

## Further Afield

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Back in the Summer 2002 issue of *The Ohio Cardinal* (25(4):181-85), we began a series discussing the rare birds of Ohio and, hopefully, how to find them. We continue that series here. After all, an Ohio state list is only as good as the rare species that appear on it. Therefore, we have combed through the 10 most recent published years of *The Ohio Cardinal* for each season (Spring 1993-2002, Summer 1993-2002, Autumn 1993-2002, and Winter 1993/94-2002/03), and then combined that with personal experience and perhaps a bit of wishful thinking into brief accounts covering another batch of rare Ohio birds. The species we address here are those graphed only as "rare" in the first edition of the *Ohio Bird Records Committee Checklist of the Birds of Ohio* (ODNR-Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, June 2002). In the near future, the Committee hopes to have an updated version available online. As defined in the *Checklist*, a "rare" species "normally occurs annually, but with only a few records on average." Another term we often use is "casual", which the *Checklist* defines as "not observed annually, but with a recognized pattern of occurrence." All uses of the words "rare" and "casual" that follow conform to these definitions. In our first installment of this series, we covered red-throated loon, red-necked grebe, eared grebe, American white pelican, little blue heron, and yellow-crowned night-heron. This time around, we handle greater white-fronted goose, brant, Eurasian wigeon, harlequin duck, white-winged scoter, and long-tailed duck. That's a lot to handle, so I suggest we begin immediately.

### Greater White-fronted Goose

As far as rare Ohio species go, the Arctic-nesting greater white-fronted goose seems to become less rare all the time. As migrants, they were casual at best in Ohio into the 1970s, but have subsequently increased so that a determined wild goose-chaser can usually expect to see this species every year in Ohio. Many migrants will linger for extended periods of a week or more when feeding is good, and when found are usually mixed in with large flocks of Canada geese. Although searching through these goose flocks can be tiresome, it can also pay off. Scan especially for tight groups of smaller geese, perhaps separated a bit from the main group. Size differences are often apparent even in flight. Before you rush off, a reminder that it is usually easier to track down a stake-out white-fronted rather than hoping to find one on your own, but in the end they all count the same.

This species has been reported at least once in each of the 10 most recent winters, ranging from one bird to over 100, and with a notable upward trend since 1996-97. Although few white-fronteds have ever actually wintered in Ohio, late fall migrants and early spring migrants also occur during the December through February winter reporting period. Fall migrants are quite irregular, ranging from zero birds in four years between 1993-2002, up to over 150 birds. They are casually

found from the last quarter of October through the first quarter of November, and then upgrade to rare for the middle two quarters of November. Late fall migrants then trend down to casual from the last quarter of November through the second quarter of January, although early January records have increased enough to warrant a very rare status. There is a distinct lack of records from the last two quarters of January, but they pick up again as rare spring migrants in the last quarter of February. They remain rare through the third quarter of March, and then fall back to casual through the third quarter of April. During the spring seasons of 1993-2002, individuals reported across Ohio ranged from zero birds (once) through 24 birds. Beware of any sightings outside of these periods, being especially wary of domestic geese, as described below.

In North America, the greater white-fronted goose is mostly a central and western species; their records however are surprisingly widespread in Ohio, although tending toward the western and central counties. In the past 10 years, they have been found in at least 30 counties. Omitting two oddball flocks of 31 birds in Licking County and 23 birds in Guernsey County, only 15-20% of white-fronteds have been found in eastern Ohio during this period. If I required a white-fronted goose for Ohio, unquestionably I'd head to the vicinity of Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area (Wyandot and Marion counties), home to an abundance of Canada geese and site of more white-fronted goose reports than any other in recent years. This would include Ohio's largest-ever recorded flock, of 113 birds on 27 November 1998. Other areas with multiple recent reports include Clinton and Warren counties in southwestern Ohio, Franklin County in central Ohio, Wayne and Lake counties in the northeast, and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge (Ottawa and Lucas counties) in the northwest.

Unexpectedly, domestic barnyard geese (mostly greylag types) can appear superficially similar to white-fronteds, and may trip up the unwary. As an aid in sorting through the two, bear in mind that barnyard geese usually appear bottom-heavy or pot-bellied, are very vocal, including much honking, and tend to favor barns and other rustic structures. You may also wish to distinguish barnyard geese from most demolition derby drivers, who curiously share many of these same traits.

### Brant

There can be no doubt about it—those in need of an Ohio brant should head for the Lake Erie shoreline, stretching from Erie County to Ashtabula County, and plan to do so from the last quarter of October through the third quarter of December. Even within this brief span, there is a definite spike in activity in the second quarter of November; almost three times as many reports have come from this period than from any other quarter-month over the past 10 autumn seasons. I'm pretty sure I'd look then. After the second quarter of December, brants become casual through the winter (almost exclusively as visitors, rather than winterers) and remain so into early April. Keep in mind that only eight individual brants have been seen during the combined springs of 1993 through 2002. Focus on the fall.



And focus on the lakefront. Brants heavily favor the immediate Lake Erie shoreline, when not seen on or over the Lake itself. They can often be found grazing in parks on grassy lakefront lawns or foraging on lakefront mudflats. In recent years, the mudflats at Conneaut Harbor (Ashtabula County) have become a hotspot for this species, with roughly 90 individuals reported there and nearby. Heading west along the Lake, Lake County has generated 80+ birds, and Erie County almost 60, during the autumns of 1993-2002. All other counties in the state have totaled a paltry 11 birds, and only three of those were inland.

Don't plan to spend much time searching goose flocks for brants—they show little tendency to gather in feeding flocks with other goose species in Ohio. Greater white-fronted geese, yes; snow geese, yes; Canada geese, most alarmingly yes; and even the casual Ross's geese, all tend to gather with other geese, but not brants. Instead, they prefer coastal saltwater habitats, while the other species are more upland and field oriented. Since Ohio is rather thin on saltwater habitats, brants tend to move on quickly, but sometimes will stick tight for a few days to refuel before moving on to the central Atlantic coast to spend the winter.

During the fall, watch the weather maps for northeasterly winds, another scarce commodity on Lake Erie. Although I don't have hard data to back it up, in my experience northeasterly winds seem to push rare species into Ohio; species that would normally be expected to migrate to our east. I suspect brants fall into this category. Ohio's best brant flight ever came on the strong northeasterly winds of 11 November 1985, when several groups of birders each recorded 200-300 fly-by brants at Huron and Vermilion in Erie County. That was one wild day, 18 years ago. Did I mention the 600 black scoters that also flew by?

### Eurasian Wigeon

Here is certainly the rarest of the rare species we are covering in this issue, only recently removed from the Ohio Bird Records Committee Review List. Since 1993, it has been found almost exclusively in the spring, so much so that outside the mid-March through late April spring migration window it should be considered casual at best. Although the OBRC *Checklist* graphs this species as rare for all of March and April, and into the first quarter of May, I would now restrict it even further to rare beginning with the third quarter of March through the end of April. The first three quarters of April seem to form a long peak, as spring waterfowl, especially American wigeons, move through Ohio.

Be especially aware of large wigeon flocks, as male Eurasians will sometimes lurk in their midst. Surprisingly, the rich reddish-brown heads of the male Eurasians aren't always as easy to detect as one might think, and flocks require careful scrutiny. Even suspected Eurasians may turn into Eurasian X American wigeon hybrids, a form that has been identified in Ohio more than once. Female Eurasians must surely be overlooked, but since female Eurasian and American wigeons appear so similar, who's to say? The rufous-morph female Eurasian has been identified here at least twice, so keep that in mind.

Eurasian wigeons have been reported from at least seven counties since 1993, with the western Lake Erie marshes producing the lion's share. Actually, about two-thirds of Ohio reports during this period have come from Lucas, Ottawa, and Erie counties, especially Ottawa NWR. The dikes forming the large impounded areas there allow scrutiny from many angles, and it's a good idea to check as many angles as you can. If you'd rather sit in your vehicle and look rather than hike the dikes, you can do no better than scope out Medusa Marsh in Erie County, on the southern border of Sandusky Bay.

### Harlequin Duck

In Ohio, the harlequin duck is essentially a bird of two habitats—rocky Lake Erie shores and jetties, and rapidly flowing rivers. Only a handful of Ohio harlequins have ever been found away from these settings. Even within these narrow habitat requirements, harlequins have chosen their favorite haunts even more specifically—the rocky shores of Lake County, and the rapidly flowing rivers of southwestern Ohio.

Amazingly, since 1993 almost *five times* as many harlequins have been reported from Lake County than from any other county, with most sightings emanating from Eastlake Power Plant, Headlands Beach, Fairport Harbor, and Lakeshore Reservation. Although quite a few of these have been fly-bys, many have also set up shop for extended periods. Actually, any likely-looking habitat along the Lake Erie shore from Erie County east through Ashtabula County is worth a peek. In the southwest, Montgomery County seems to attract more than its quota of harlequins, particularly in the rapids of the Great Miami River in or near Dayton. Their attraction to rapidly flowing rivers should be no surprise, as mountain streams are their preferred nesting habitat, but the secret of their attraction to southwestern Ohio is anyone's guess. The Maumee River rapids in northwestern Ohio may also prove to be a steady Ohio choice.

As fall migrants, harlequin ducks are rare throughout November. They then drop off considerably in December, but pick up again as winter visitors and residents in January through the first quarter of February. After this, they might better be termed as casual through mid-March, mostly representing a few lingering winterers. True spring migrants are almost accidental. Birds seen outside the late fall through early spring period are always highly suspect as potential escapees, especially if they feed from your hand.

While adult males are about as easily identified as any bird has a right to be, relatively few adult males are found in Ohio. Immatures and females seen here tend to outnumber adult males by somewhere between two- to three-to-one. Watch especially for these immatures and females amongst near-shore buffleheads, focusing in particular on the facial markings, which can sometimes even be differentiated on flying birds. Female and young harlequins also have all-dark wings; you should be able to pick up some white on fly-by buffleheads, assuming you're close enough. Be close enough before calling a fly-by harlequin.



### White-winged Scoter

Although once considered the most numerous scoter in Ohio, white-winged scoters have now fallen to the third position numerically, behind surf and black scoters. Even so, they are often still readily findable, albeit in very small numbers, when a generalized scoter flock is present. Just look for the ones with white on the wings.

The first edition of the OBRC *Checklist* graphs white-wingeds as rare in the third quarter of October; I think I'd push their fall arrival back even further to the beginning of November. For the entire month of November they remain steady but rare, and have averaged about 16 birds per fall season from 1993 through 2002. They remain rare but in slightly lesser numbers through the winter, but pick up again, presumably as spring migrants, with the third quarter of February. They remain as rare spring migrants all the way through mid-May. During their spring movements, peak numbers appear in the first two quarters of March. Although they have averaged about eight birds per spring period from 1993-2002, they are irregular; in four of those years, only one bird each year has been reported across the state.

But where to look? Since 1993, roughly three times as many white-wingeds have been found on Lake Erie as inland. Lake and Cuyahoga counties seem your best bet, followed by Lorain and Erie. My best guess would be to search through the scoter flocks that have taken to lingering off Rocky River City Park in Cuyahoga County just west of Cleveland. Beginning in late October and through November, this park is always worth a stop. Rocky River City Park is not to be confused with Rocky River MetroPark, also on Cleveland's west side, but well inland. Although white-winged scoters may have little use for Rocky River MetroPark, it's a favorite of mine, whether the scoters like it or not.

If you want to look inland, be my guest: white-winged scoters have been seen in 20+ inland counties over the past 10 years. Inland birds are rather widely distributed, with 10-20 individuals seen in each of the northwestern, southwestern, central, and northeastern regions of the state. As with most other waterfowl, the south-central, east-central, and southeastern counties are hardly scoter magnets; if my math is correct, a grand total of three white-wingeds has been seen in these regions since 1993. This is in contrast to about 220 birds seen on Lake Erie in the same time period. Don't say I didn't warn you.

### Long-tailed Duck


I still prefer to call them oldsquaws. But then again, I also prefer marsh hawk, snowflake, and butcher bird, if anyone asks. Also worth asking is how the long-tailed duck, so very unpredictable in numbers from year to year, can be so predictable in their timing. In the fall, they begin to appear as rare in the fourth quarter of October, but virtually none are found before that. They remain rare throughout the winter as residents and visitors, and then through the spring until mid-April, when virtually all head north by 15 April in one fell swoop, or swell foop, as my mother likes to say. On average, numbers remain remarkably consistent all the way from

late October through mid-February, then dip somewhat, only to rise to a very sharp peak during the last quarter of March. This seems to be the best time of the year to find a long-tailed oldsquaw duck.

Numbers of migrants vary widely from year to year, possibly due to weather-related groundings. For the 10 consecutive springs beginning with 1993, my best accounting reveals 59 birds, then 35, 65, 19, 8, 18, 15, 9, 4, and 45 birds found across the state. For the 10 consecutive falls beginning with 1993, I come up with 12 birds, then 5, 5, 39, 5, 8, 9, 14, 1, and about 40 birds found. On average, they are still rare though, and are certainly not particularly easy to find; in a good flight, you might come across a clump of 15 on one lake, but then none the rest of the day.

In the fall, usually more than twice as many birds are seen on Lake Erie (mostly in Lake and Erie counties) rather than on inland lakes. During winter, numbers are about equally distributed between Lake Erie and inland. In the spring, their distribution changes again, with roughly three times as many birds being seen inland versus on Lake Erie. I'd like to know why, but I haven't a clue.

Certainly, the northeastern inland counties of Summit, Portage, and Geauga are the places to look, hoarding about half of the state's inland spring birds since 1993. Specific sites that have attracted large flocks are Nimisila and Summit Lakes in Summit County, West Branch and Walborn Reservoirs in Portage County, and La Due Reservoir in Geauga County. If I had only one shot, I'd try a tour of all these sites and more during the last week of March or first week of April; scour as many sites as possible to increase your chances of success.

That's certainly enough to digest for one issue. Next time, whenever that might be, we hope to cover northern goshawk, golden eagle, king rail, and begin on the shorebirds. But first, you've got lots of waterfowl to look for. Go to it. 



Franklin County's nesting yellow-crowned night-herons produced several young birds this season, including this duo. Photo by Tim Leslie on 9 July 2003.