

“A Perfect Revolution”: Jared P. Kirtland on the Western Reserve

Only eight years younger than John James Audubon, Kirtland was Ohio's first naturalist, and his diverse but hard-to-find writings provide the clearest portrait we have of Ohio's natural realms in the early days of statehood. Some years ago (Vol 24, No 4:189-212) we published in these pages the full text of his catalog of Ohio birds and related works. Here we reproduce the preface to a series of papers, appearing beginning on 3 January 1850 in *The Family Visitor*, a vanished periodical no longer widely available. It provides an overview of wild life in northeastern Ohio in the early nineteenth century. —Ed.

Fifty three years have nearly elapsed since the first surveys and settlements were made on the Connecticut Western Reserve. Within that period of time a perfect revolution has been effected in its condition. Its forests have been displaced by farms, villages, and cities; canals, railroads, and other important thoroughfares are extending in every direction; telegraphs are furnishing increased facilities for communication; commerce has spread over the Lake, and the whole face of nature has been changed.

The progress of improvement is familiar to our intelligent population, and awakens in them a laudable pride and satisfaction. A series of changes have, however, been attendant on settlement and civilization, that are looked upon by the *true Naturalist* with about the same complacency that Leatherstocking and his red associates viewed the depredations on the face of Nature by the white man at Templeton. Of the extent of these changes few have any conception.

The surface of the Reserve, though somewhat level, is sufficiently undulating to admit of a great variety of soils and exposures—from the high and dry ridge to the rich alluvion and the mucky swamp; and to afford suitable localities for a numerous Flora, embracing on the one hand the *half* hardy plants of more Southern regions, and on the other the Alpine productions of the North. Lake Erie at the same time serves to mitigate and adapt the climate to the former class of vegetation, while its waters often prove a medium to waft to its shores the seeds of the latter.

The country was originally covered with a heavy growth of timber, the species varying with the soil and exposure. Beneath its shade had accumulated, during series of centuries, a surface mould, rich in the elements of vegetable nutrition. This formed a pabulum, congenial to more tender growths of shrubby and herbaceous plants, which, protected also from the sun and droughts by the over-spreading forests, invested the earth universally with

a verdant and beautiful carpet. From the earliest days of spring, till the close of autumn, a splendid show of flowers was exhibited that varied from time to time as one species after another developed its inflorescence.

The best arranged, artificial Botanic garden cannot afford the botanist and amateur cultivator a more inviting field than nature furnished here half a century since.

As the season advanced, various fruits and nuts ripened in succession, and though some of them were not, perhaps, as delicate as the varieties now produced by cultivation, yet they were palatable, and often a source of comfortable convenience to our pioneer fathers.—Among the native fruits were the Strawberry, Serviceberry, Gooseberry, Raspberry, Cranberry, Cherry, Grape, Crab-apple, and Pawpaw. Equally rich was the Fauna of that day.

It is somewhat uncertain whether the Bison and the Moose-deer ever visited this section of Ohio; the former were one not uncommon in the Southern part of this State, where the cane brakes then extensively occurred. The last Bison there known were two that were shot in the Sandy Forks of Symmes Creek, near the South East part of Jackson county, in the year 1800.

Among the larger quadrupeds, the Elk, Deer, Bear, and Wolves were common. A few Panthers existed here; several were killed in the township of Poland, about the commencement of the present century.

The Beaver, whose “ancient works” may still be seen in many places, had been nearly exterminated by the Indians and white hunters before the permanent settlements commenced. A few were occasionally taken within the present century.

The unique Porcupine might then be found in every forest, and frequently aroused the farmer's ire by destroying the usefulness and often the life of his watch-dog. This was accomplished by the insertion of its quills into the dog's lips and mouth, and not by shooting them from a distance, as was fabulously supposed by many.

The Otter was equally abundant; his *sliding ways* might then be seen at short intervals, beaten upon the mud or snow along the sloping banks of every little creek. The Fisher, Muskrat, and Mink existed in great numbers.

The Black and Gray Squirrels were far more common than at the present day, and often blasted the farmer's prospects by destroying his crops of wheat and Indian corn. The Red Squirrel had then barely made his debut.

The Grey Fox was a common tenant of the forests. The Red species did not make its appearance for many years, and *is not a native*. It was not known on the Reserve as late as 1810; but I think I heard of it in 1818.

Many other minor species of quadrupeds that it is not necessary to refer to, existed here very abundantly in those early days.

The rapacious family of Birds was very strongly represented. The Bald Eagle visited the premises of almost every farmer during cold weather. The Golden Eagle was not uncommon, particularly along the shores of the Lake. Of the former, a few remain at the present day; the latter has nearly or quite forsaken his former locations.

It is problematical whether AUDUBON'S *Washington Eagle* ever had an actual existence. On several occasions I supposed I was on the track of it, but in the end I always found it to be one of the other species. The young female of the Bald species, in her gray or black plumage, is frequently mistaken for it, from the circumstance that she may not be larger than even an old white headed male. She does not assume the mature plumage till after the third moulting.

The Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, Broad-winged and Cooper's Hawks might, in early days, be found nesting on almost every acre of the Western Reserve, and during the summer, the beautiful Swallow tailed Hawk visited here in considerable numbers, in pursuit of its favorite food. It might be seen moving in graceful circles, at no great height, watching for the garter snake, that then infested our meadows.

Wild Geese, Swans, Ducks and wading birds, literally swarmed about every lake, pond, and creek, during Spring and Autumn. Many species, also, bred on the Reserve.

Forty years since, while traveling from Buffalo to Ohio, along the immediate shore of the Lake, the scene was constantly enlivened by the presence of ducks, leading their young on the margin of the water—or hastily retreating to it at our approach. It often happened, that on doubling some point of land, or fallen tree, we placed ourselves in a position to cut off their communication with their favorite element. The instinctive expedients to which the anxious mother would resort to extricate her charge from impending danger, were to us a matter of amusement and interest. The Goosander, Mallard, and Summer Duck, were among the most common species we observed.

The flocks of Wild Turkeys were more common and numerous, than are those of the tame variety of the present day. The Partridge and Quail were not very abundant. The Pileated Wood-cock was found on every dry tree. The sound of his heavy blows and loud note, were heard on all sides; and many a decaying trunk, was literally demolished by his labors.

Turkey Buzzards and Ravens collected in numerous flocks about every dead carcass—while the crow was less abundant than it is in more recent times.

The Crow Black Bird might be found nesting in almost every hollow and cavity in decaying trees. His habits in constructing his nest, were different from his kin in the New England States, where it builds its nest exclusively on some fork of a limb of a live tree, near its extremity.

The Robin, Blue Bird, Thrush, Cat-bird and many small species, have, perhaps, increased as our fields and orchards have extended, and afforded them favorite resorts; except in neighborhoods where idle and vicious boys abound, and especially, newly imported foreigners, who for the first time in their lives are endowed with the privilege of destroying every harmless or useful bird.

While the tributaries of Lake Erie and the Ohio river were unobstructed by dams and were not swept by seines, they abounded with large and valuable species of fish, which, in their vernal migrations, crowded in immense shoals on the ripples. Sturgeon and Muskallonge often run up the Cuyahoga several miles, and large numbers of Pike, Pickerel, and white Perch visited the upper waters of the Mahoning during Spring and Summer.

Reptiles were sufficiently common, at least, to gratify the most ardent curiosity of the Naturalist. The Yellow Rattle Snake was abundant. Difference of color and form, arising from sex, were taken as evidence of specific distinction, and it was the popular opinion, that there were two distinct species of the large kind, the *Yellow* and the *Black*.

The small black Rattle Snake, the Massasaugua, was still more abundant in certain marshes, and the Copper-head might be occasionally found near some moist and stony ledge during long continued hot and dry weather in summer.

These *three* constitute all the species of a venomous character that have been found in Northern Ohio.

Several annoying species of insects, nearly as noxious by their impressions, were very common, and were a source of great suffering to man and beast.

The forests and waters abounded also, with many Mollusca and animals provided with shells as a protection and covering. The number of species of land and water shells found in Ohio, is, probably, greater than in any State or country besides—as most of the species were then abundant, furnishing beautiful additions to the cabinet of the Conchologist.

The gun, the axe, and the plough, together with the depredations of domestic animals, have effected extensive damage in the condition of the animal and vegetable kingdom.

That universal forest has been so far destroyed, that only broken patches remain, mere shadows of its former stateliness. These are not so much exposed to the sun, winds and frosts, that they have lost much of their verdant and luxuriant appearance.—The same exposure to the elements has, in great measure, dissipated the rich native soil; and the beautiful investments of shrubs and herbaceous plants have been destroyed by repeated browsing and cropping of domestic animals. Many interesting and beautiful species have entirely disappeared from our flora.

Most of the native fruits, like the Indian, have been blasted by the approach of the white man, and have entirely disappeared or become barren.

The trees of the Wild Plum, Service Berry, and Pawpaw which have survived the progress of improvement, have, long since, ceased to produce their fruits; and the Vine and Cranberry are not much more favorably affected.

Most of the native species of Quadrupeds have entirely disappeared, or are very scarce.

Geese, Ducks, and other aquatic birds, have nearly forsaken their favorite resorts.—Even Sandusky Bay is now visited semi-annually by very

diminished numbers, compared with former days; and many species, formerly very common, are no longer seen.

Still greater changes, if possible, have occurred with the finny tribes. The Sturgeon has nearly forsaken this shore of the Lake; the Muskallonge has become scarce, and no longer seeks the mouth of the rivers to deposit its spawn. All the migratory species have been excluded from the Mahoning river by the construction of dams on the Big Beaver. Many smaller species have increased in all our waters since the larger and more voracious have been reduced in numbers. The slaughter houses about the rivers, afford them large supplies of food, and contribute to their increase. Artificial slack waters, canals and basins have also in many localities effected similar results.

No one will probably regret that the venomous reptiles have been so nearly exterminated. A sufficient number remains. Only two years since *seven* Copper Heads were taken near the mouth of Rocky river, in Rockport, and no less than forty were killed in one day, a few years since, by some Irishmen engaged in excavating the Mahoning canal, north of Lowell, in Mahoning county.

With equal pleasure we should greet the disappearance of many of the annoying insects.

All the species of Land Snails in this country are harmless, as are also the Mollusca inhabiting the fresh water shells. Most of them are rapidly disappearing. Swine, Turkeys, Ducks and Hens destroy the Land Snails, and during low stages of water in our streams, swine prey on the muscles.

Our canals and reservoirs form favorable localities for the increase of these muscles, and may perhaps preserve some species from total extermination.

Other changes are also occurring in our vegetable and animal kingdoms. New species are constantly finding their way among us—some proving to be useful and valuable, others noxious and nuisances.



Perhaps our most beautiful migrant sparrow, Lincoln's is common for only a few days every spring. This one was at the Magee bird trail 14 May. Photo by Jason Estep.

Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

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After a hiatus of several months, the Ohio Bird Records Committee returned to action this spring, sporting four new members: Dwight Chasar (Northfield); Tom Hissong (Dayton); Tom Kemp (Whitehouse); and Ben Morrison (Alliance). They join current members Rob Harlan (Norton), Ned Keller (Clevs), and Sue Tackett (Dayton).

Since no rare bird documentations from late 2003 or 2004 had been reviewed, the OBRC had the task of reviewing 55 new documentations from 2003/2004 and four records still in circulation. Of these 59 records, 45 were accepted by the committee, four were not accepted, and 10 remain in circulation.

Accepted Records

- Ross's goose - Stark Co., 24-26 Nov. 2003; observers
C. Greenfield, J. Estep, P. Gardner, C. Caldwell, K. Metcalf.
- Ross's goose - Summit Co., 10 Jan 2003; observer F. Losi.
- Ross's goose - Medina Co., 29 Mar 2004; observer J. Perchalski.
- Ross's goose - Portage Co., 10-18 Dec 2004; observer L. Rosche.
- Cackling goose - Clark Co., 13 Nov 2004; observer B. Whan.
- Cackling goose - Preble Co., 5 Dec 2004; observer J. Stenger.
- Western grebe - Warren Co., 8 Nov 2004; observer F. Frick.
- American white pelican - Mahoning Co., 6 Jun 2004; observer L. Hartman.
- Tricolored heron - Erie Co., 30 May 2004; observer C. Caldwell.
- Glossy ibis - Erie Co., 30 Aug 2004; observer J. Lehman
- White-faced ibis - Marion Co., 1 May 2004; observers B. Sparks, P. Gardner
- White-faced ibis - Wood Co., 9 May 2004; observer P. Chad
- Mississippi kite - Lucas Co., 12 May 2004; observer G. Klug
- Prairie falcon - Muskingum Co., 15 & 25 Feb 2004; observers R. Rogers,
K. Davis, D. Linzell, A. Ryff
- Piping plover - Highland Co., 25 Apr 2004; observer T. Shively
- Piping plover - Gallia Co., 10 Oct 2004; observer H. Slack
- Black-necked stilt - Preble Co., 8 May 2004; observer J. Jaskula
- Black-necked stilt - Sandusky Co., 12 Jul 2004; observer S. Zadar
- Black-necked stilt - Ottawa Co., 6 Jun 2004; observer E. Pierce
- Black-necked stilt - Ottawa Co., 17 Oct 2004; observer S. Snyder
- Black-necked Stilt - Marion Co., 7 Jun 2004; observer B. Whan
- Baird's sandpiper - Scioto Co., 17 Apr 2004; observers B. Sparks, P. Gardner
- Ruff - Marion Co., 16 May 2004; observer D. Overacker
- Long-tailed jaeger - Franklin Co., 8 Oct 2003; observer J. Sauter
- California gull - Lorain Co., 3 Jan 2004; observer K. Miller