

## Further Afield

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It's official—for aficionados of nesting birds, the summer season is too danged short. Here in northern Ohio, nesting studies are productive from the last week of May through the first week or two of July. Although seemingly never as popular as migrational birding, breeding season birding has, over the years, seemed to run hot and cold. Oologists, mostly in the form of men and boys scouring the countryside hunting for eggs and nests for their personal collections, ruled the roost from the mid-1880s through the mid-1930s, when their hobby fell out of favor. Also in the mid-1930s, but perhaps on a nobler basis, Lawrence E. Hicks distilled the combined knowledge of "the five score ornithologists of the state" in his 1935 *Distribution of the Breeding Birds of Ohio* (Ohio Biol. Surv. Bull. No. 32, 6(3):125-190). Many birders would conduct local nesting studies in the interim, but the next intensive statewide effort wasn't attempted until Ohio's breeding bird atlas project began collecting data in 1982, continuing through 1987. In all, some 500 volunteers provided 30,000 hours of data collection for this cause. It doesn't seem conceivable that 21 years have passed since data collection began, but such is the case. After six years of atlassing efforts, nesting season studies understandably tapered off somewhat through the 1990s. But I sense a renaissance of sorts today, with more and more birders picking up the nesting season torch. This is very good news for me, a dedicated summer birder. I usually don't need much of an excuse to go birding in the summer months, but this year, I came up with two.

It is a matter of fact that some areas are birded much more intensively than others. No news flash here. But as a compiler of birding records, anecdotes, and other miscellaneous detritus, this has been especially apparent to me. Back in the early 1990s, I was working on a project that studied published Ohio rare bird records. During the early portions of the project, I kept track of which of Ohio's 88 counties were represented by these records, and I was, for some reason, particularly interested in which county seemed to produce the fewest records of rare birds. I found out. To this day, virtually no bird reports of any kind emerge from this particular county. Not even one Christmas Bird Count circle overlaps its borders. It is clearly a very seldom-birded area. With that kind of history, I knew I needed to go there and sample it for myself.

But it wouldn't be any fun to just announce the county in question. Rather, I thought it might be more interesting to offer this short list of facts regarding our mystery county, and let you ponder the possibilities:

- It is located in southeast central Ohio.
- Its population, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, stands at 15,180 (down from 28,351 in 1850, 27,031 in 1900, and 15,362 in 1950).
- It ranks as the fourth least-populated county in Ohio.

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- Of its 292,459 acres, 220,288 are wooded and 798 are urban.
- It has zero TV stations, zero radio stations, and its zero daily newspapers boast a circulation of zero.
- It has seven registered physicians. Its zero hospitals contain zero beds.
- It has zero Interstate miles, zero Turnpike miles, and zero U.S. Highway miles.
- According to a glossy tourist brochure we picked up, a local feed store carries "a full line of Purina Chows."
- Its county seat, Woodsfield (population 2,598), supports the only McDonald's restaurant in the county. This actually one-ups Vinton Co., which still has high hopes for its first.
- The major employer in the county is the Monroe County government.
- Established in 1813, it was named after then-U.S. Secretary of State James Monroe, even before he became our fifth President.

Is it Monroe County? Why, yes it is. Situated along the Ohio River in one of Ohio's several "Little Switzerlands," it is actually very pretty, and very dominated by a landscape of heavily wooded hillsides cut by numerous small streams. Unlike in many areas, where birders need to seek out a good patch of habitat, my wife Sandy and I found good habitat virtually everywhere we looked as we crisscrossed the county this past June 1. If one can view monotony as a good thing, it was that; out of 86 likely nesting species we found, fully 51 seemed numerous enough to be thought of as Common, due in large part to the abundance of certain habitats. For comparison, *The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* (Peterjohn and Rice 1991) reported from 92 to 94 Confirmed or Probable nesting species in the county, while Hicks in 1935 tallied 95 nesting species. Not much changes in Monroe County, it seems.

Hayfields predominated on the cleared ridge tops, but for some reason these did not seem to attract many grassland birds, and we did poorly with this group. Strip-mines have barely made an impact in Monroe County, further diminishing opportunities for grassland specialists. Meadowlarks were aplenty, however, and we were quite surprised by several vesper sparrows in an Ohio habitat unusual in our experience—a gravel lane cutting through an ungrazed pasture with woody margins. Perhaps this habitat is more reminiscent of those favored by Vespers when the species was much more numerous and widespread in the state, back in Hicks's day.

Obviously, woodland species were the most prevalent, although edge species were also quite numerous. I doubt I have ever found more orchard orioles in a single day in Ohio, as we tallied no fewer than 30. One particular tract of wooded habitat was especially appealing—119-acre Piatt Park, administered by the Monroe County Park District. Piatt Park features a deep hemlock ravine with a stream, caves, trails, and even a boardwalk. Although this park is very reminiscent of portions of Hocking County, we were surprised that the only so-called "northern nesters" we could turn up were northern parulas; based on the quality of the habitat, I would have guessed that at least blue-headed vireos and black-throated green warblers would also have been present. The *Breeding Bird Atlas* also failed to find

these species there. This lack of “northern nesters” makes little sense to me, with the habitat apparently so well suited to them; I suspect they must make a home here, at least in some years. Perhaps someone should propose this site for a blue-headed vireo introduction project. Then again, perhaps not.

Several spots along the Ohio River also looked very productive. Two large embayments (clearly depicted in your *DeLorme Atlas and Gazetteer*) must get their share of good birds in migration when water levels fluctuate. On June 1, with water levels high, we found all of Ohio’s nesting swallow species, plus an unexpected adult bald eagle.

Did I mention Bewick’s wren, Swainson’s warbler, or Bachman’s sparrow? Well, we had none of those, although in a county as underbirded as Monroe, who knows what surprises may remain. Monroe County may be a bit out of the way, but it’s surely worth a look. Once you get there, just remember to report what you find!

My second goal this summer was to develop a roadside nesting season survey, patterned (extremely) loosely on the USGS’s North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Very briefly, a BBS route consists of 50 precise three-minute stops along a predetermined 24.5-mile roadside route, in which all likely breeding species are tallied, individual by individual. As of 2002, Ohio hosted 68 such routes, a small fraction of the 4449 routes scattered across the U.S. and Canada. Combined, these routes provide some of the best data available for describing long-term avian population trends on a continent-wide scale. For serious birders, the BBS is a great way to channel your energies for a good cause. Actually, in 2002 only 46 of 68 Ohio routes were taken, so many more volunteers are needed. For further details on Ohio routes, contact state coordinator Scott Hull at (740) 747-2525, extension 23, or at <Scott.Hull@dnr.state.oh.us>.

It has been my privilege to run the Pittsfield BBS route (located in Lorain, Huron, and Ashland counties) for over 10 years now. While always acknowledging the importance of consistency in maintaining exact stops from year to year, and strict study guidelines, I have nonetheless found official BBS routes somewhat restrictive, and a bit too time-consuming, given that a route typically takes from four to five hours to complete.

So, after a bit of experimentation, I came up with a form of “BBS Lite,” designed to taste great and be less filling—less restrictive and easier to run before work or school. In truth, this survey is intended to be more a challenge than any real gauge of population levels. Basically, it is a 10-mile roadside route with a two-hour time limit, in which one counts only the number of species, rather than the numbers of individual birds. At the very least, this would give us some idea of which areas of the state have the richest roadside species diversity. Which 10 miles of Ohio roadside can claim the most species?

Despite much grumbling from the underworked and grievously overpaid *Ohio Cardinal* marketing gurus, who are always looking for ways to cash in on a catchy acronym, I have chosen to name this survey the “Further Afield Two-Hour Extreme Avian Derby”, or FATHEAD for short. Its six rules are as elegant as its name. 1) Each roadside route is plotted entirely by your choice, anywhere in the state. 2)

Each route must be exactly 10 miles in length, with no backtracking or retracing allowed. 3) Each route must be run in exactly two hours, and you must have completed the entire 10 miles at the two-hour mark. 4) You may stop anywhere you like along the route, for as long as you wish, keeping in mind the two-hour limit. This allows a more thorough sample of any particularly birdy habitats, and likewise, allows one to give only a cursory glance at sub-par habitats (such as 99% of Van Wert County, for instance). One problem I consistently run into on my Pittsfield BBS route is noise—not from traffic on the roads, but rather from the many trains that pass through the area. When one of the 50 official predetermined stops is near an active train route, the noise completely blots out any avian song, and essentially wastes the three minutes at that stop. Perhaps equally confounding, even if you don’t actually see or hear a train at the moment, you can always tell they’re lurking somewhere nearby, from all the tracks they’ve left behind. Sorry. 5) Since these are roadside routes, you may park anywhere along your route, but you may walk only a stone’s throw from your vehicle. If you are unsure exactly how far you can throw a stone, you will want to practice beforehand. You may also wish to consider throwing at someone else’s vehicle rather than at your own. I learned this the hard way. 6) Routes should be run from late May to early July, to avoid migrants. That’s all.

During this season, I ran seven routes: in the Hinckley Metropark and north-eastern Medina County area May 28 (74 species); the Overton Ponds area of Wayne County June 14 (66 sp.); the Lake Rockwell area of Portage County June 16 (61 sp.); the Chippewa Lake area of western Medina County June 21 (69 sp.); the Mohican State Park area of Ashland County June 22 (82 sp.); Riverview Road in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) in southern Cuyahoga and northern Summit counties June 24 (64 sp.); and the Oak Hill area of the southern CVNP June 29 (71 sp.). These seven routes combined for 105 species, which seems reasonable, but also leaves considerable room for improvement.

Scouting pays dividends on these routes; on my less familiar routes, I tallied fewer species. Knowing an area thoroughly helps to determine how long you may wish to stay at any given spot, waiting for a staked-out rarity to appear. Of course, a wide variety of habitats is critical, but so is birdability—heavily-traveled routes are simply much harder to bird than those with little traffic, even if there are safe places to pull off the road. Even though my Riverview Road route, which cuts through the heart of the CVNP, has plenty of pull-offs, the noise from the volume of traffic was a real problem. On weekday mornings, Riverview Road serves as a north/south commuter flume, where motorists feel somehow cheated if they are not able to take every turn on two wheels. My lower species tally on this route reflects this fact of life.

All in all, the birding was very good and generally much more relaxed than on an official BBS route, which was what I had hoped. Hinckley hosted a golden-crowned kinglet (at one of Ohio’s few traditional nesting sites), plus chestnut-sided and black-throated green warblers; although I missed them on count day, two red-breasted nuthatches were also present on this route this summer. The chickadee

saga was as interesting as always on the Overton route, which crosses the boundary for both of our nesting species. Several black-capped were found north of town, but only Carolinas could be found south of town. An osprey nest was obvious at Lake Rockwell, and herring gulls were also potential nesters there. The rural Chippewa Lake route provided a least bittern, cliff swallow, and prothonotary warbler, all real surprises for Medina County. The 82 species found on the Mohican route may prove to be tough to top; although I feel that this particular route could come up with more than 82 species on the right day, other potential Ohio routes might have a difficult time besting that mark. Certainly a carefully planned Hocking Hills route has a chance, and perhaps so does a meticulous Oak Openings route; regardless, I don't think a better mark will come easily. Prove me wrong. Goodies at Mohican included red-breasted nuthatch (three sites), hermit thrush, magnolia and Canada warblers, and dark-eyed junco (two sites). The Riverview Road route provided plenty of traffic, plus a yellow-throated warbler in someone's front yard. At the more peaceful Oak Hill area of the CVNP, interesting finds were two alder flycatchers, two more red-breasted nuthatches, brown creeper, and my first summer Summit County record of pine warbler, again in someone's front yard. They have good front yards there.

But what about other areas—can a good marshland route be devised? Perhaps something combining Big Island WA with Killdeer Plains. How would Adams County fare? A route through the eastern half of the CVNP should theoretically out-produce the two routes I ran there this season, now that I think about it. The key is to remember that the tough species must be readily findable from the road. Combine that with a variety of habitats, and you've got yourself a contending route. Please excuse me for a moment, I must check to see if a reasonable 10-mile Hocking Hills route can be made to stretch from Clear Creek Road to the northern tip of Lake Logan. Now where's my DeLorme... 



These Caspian terns graced the beach at Caesar Creek State Park in Warren County on 21 April 2003. Photo by Jay Lehman.

## Molt Strategies in Adult Dowitchers: Criteria for Field Identification in Fall Migration in Ohio

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In the shorebird world, there are many clear and simple identifications that leave a birder feeling confident and well informed. There are also species groups frustrating enough to make one feel a distinct contempt for all avian life, and tempted to throw scope and binoculars into the mud in order to pursue a more unambiguous hobby—say, the field identification of teneral *Lestes* damselflies. The dowitchers form one such group.

Historically, the taxonomy of the genus *Limnodromus* has been tricky, going through a series of lumps and splits until 1950, when two distinct species were recognized: the short-billed dowitcher *L. griseus*, and the long-billed dowitcher *L. scolopaceus* (Pitelka 1950). Further complicating matters are three recognized subspecies of short-billed dowitchers. Nominate *L. g. griseus* migrates through the Atlantic coastal region, *L. g. hendersoni* is a more Midwestern breeder and migrant, and *L. g. caurinus* dwells in the Pacific coastal region. Fortunately for Ohio birders, only *hendersoni* regularly occurs in the Buckeye State. Unfortunately for Ohio birders, this is the subspecies of short-billed dowitcher most closely resembling the long-billed dowitcher in appearance. Thus, identification of Ohio dowitchers by plumage alone is seldom a matter of dull routine, in the field or even in the hand.

The various plumages of dowitchers have been treated in depth in several papers and field guides, such that despite the difficulties birders now have the resources available to separate most birds reliably. As fine as these articles are, however, important points of identification can remain confusing, even with the bird in hand. One author's "broken barring" can be another author's "wide spotting." "Dull rufous" can look all too similar to "dark salmon." The only good way to learn to identify dowitchers is to study them carefully in the field, take good notes, and establish one's own concepts compatible with the literature. One may even discover a reliable field mark no one has ever noticed or adequately treated heretofore. One emerging field mark in dowitcher identification is state of molt during the autumn migration.

It has been asserted in several recent publications that long-billed dowitchers undergo a complete molt during migration, while short-billed dowitchers, like most other shorebirds, do not molt until they reach the wintering grounds. Birders will find this information useful, but may wonder why this distinction is untreated, or even seemingly contradicted, in many respected sources on the genus *Limnodromus*. This paper will examine molt in Ohio dowitchers more closely, and attempt to clear up some of the potential confusion in the literature. Although the