

Further Afield

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I keep it out in the garage. I might use it only once a year, so it tends to get buried. For this column, I dug it out from under a pile of oily rags, after having jostled the weed whacker, lawn darts, and croquet set out of the way first. After a quick dusting and a few calibrations using my multivariate chrono-transducer, it was purring like a kitten. The "it" I refer to is, of course, my time machine.

Others might use their time machines to investigate a particularly intriguing period in history, to use advance knowledge to make a killing on the stock market, or to resolve a lingering "what might have been." I, however, use mine to revisit the historical Ohio birding scene at exactly 10-year intervals. Go figure.

Elsewhere in this issue, Bill Whan covers the winter 2002-03 period; with the assistance of my time machine (and, I admit, through the guidance of various historical references), I suggest we begin our journey with the December through February period of:

Winter 1852-53

Millard Fillmore, our 13th President, keeps watch over 31 states. Under his administration, the Coinage Act of 1853 is adopted on February 21, allowing \$3.00 gold pieces to be minted. The windshield of our time machine usually fogs over with any rapid descent into the past, and this excursion is no exception. Nonetheless, a quick swipe of the windows with my sleeve creates a small opening to the outside world—a world, apparently, when bird observers were as scarce as \$3.00 gold pieces are today. However, speaking of gold, we discover that in 1853 Mr. M. C. Read writes that "[t]he Rev. Sam'l Wright of Toledo, now deceased, wrote me in the winter of 1852 that he then had a young bird...which was quite tame, and a very interesting pet. It fully answered the description of the 'Ring-tailed Eagle'." Today we know this as an immature golden eagle. Read continues "After the death of Mr. Wright [the bird] was promised to the writer, but escaping from confinement [and] accustomed to only the voice of its old master, it could not be recaptured, and at last account was still lingering about the neighborhood of the city." We'll move on though, to...

Winter 1862-63

President Lincoln is Commander in Chief of the Army of the Potomac, an army whose attack against Gen. Robert E. Lee's entrenched Confederate forces at Fredericksburg, VA on December 13 proves disastrous. This does not prevent Lincoln from signing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1. First fogged-up windows hampered our view, now we must deal with the confusion brought on by the "fog of war." We can't seem to find any significant bird sightings during this winter period; presumably most potential birders are involved in wartime efforts.

FURTHER AFIELD

However, just before our time machine comes to a complete stop at December 1862, we detect the following report from the previous July. According to William S. Sullivant, "informed ornithologist" and "eminent botanist," "a flock numbering from twenty-five to thirty made their appearance in the Capitol square [of Columbus] and remained in the elm trees...for a couple of hours, greatly to his enjoyment and the delight of numerous small boys." Presumably most of us would have been delighted also, as this was a flock of 25-30 Carolina parakeets.

Winter 1872-73

The Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant is rocked by the Credit Mobilier scandal, and two members of the U.S. House of Representatives are formally censured on February 27. There seems little reason for us to tarry here, as concern over that Credit Mobilier thing seems to have knocked the birding world into a stupor as well. The only report we can find during the period is of two black-capped chickadees collected in Cincinnati by Charles Dury. These specimens appear to have gone missing since then, so 21st-century birders have no way to confirm these extreme southern records. Keep in mind that black-capped chickadee is a Review Species in Kentucky, just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati.

Winter 1882-83

The Federal Civil Service Commission is formed on January 16, during the Chester A. Arthur presidency. In February, the Ohio River floods, cresting at 64 feet in Cincinnati. Looks like another sloooow period; we can't find any reports to investigate. Nothing to see here, move along please...

Winter 1892-93

The Benjamin Harrison administration offers amnesty to polygamists on January 4, but only if they agree to follow laws against polygamy in the future. Also, John L. Stevens, the U.S. Minister to Hawaii, helps overthrow the legitimate government of Hawaiian Queen Liliuokalani. A more interesting period historically, perhaps, but still not so interesting birdwise. Nonetheless, in December, W. F. Henninger does collect two red crossbills in Seneca County, and donates them to the local Heidelberg University Museum. That was nice of him, because examination in the 21st century might reveal something about the racial identity of Ohio red crossbills in the late 19th century. With the real potential for a red crossbill split in the near future, the past just might help us sort things out today.

Winter 1902-03

On January 22, the U.S. and Colombia sign the Hay-Herrán Treaty, providing for lease of a strip of land across Panama. Colombia, however, refuses to ratify this treaty, and later in 1903 the people of Panama declare their independence from Colombia and sign a treaty with the U.S. on their own. President Teddy Roosevelt watches with interest. Things begin to pick up here. In Scioto and Pike counties, W. F. Henninger deems barn owl, Bewick's wren, and chipping sparrow as "common" winter species. Loggerhead shrike and osprey are "fairly common", and golden

eagle is "very rare." Henninger also notes another interesting species present during this period, at least in captivity. He writes "[o]ne specimen was taken [earlier than the winter of 1902-03, of course] on the banks of the Scioto River, in Scioto County; in the collection of Mrs. Mary E. Bannon, Portsmouth, Ohio. One was kept in captivity for a number of years. It had been winged." Unfortunately, we have no idea where the Mrs. Mary E. Bannon collection disappeared, as this whooping crane specimen would generate a great deal of scientific interest today, I suspect. Ohio has no official records of this species.

Winter 1912-13

President-elect Woodrow Wilson publicly opposes business monopolies in a January 11 speech. Lame-duck President William Howard Taft watches with little interest. Lack of interest also seems to be the mood of most birders during this period, as we find very few reports to examine. However, a few sightings from a fledgling series of surveys known as "Christmas Bird Counts" do merit at least a partially raised eyebrow: a northern shrike on the East Liberty CBC, a bald eagle on the North Kingsville CBC, and two northern saw-whet owls in the Youngstown count circle.

Winter 1922-23

In January, in the midst of the Warren G. Harding administration, Florence E. Allen becomes the first U.S. woman to serve on a state Supreme Court—the Ohio Supreme Court, actually. It seems that CBCs continue to grow in popularity; this period sees the Hillsboro CBC tally two Bewick's wrens and 25 black vultures, while the Paulding CBC finds 12 gray partridges and Youngstown chalks up 46 pine siskins. It appears to be a reasonably good "winter finch" season, as Harold C. Jones deems purple finch "abundant all winter" in Oberlin. Apparently even more noteworthy to Jones ("President of [the] Cardinal Ornithological Club" in Oberlin, by the way) was "a Mourning Dove...seen near the lake on December 26."

Winter 1932-33

President-elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt survives an assassination attempt February 15. For those keeping score, the 20th U.S. Constitutional Amendment is adopted February 6, while on February 20 Congress recommends the adoption of the 21st, but also the repeal of the 18th. In December, the Chicago Bears defeat the Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans for the first National Football League championship. Those hoping for winter finches and associates can look elsewhere—in Oberlin, "we haven't a single record" of red-breasted nuthatch; in Wooster, "Northern finches have been absent"; in Toledo, "few birds such as the Grosbeaks came down from the north"; and in Cleveland, their "entire absence" is noted. William Baker, of Salem, notes a mourning dove on December 26 as one of the "high spots of the winter for me". Finally, "A Holboell's [red-necked] Grebe was picked up on a rural road southeast of Youngstown on February 16 and was identified by Dr. Brody. It ate a few minnows and newts but died after several days." That would just about do it for me, too.

Winter 1942-43

With FDR still President, the U.S. launches its first solo WWII bombing raid over Nazi Germany on January 27. On February 7, the U.S. government begins to ration shoes—no more than three new pairs per person per year. We note with interest Ohio's annual tally of wintering ducks (47,864), including "54% blacks and 24% mallards. Also counted were more than 1474 Canada geese." We really must begin to carefully examine the winter gulls, since "[n]orthern gulls are occurring more frequently in recent years along Lake Erie." As proof, at least one great black-backed gull winters near Put-in-Bay, and another is seen at Cleveland. Once again finch-watchers are disappointed, as "[t]his winter brought few unusual observations of northern visitors of the finch family..."

Winter 1952-53

Under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, the Korean conflict grinds on during the winter, before finally coming to an uneasy truce in the summer of 1953. In Ohio, as we bask in "one of the Midwest's warmest recorded winters," we note that severe winter weather alone doesn't mandate the Ohio presence of winter finches, considering the "great influx" of siskins and redpolls. Gulls continue to warrant close scrutiny, with the highlights being a little gull and a Sabine's gull, both seen at Ashtabula on December 27 by Lawrence E. Hicks and Ernest Limes. In the northwest, "[a]s in the past, Laurel Van Camp found King Rails in Magee Marsh...More noteworthy is his January record of a Florida Gallinule [common moorhen] at the same place..."

Winter 1962-63

On November 20, just before the winter period begins, President John F. Kennedy calls off the U.S. naval blockade of Cuba. "Telstar" by the Tornadoes heads the Billboard chart beginning the week of December 22. Bundle up for the "extreme cold," including seven new all-time lows in Cleveland. Again as evidence that severe weather and finch invasions don't necessarily coincide, very few finches are noted anywhere in the state or region. Keeping in mind our concerns over possible reductions in chickadee, titmouse, and nuthatch populations in 2003, observers in the 1962-63 winter period also report chickadees to be down, and titmice and white-breasted nuthatches "were also down from 50 to 75 percent according to all observers commenting." Certainly West Nile Virus was not a factor then: maybe it is—maybe it isn't—today.

Winter 1972-73

Five of seven men accused in the Watergate break-in plead guilty in January. President Nixon signs the Vietnam cease-fire agreement on January 27. The Miami Dolphins' victory at Super Bowl VII on January 14 caps the only undefeated season in NFL history. Even though "[m]uch interest has been given to the expanding range of the Monk Parakeet..." in the Midwest, and a Dayton feeder attracts one in early January, the "much interest" soon fizzles into "much ado about nothing" as further reports of significance are not forthcoming. Unusual gulls proliferate, with maxima of two glaucous, one Iceland, and 12 great black-backed gulls along Lake

Erie. Finches perform very well, including 253 evening grosbeaks on the Portsmouth CBC of December 31 and at least 10 pine grosbeaks in the Cleveland area during the period. A Harris's sparrow is outstanding in Marietta in February, but is topped by a boreal chickadee "banded and photographed" at Waite Hill, east of Cleveland, on December 23-24.

Winter 1982-83

President Reagan mulls over his "Star Wars" defense system proposal. Toni Basil's "Mickey" tops the Billboard chart during December, to the everlasting embarrassment of all music fans of this period. Here's a victory for the "mild winters equal few finches" contingent—this winter is "one of the mildest..." and finches are essentially a no-show throughout. Gulls come on strong, including maxima of 11 glaucous, three Iceland, and 640 great black-backed gulls along Lake Erie. This is not to mention the new European immigrant lesser black-backed gulls, Ohio's second California gull, a black-headed gull, and a black-legged kittiwake. Other rarities? Why, of course: a prairie falcon at Rickenbacker Air Force Base in Columbus January 21; a grasshopper sparrow in Butler County February 5; and a purple gallinule recovered from a Mansfield residence February 21, only to succumb the next day, and to wander erratically no more.


Winter 1992-93

Under the George H. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, in December U.S. troops are sent to Somalia to aid in U.N. famine relief efforts. The World Trade Center in New York City is bombed February 26 with five killed. On February 28 a failed attempt is made to arrest David Koresh in Waco, Texas. Hmm, here is another "unusually mild" winter, and a corresponding "absence of many regular boreal passerines." Whether there is any significance, who's to say? Rarities do not disappoint, however, and include a Ross's goose at Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in February, a dapper male Barrow's goldeneye at Avon Lake on February 28, and a black-throated gray warbler in Brown County through February 16.

Winter 2002-03

See Bill Whan's seasonal report elsewhere in this issue. It presumably includes information on finches, gulls, and rarities. We can only hope.

Winter 2012-13

On our return trip, our time machine accidentally skips past our destination and pauses briefly during the winter of 2012-13 before yanking us back to spring 2003. But in 2012-13, we can see three species of hummingbirds attempting to winter in Ohio. We see American crows, great horned owls, and all other permanent residents back at expected "pre-West Nile Virus" population levels. We see mind-numbing hybrid gull swarms infesting the lakefront. We see a group of die-hard birders attempting to slap a name on each and every one. And we see lots more birders just trying to ignore them altogether. If I squint hard enough, I think I can see myself in that latter group. It's funny, I seem happy enough... 

Annals of Pelagic Birding in Ohio: Black-capped Petrel

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If a company of ghosts were suddenly to 'materialize' before us, make strange gestures and depart silently, leaving only their chilly shrouds behind them for memories of their visit, we should know about as much of their whence and whither, their 'life histories,' in short, as we know now of these strange wanderers from the trackless deep.

—W. L. Dawson on this species, in *The Birds of Ohio* (1903)

A century ago, the black-capped petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* was a bird of mystery, its very existence subject to debate. As recently as 1928, Alexander's work on pelagic birds called it "perhaps now extinct." Today we know it to be a Caribbean breeder, with a few thousand pairs nesting in mountainous areas of Hispaniola (Wingate 1964, Lee & Vina 1993). At least a few can be seen in deep ocean waters off our southeast coast throughout the year, their presence continuous because young birds remain at sea for four to six years after fledging (Imber 1985). It has been recorded at a number of inland spots in eastern North America, almost always accompanied by severe storms. The black-capped petrel has a place on Ohio's official list, and among neighboring states and provinces also on the lists for Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Ontario.

The Petrels of 1898

The inclusion of black-capped petrel in Ohio's avifauna is based on events during two windy October days 104 years ago in the Cincinnati area. In language far less figurative than Rev. Dawson's, one Josua Lindahl of Cincinnati wrote up this occurrence in a general note "The Black-capped Petrel (*Aestrelata hasitata*) on the Ohio River at Cincinnati" for *The Auk* for 1899 (Lindahl 1899a):

A specimen of this oceanic bird was noticed yesterday (Oct. 5, 1898) on the river at the east end of Cincinnati by two young men who approached it on a boat, close enough to hit it with an oar. It was brought alive to the Museum of Natural History. Its skin will be preserved in the museum. It proved to be an adult female.

A young male of the same species was taken the same evening on one of the bridges connecting Cincinnati with the Kentucky shore. It was seen fluttering about the electric lamp, and finally struck the glass globe¹ and fell down on the bridge where it was picked up by the bridge watchman. The specimen was brought to the Zoölogical Gardens in Cincinnati where it lived one day and was then given to Mr. Charles Dury, in whose collection the skin will be preserved. Mr. Dury, who skinned both birds, tells me they were extremely emaciated and their digestive canals contained nothing but a little watery fluid.

¹ Black-capped petrels are to a large extent nocturnal feeders (Imber 1985).