as being "prevalent in the rich farmlands around the Lake." The State Fish Hatchery at the eastern end of the Lake was also worth a stop then, as now.

Under the next heading, a whopping five paragraphs are devoted to **Fort Hill State Memorial** near Sinking Spring. When is the last time anyone has reported from this site? How do we know that the "fairly common" Bewick's wren and the "several pairs" of Bachman's sparrows are no longer present? If you do go, and find even one Bachman's sparrow, please let me know.

Toledo's **Oak Openings Park** rates three thick paragraphs. Here one must beware the "abundant and aggressive" mosquito population; indeed, "[m]ore than one bird finder has walked hopefully into the Oak Openings and has been forced to retire in disorder because he was not suitably dressed to withstand their attacks." Although the mosquitoes remain, unfortunately the golden-winged warbler, "nesting commonly here," seems to have disappeared as a nester, taking with it most of the hybrid "Brewster's" and "Lawrence's" warblers, listed as "seen here with unusual frequency." Lark Sparrows, then as now, are holding their own. Also, the rapids of the **Maumee River** still attract waterfowl and shorebirds when conditions are right.

"Members of the Grant M. Cook Bird Club...have unlimited possibilities for bird finding" in the Youngstown area, including **Mill Creek Park** and several nearby reservoirs: **Mosquito Creek**, **Berlin**, **Meander**, **Milton**, and **Guilford Lake**. The reservoirs are noted as "havens for numbers of waterfowl" in spring and fall, and for shorebirds starting in July. In fact, concerning Mosquito Creek Reservoir, "Members of the Cleveland Bird Club (Cleveland is 50 miles from Youngstown) consider this their best and nearest shorebird territory." Trust me, that's not the case anymore.

The Second Edition

Twenty-six years passed between Pettingill's first edition and his second in 1977. Ohio still rates 33 pages of treatment, including five introductory pages. The major headings remain the same, save for the addition of Dayton, a switch of headings for Fort Hill State Memorial from Sinking Spring to Hillsboro, and the removal of Mosquito Creek Reservoir from the Youngstown heading to one for Warren.

Cincinnati gains several new sites: **Cincinnati Nature Center, Miami-Whitewater County Park**, and the **Anthony Meldahl Dam**. The old **Remington Gravel Pits** have transformed into the **Newtown Gravel Pits**, and the mouth of the **Big (Great) Miami River** has been expanded into **Shawnee Lookout County Park** and "an old oxbow" situated in the "extensive bottomlands of Indiana," across the Great Miami from Shawnee Lookout. The old Ohio River sites of **Pond Run Creek** and **Twelve Mile Creek** have been mostly enveloped into the description for the Meldahl Dam.

The Cleveland area remains the same for the most part, with **White City Park** the only addition. White City was another dredge disposal facility hot for shorebirds in the 1970s, but it too has now faded into anonymity as its habitat matured.

In Columbus, **O'Shaughnessy Reservoir** went from "a favorite area of Columbus bird finders" in the first edition to not mentioned at all in the second, taking with it three paragraphs of its own and two more for the associated and mysterious **Jeffery Park** and **Flint Ravine**. However, two Columbus properties make their first appearance—**Sharon Woods** and **Darby Creek Metropolitan Parks**.

A Dayton heading was a surprising omission from the first edition, but two adjacent Dayton area sites appear in the second. **Aullwood Audubon Center** and **Englewood Reserve** account for four paragraphs total.

Under the Hebron heading, **Buckeye Lake** now rates only five paragraphs, down from seven. If someone were to prepare a new edition today, five paragraphs might seem overly generous. **Hebron Fish Hatchery**, "[a] satisfactory place for shorebirds," makes its appearance in the second edition, rating a satisfactory one paragraph.

After shifting from the Sinking Spring heading to the Hillsboro heading, **Fort Hill State Memorial** still retains its Bewick's wrens and Bachman's sparrows in the 1977 edition. Actually, they probably had gone missing well before that date—but has anyone checked? (No, I don't really suppose any remain, but if anyone happens to be in the area.....).

The Lebanon and Logan headings remain essentially unchanged. The Painesville heading now lists both **Headlands Beach State Park** and **Mentor Marsh** as separate entities, leaving the "**Black Brook**" designation behind. The second edition still notes the "unspoiled ponds and adjoining marshy areas" of Mentor Marsh; the same can hardly be said today, with tainted water and vegetation dominated by invasive plants. Curiously, the detail found in the first edition concerning the hefty migrant "bunch up" at the Dunes is omitted in the second. Certainly the birds still bunched up in 1977, as they bunch there today.

East Harbor State Park, under the Port Clinton heading, is still depicted as hosting healthy marsh bird populations in 1977. I'm not sure when the habitat there deteriorated to its present condition, but the nesting habitat today is certainly not conducive to any self-respecting bittern, rail, or black tern.

The Portsmouth heading now lists **Shawnee State Forest** instead of **Roosevelt State Park**, and the area has erupted from 15,000 acres in 1951 to 59,000 acres in 1977; more detail is included in the second edition to reflect this growth. Additional detail is also provided for finding **Ohio Brush Creek's** chucks and whips.

The Put-in-Bay heading loses its **Middle Bass Island** listing, taking with it Middle Bass's "three fine marshy areas." **Starve Island** has also lost its common tern nesting colony, replacing it with a herring gull nesting colony instead. Bad trade.

At **Grand Lake St. Marys**, the southern edge of the Lake is still depicted as harboring good numbers of marsh nesters, although the comments regarding the noteworthy grassland nesters in the farmlands near the Lake are omitted.

An important addition is made under the Toledo heading with the inclusion of **Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge**. Here, the "stellar ornithological attraction is the assemblage of Whistling Swans in early spring." I recall visiting Ottawa in the early 1970s for the official "Whistling Swan Day"; for some reason, however, spring swans have largely forsaken the area ever since. "Swan Day" was subsequently replaced with "Canada Goose Day"—another bad trade. It's still better than a potential "Trumpeter Swan Day," however.

Over in Youngstown, **Milton Reservoir** and **Guilford Lake** have both been omitted from the 1977 edition, and **Mosquito Creek Reservoir** has been shifted over to the new Warren heading. Such is life.

Some Final Thoughts (Finally)

So is there a point to any of this? Let's tally: of my choices for Ohio's current top ten (top nine, really) birding hotspots (Conneaut, Headlands, Dike 14, the Crane Creek complex, Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, Hoover Reservoir, Miami-Whitewater Wetlands, the Lake Erie islands, and Shawnee State Forest), only Headlands, the Lake Erie islands, and Shawnee State Forest (under the guise of Roosevelt State Park) are included in Pettingill's 1951 first edition. For the second edition, we can add the Crane Creek complex, due to the addition of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge. It is surely worth noting that many people's choice for the best birding spot in Ohio, the Magee Marsh Bird Trail, is not mentioned at all. This area was purchased by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 1951, and in 1963 Laurel Van Camp established a ¼-mile bird trail at this site. The familiar boardwalk was dedicated in 1989. Elsewhere, purchase of land for Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area began in 1952, the property containing Miami-Whitewater Wetlands was purchased in 1989, and the dam at Hoover Reservoir was completed in 1955.

It is also essential that we note the degradation (or destruction) of the myriad high-quality wetlands listed in the two editions. Marshes at Buckeye Lake, Black Brook (Mentor Marsh), East Harbor State Park, on Middle Bass and Kelley's islands, and at Grand Lake St. Marys have mostly disappeared or been compromised to the extent that they no longer resemble their former descriptions. Keep in mind that many of these wetlands were in relatively protected areas, and were all acknowledged as valuable resources by the birding community. We lost them anyway. It seems we still haven't learned our lesson entirely, as the unfortunate Metzger Marsh incident springs to mind. But then again, several valuable wetlands have recently been created or improved, such as Miami-Whitewater, Pickerel Creek Wildlife Area, Big Island Wildlife Area and Sandy Ridge Metropark. Many great birding sites have come and gone since Pettingill's 1951 first edition; by reflecting on what we had, what we have, and what we can hope to have, perhaps all that we have lost in the past will help us to gain in the long run. 🐦