

Further Afield

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Being a thoughtful person, I have many thoughts. Formerly my thoughts seemed, at least to me, to be cutting-edge: provocative, cohesive, and well-rounded. As I age, however, it seems that my thoughts have become more random in nature, often verging on trivial and borderline goofy. I suspect some readers would argue they have never seen adequate evidence of my ever having been provocative or cohesive—well-rounded, perhaps; but I prefer to think of this trait as my personal “bonus biomass.” My detractors may have a point. I feel confident, however, that given enough weeks, I could assemble a witty rejoinder for these nay-sayers. Maybe not, though.

Speaking of trivial and goofy, predictions, on the whole, usually fall under this banner. But that doesn't stop us from predicting. Birding predictions are usually at least entertaining, especially when they are based on delusional thinking. Never being one to let delusion stand in my way, I will now attempt a bold prognostication—to predict which birds might next be added to the list of Ohio *nesting* species.

Do not confuse this prediction with other, more pedestrian predictions, such as which *species* might next be added to the official Ohio list. This prediction is *waay* different than these, even if it is not as provocative or cohesive, or as good. But I will let both of my readers be the judge.

Just recently, I have noticed that many bird species nest in Ohio, whereas many others do not. Not in recorded history, at least. As the various Pleistocene ice sheets of eons past moved across what would become Ohio, habitats and land features must have been radically different than we see today, to the extent of being utterly unrecognizable. Ice 5000 to 8000 feet thick will tend to do that to a landscape. Keep in mind, though, that all these icy movements took place before the invention of binoculars, written language, or even e-mail for that matter, and therefore no record of the breeding birds of glacial Ohio has been left to us today.

On the other hand, continued global warming would also certainly affect which birds might nest in Ohio in the near and distant future. Recently we have seen several articles covering this general topic, but on a continent-wide scale. Closer to home, in his 2000 article “Modeling the Potential Impacts of Climate Change on the Summer Distribution of Ohio's Non-game Birds”, which appeared in *Ohio Birds and Natural History* 2(1):32-39, author Jeff Price uses various climate models to project specifically which Ohio bird species might be affected by global warming over time. Price's list of potential extirpations includes black-capped chickadee, house wren, yellow warbler, and song sparrow. I'm not sure I'd want to live in an Ohio that lacks nesting yellow warblers, just one of 14 currently nesting warbler species that Price postulates will disappear if his climate models hold true. On the other hand, Price's list of potential newcomers to the nesting scene is much smaller, but includes such oddballs as Say's phoebe, scissor-tailed flycatcher, painted

bunting and great-tailed grackle. Actually, great-tailed grackle has illustrated an amazing growth potential in recent years throughout the central plains, but has shown little propensity to head east. Nesting may therefore be a ways off, especially given that Ohio has only a single record of the species, which came in 1985.

Taking into account potential climate changes, range expansions, habitat modifications, tendencies to linger into summer, and guesswork, which other species might next join the list of Ohio nesters? Bear in mind that adding a species to the list of Ohio nesters is far more difficult than adding a new species to the Ohio list—since 1990, I believe we have added only common merganser and clay-colored sparrow to the nester roster, while during the same time period we have added 18 species to the official Ohio Bird Records Committee state list. Far more difficult, indeed. But let us begin.

Common loon seems a likely possibility to nest, if in fact this hasn't already happened. Suspicious activity this past summer at Alum Creek Reservoir is only the most recent tantalizing nesting rumor. Loons headed for parts north linger into early summer somewhere in Ohio every year, and sometimes with more than one bird per site, which is always useful in nesting attempts. Ring-necked ducks, another northerly nester, also occasionally linger here into summer, even obvious male and female pairs. It's probably only a matter of time until some woody-edged Ohio marsh or swamp induces a pair to nest. My guess would be the Killbuck Marsh, but I could be wrong. Canvasback is another possibility, although this typically western nester is probably more of a long-shot. Even so, the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (1981-85) found canvasback to be a confirmed nester in the marshes of Lake St. Clair, perhaps 100 miles from Toledo, and also found them as probable nesters at Rondeau Provincial Park, on the north shore of Lake Erie, roughly opposite Cleveland.

I also suppose it is remotely possible that a tricolored heron or even one of the *Plegadis* ibis species (glossy or white-faced) could nest in Ohio, but if so, it would almost certainly be as part of the madness on the West Sister Island heronry, where even little blue heron has nested in the past (as recently as 1991). In fact, single tricoloreds have been seen at West Sister in 1979 and 1986, and 1-2 glossy ibises intermingled with a black-crowned night-heron colony on North Bass Island in 1963. Anyone who has visited an active heronry can attest to the copious quantity of raging hormones pervasive at these sites—who could blame an out-of-range pair of tricoloreds or ibises if they chose to stick around to join these festivities? I would not blame them; I would be happy for them.

Forster's tern, Caspian tern, and great black-backed gull also come to mind as potential nesters, with the marsh-nesting Forster's tern seeming by far the most likely. Confirmed as a nester in at least nine atlas blocks on Lake St. Clair and at Rondeau during the first Ontario BBA, Forster's tern continues to be confirmed or probable at these sites midway into the second, 2001-05, Ontario Atlas [maps for both Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases can be found at <http://www.birdsontario.org/atlas/map.jsp>]. Enough Forster's are usually present in Ohio during the nesting period within the Lake Erie marshes to give it a real opportunity to nest here.

Caspian tern has been deemed a probable nester at Rondeau midway through the second Atlas, but it has already been confirmed as a nester at Long Point, also on the north shore of Lake Erie, and roughly opposite from Erie, Pennsylvania. An isolated great black-backed gull nesting attempt seems possible in Ohio, presumably somewhere along a rocky Lake Erie shoreline, island or breakwall; all habitats a bit reminiscent of their typical northeastern coastal preferences. Given their penchant for dawdling here into the summer (especially at Conneaut, although this behavior has diminished in the past few years), I would not rule a possible nesting attempt by great black-backed gull, perhaps even (dare we say it??) as part of a hybrid pair.

The *blitzkrieg*-like range expansion of the Eurasian collared-dove in North America (and elsewhere) is well-documented, but so far Ohio has only one official record of the species. I have little doubt that others have passed through undetected, and that more will surface in the future. David Sibley's [The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America](#) (2003), written by David Sibley and also illustrated by David Sibley, maps this species as a year-round resident as close to Ohio as southern Illinois and western Kentucky. You may wish to compare the Eurasian collared-dove's range maps in Sibley's 2003 guide to the 2000 edition of his [The Sibley Guide to Birds](#); with this explosive rate of expansion, it makes future Ohio nestings of this species seem rather likely.

Yellow-bellied flycatchers are another intriguing nesting possibility, given that territorial birds have been found in eight Pennsylvania counties since 1980, with territories as close as the Allegheny National Forest, some 50 or 60 miles from the Ashtabula County line. According to the species profile generated by the Pennsylvania Game Commission (http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/PGC/flycatcher/profile.htm), "nests have been found in mossy, poorly drained areas (bogs and old beaver ponds) surrounded by extensive northern hardwood forests. Most nest sites are associated with standing water, sphagnum moss, conifers (spruce or hemlocks), and the presence of high bush blueberries, alder, rhododendron or other shrubs." I'm not sure how close Ohio can come to duplicating the habitat requirements of these typically northern nesters, but potential nesting seems worthy of consideration, especially in our eastern counties of Ashtabula and Columbiana. The same might be said of Swainson's thrush, another "northerly" or higher-altitude nester. Swainson's thrushes are notorious for lingering in spring, and there have been numerous cases of very young and adult birds seen in Ohio in July, especially along or near Lake Erie. Most likely these are only early fall migrants, but the possibility for nesting remains.

Two species of warbler are also worthy of consideration as future nesters. For several summers in the 1990s, yellow-rumped warblers developed a curious attachment to coniferous and rugged Mohican State Forest, a site somewhat reminiscent of their more typical Pennsylvania and West Virginia nesting haunts. On July 2, 1994 a singing male was seen in the company of a female or possible immature; the male still sang territorially as late as July 23. Singing males were also noted there in 1992 and 1993, but I'm not aware of any more conclusive nesting evidence there after 1994.

Don't overlook the delectable Swainson's warbler as another potential nester. Since Ohio's first record was established in Lawrence County in May and June 1947, nesting season occurrences have been noted in Ohio in at least seven other years. At least we think so. Although the territorial Lawrence County bird was collected, most other reported Ohio Swainson's warblers have proven extremely difficult to verify, even as to species, let alone confirm as nesting. This has been the case even though the species nests regularly in Kentucky and West Virginia. Rhododendron thickets, a typical nesting habitat in these states, are not even mandatory in Ohio, given that at least two confirmed territorial birds in Ohio favored cut-over hillsides instead of rhododendron. Listen for a not-quite-right Louisiana waterthrush song, one perhaps a bit out of habitat, and you may find yourself a Swainson's warbler instead. I trust this would be OK with you.

I consider Brewer's blackbird a real contender for future Ohio nesting, especially in the far northwestern corner of the state. Brewer's were confirmed nesters near Point Pelee in the first Ontario BBA, and their regular breeding range includes the northern two-thirds of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Due to its similarity to other blackbirds, and many birders' relative lack of interest in the group, it seems nesting Brewer's blackbirds might be easily overlooked here, especially in the summer, when the species is usually not even considered as a possibility in the state. Oh, but it is, even though we have but two summer records thus far. Williams County, in far northwestern Ohio, would be my best guess for a first nesting record.

So where does this leave us? If my math is correct, I have predicted that 13 additional species might someday be found nesting in Ohio: common loon, ring-necked duck, canvasback, tricolored heron, *Plegadis* ibis species, Forster's tern, Caspian tern, great black-backed gull, Eurasian collared-dove, yellow-bellied flycatcher, Swainson's thrush, yellow-rumped warbler, Swainson's warbler, and Brewer's blackbird. In all likelihood, if we can add just one of these species to the list of Ohio nesters in this decade, we'll be doing very well. Whatever the next official first-time nesting species turns out to be, I suspect it will very likely be one of the above. I hope so, if only to substantiate the sometimes delusional thinking of this well-rounded columnist. 🐦