Further Afield

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Some Summer Conundrums
or
Block-busters, Roosters, and Floaters

The right way…the best way…the only way…we like to think we know the answers, but in truth, these are often questions best left for the future to decide. I cringe at the blathering of instant experts, and masters with all the answers. Birding, like just about everything else in life, is seldom an exact science, or defined by clear-cut black and white. Let's leave black-and-white to *Mniotilta varia*. Let's instead attempt to shed some light on a few gray-shaded topics where the right answer isn't always obvious, or known, or knowable--where only time, and maybe a little research, will tell.

Our first topic is the new Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas II, scheduled to run from 2006 through 2010. And no, I don't have the answers, only questions. It's hard to believe that 19 years have passed since the first Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas (now out of print, but on line at www.ohiobirds.org/obba2/pdfs/pdfselect.php) shut its doors back in 1987. Experiences gained while surveying for the first Atlas still remain vividly etched in my mind, and I learned so much in the process. Considering that I didn't get involved until its second-to-last year, I'm almost envious of the young birders now deftly taking advantage by becoming involved in the inaugural year of the new Atlas. Get out and explore places you would otherwise never go— both the unusual and the ordinary. Only then will you begin to appreciate what too many birders overlook, and are all the poorer for as a result— that birding is not just migration periods and Christmas Bird Counts— birding is all year long. Let the summer birds sing, and from now on let's listen.

But what is the right way, or the best way, to accomplish a task as herculean as a statewide breeding bird atlas? I have my own ideas and feelings, but in truth I don't know the best way. I also don't envy the responsibilities taken on by Paul Rodewald (OBBA II Project Director) and Aaron Boone (Project Coordinator), but I trust they will skillfully address whatever conundrums come their way. You can view their progress online at www.ohiobirds.org/obba2/, and read it here over years to come.

First off, it is immediately apparent that OBBA II planners have carefully studied atlas projects elsewhere, in addition to the first atlas project here in Ohio (1982-87), in order to capitalize on successes and to minimize shortcomings. A great deal of thought has obviously gone into formulating the OBBA II *Atlas Volunteer Handbook*, which is about as informative and complete as one could expect, given that gray areas are always bound to develop. Some fun gray areas are considered in the Atlas's online discussion forum, at www.ohiobirds.org/obba2/forum/index.php.

My primary focus here deals with how the new Atlas differs from the original. As one might expect, the goals of both projects run nearly parallel: to document the status and distribution of all birds nesting in Ohio during their

respective survey periods; to provide accurate and detailed information on rare nesters; to identify habitats supporting significant birdlife; and to provide baseline data to help better gauge future changes in status and distribution. The original Atlas listed two additional goals— to provide data for the development of environmental impact statements, and to involve Ohio birders in a cooperative effort of scientific value.

OBBA II adds four more goals of its own—to survey all blocks in the state; to assess changes in the distribution of Ohio nesters since the conclusion of the first Atlas; to provide new measures of abundance of nesting birds across the state; and to collect data on species difficult to survey, such as owls and wetland species.

I find it curious that both projects place distinct emphasis, and channel significant effort, towards upgrading breeding status (from Possible, to Probable, to Confirmed in the original, and from Observed, to Possible, to Probable, to Confirmed in OBBA II), but neither project specifically lists this function as one of its primary goals. As time ran short for the first Atlas, the desire for confirmation took a back seat to the more fundamental goal of ensuring adequate coverage for each priory block— a basic prerequisite which proved difficult to secure, despite the efforts of 632 atlasers who supplied over 30,000 hours to survey 764 priority blocks.

Given the enthusiasm of OBBA II to survey all blocks in the state (numbering 4584, or 4437, or 4434, depending on which source is consulted), I think we can expect a shift in focus away from confirmation towards adequacy of coverage as the project nears completion. Even if we use the lowest published total of blocks (4434) to be covered, this still amounts to surveying *over 5.8 times* the number of blocks surveyed in the original Atlas. This will take a massive and well-focused effort, although four years worth of hired atlas workers and intensive localized "block-busting" weekends should help greatly.

Fortunately, OBBA II has several other advantages over the original that will also assist in this goal. The original Atlas had 632 volunteers over the course of the project, while as of 1 September 2006, OBBA II already had 401 registered participants. Hopefully, this number will continue to grow as each year passes.

OBBA II has another huge advantage— its presence on the internet. The internet played no role for the original Atlas, which took place in the prehistoric period of 1982-87. Not only does the OBBA II web site provide quick and easy access for on-line birders, it allows volunteers to view continuously updated maps of Ohio, which depict "owned" blocks, coverage of overall species per block, and coverage of individual species per block. A quick look at the map of "owned" blocks reveals that coverage is already committed (but not necessarily already provided) for most large urban areas and their close surroundings, and that huge gaps in coverage exist in most rural areas, especially in the northwest and southeast quarters of the state. With this data available, an OBBA II volunteer can easily see where efforts are most needed. The original atlas never had this luxury— instead of being instantly available, results were not accessible until the hard copy of Bruce G. Peterjohn & Daniel L. Rice's *The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas* appeared in 1991. My understanding is that folks at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Cincinnati's Ned Keller deserve special kudos for their work in making the internet functionality of OBBA II possible and practical.

I wonder, though, if this focus on internet accessibility has "left behind" some original atlasers, despite efforts to avoid this possibility. According to 2005 statistics, about 22% of American adults have never accessed the internet, or sent an e-mail (see www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Digital_Divisions_Oct_-

5_2005.pdf for details). Does this same statistic accurately reflect original Ohio atlasers? I don't know, but I do get the impression from several original atlasers that the new Atlas, with its focus on the internet, holds a lesser appeal for them.* They miss the mailed hard-copy Atlas newsletters, and question whether enough effort has been made to directly contact original atlasers to seek their input and assistance, in order to provide continuity between the two projects. I can't answer these questions, but I do note that of the 38 Regional Coordinators listed for OBBA II, only 15 (39.5%) even participated in the original Atlas. This seems like quite a turnover, especially in a leadership position. Based on the quality of the birders listed, however, I think that leadership is solidly in place.

Another fundamental difference between the two projects is the concept of block ownership. Not addressed at all in the original Atlas, OBBA II allows for volunteers to sign up to "own" blocks, thereby agreeing to commit time and effort to adequately cover these blocks, to confirm as many species as possible, and to regularly submit data.

Although I understand the logic of block ownership, I must sheepishly confess that I am nevertheless uneasy with the idea. I attempted to sign up for ownership of four blocks this season—one was a priority block which I had heavily surveyed for the original Atlas, and another was a block that I have birded intensively all my life. I was hoping to work these blocks for the sake of familiarity and continuity; however, block ownership is apparently conferred on a first-come, first-served basis, and others were assigned ownership before I applied. I received ownership for the other two unassigned blocks, and have worked on these this past season.

But I didn't even visit my first two choices— blocks with which I am very familiar, but are now owned by others. Why? In order to avoid some vague sense of "poaching" on someone else's territory, I suppose. I also felt some indefinable sense of encroachment when others turned in data for the blocks I did own. Is this logical? Hardly. Is this foolish? Maybe. Do others feel the same way? I'll bet they do, knowing how frequently human nature intrudes on scientific endeavor. Or maybe I'm just illogical and foolish. Don't answer that....

Only time will tell how successfully OBBA II achieves its goals. But we can all help it do so.

My second conundrum of the summer actually began on the evening of 23 May, when my wife Sandy and I counted over 1000 chimney swifts *Chaetura pelagica* entering the tall brick chimney at the old Wadsworth Post Office in southeastern Medina County, a site known for its roosting swifts. Returning there the next night, we counted 600 birds going to roost.

* For those without internet access, here are other ways to contact OBBA leaders: Project Coordinator Aaron Boone, School of Environment and Natural Resources, Ohio State University, 210 Kottman Hall, 2021 Coffey Rd., Columbus, OH 43210-1085 (phone: (614) 247-6458; Project Director Paul G. Rodewald, School of Environment and Natural Resources, Ohio State University, 2021 Coffey Rd., Columbus, OH 43210-1085 (phone: (614) 292-9795.

Presumably, we're all familiar with the roosting behavior of chimney swifts in the fall, which often begin to accumulate in unused chimneys and air vents in mid-August. But I certainly wasn't as familiar with roosts in the spring. We again checked the Post Office on July 6, and tallied 365 birds heading to roost between 9:15 and 9:35 p.m., and again on July 26, when 425 swifts turned in between 9:02 and 9:17 p.m. So, mid-summer roosters were present as well.

Just how typical are spring and mid-summer chimney swift roosts in Ohio?

Peterjohn's *The Birds of Ohio* (2001) states nothing specifically about spring or mid-summer roosts, although he does mention large "concentrations" of 1000+ birds in Findlay, Cleveland, and Toledo during the first half of May. This didn't provide precise assistance, so further digging in the historical record revealed that these concentrations were indeed chimney roosts, and not simply large groups of diurnal migrants passing through these areas.

Despite being poorly documented, spring roosts do certainly occur in Ohio, especially between late April and mid-May. Some examples include 1000 roosting at the Toledo State Hospital 5/10/33; 1000+ entering the chimney at the old Phoenix Hotel in Findlay on 5/8/67; 1000 at the Willoughby Junior High School 5/23/70; 500+ at a school in Dublin 5/1/01; and 1000+ at a Chillicothe roost 5/2/05. Mid-summer roosts are harder to locate; in fact, the largest I have seen listed contained 400 birds entering a Dayton chimney 7/22/22.

It was time to consult Ohio's chimney swift authority, Ralph W. Dexter. Dexter (1912-1991) taught biology at Kent State University for 45 years, and studied the long-term life histories of the swifts nesting and roosting in the air vents at the KSU Biology Building from 1944 to the end of his life. In honor of Dr. Dexter, chimney swift emblems still adorn the KSU campus to this day.

Between 1944 and 1983, Dexter found 15 roosting flocks of 23+ swifts in the spring, but just one such roost in July. Spring roosts ranged from 26-305 birds (mean 68.6), and all were tallied between 2-20 May. Eight roosts occurred between 1945 and 1958, whereas seven occurred between 1975 and1980, possibly indicating an increasing tendency to form roosts here in the spring. The only July roost consisted of 28 birds on 7/22/66. [For more details, see *The North American Bird Bander*, 1940, 15(2):53-56]

But what about spring and mid-summer roosts beyond Ohio? Paul & Georgean Kyle's book *Chimney Swifts: America's Mysterious Birds above the Fireplace* (2005) barely acknowledges the existence of spring or summer roosts. The extensive *Birds of North America* account by Calvin L. Cink and Charles T. Collins (2002) isn't of much help either, stating that soon after arriving in North America in March and April, swift pairs quickly separate from migrant flocks and head to their nest sites, although some non-breeders may remain in communal roosts throughout the summer. However, this account cites a maximum of only 40 birds comprising such a roost, a total that seems dwarfed by the numbers roosting at Wadsworth. According to Cink and Collins, summer roosts have apparently led to the mistaken idea that swifts may nest in colonies of many pairs, when actually only one pair (occasionally with the aid of helpers) nests in any given chimney or shaft.

Although these otherwise useful sources weren't of much specific value to us, there is substantial evidence of spring roosts in the ornithological literature. In one example, a study by John B. Calhoun and J.C. Dickinson, Jr. at Charlottesville, Virginia, swifts were found to roost there with about equal frequency in both spring and fall; the authors also noted that at many banding operations elsewhere, spring flocking was rarely detected. Operations at Charlottesville in spring 1938 banded 3874 swifts between 21 April and 15 May, while in spring 1939, 7512 swifts were banded between 27 April and 14 May. Individual swifts Calhoun and Dickinson, Jr. had banded were later recovered in Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Ontario, and Quebec, indicating a wide range of dispersal. [See *Journal of Field Ornithology*, 1942, 13(2):57-69].

So, just how normal, and how common, are spring and mid-summer chimney swift roosts here in Ohio? We don't know. They certainly occur, but

we really don't have enough data to come to any definite conclusions. We are left with another conundrum—but one that could be resolved with a concerted group effort. Fall swift-watching projects are becoming quite popular— why not expand this coverage to include spring and mid-summer as well?

We offer one final summer conundrum for your consideration. We are all familiar with the notion that birds form and defend territories. These include feeding territories, winter territories, and of course, nesting territories.

Passerine birds typically use song to advertise their nesting territories, and to attract a mate. Many of our standard nesting season surveys use song to help gauge the populations of breeding birds, since it is generally easier for us to detect birds by song than by sight. But not all singers are equal. I have personally encountered this particular enigma here at our apartment complex in Norton, in southern Summit County. We have floaters. Lots of them.

Not those annoying little spots of vitreous debris that dart across your vision, or those buoyant bodies hauled ashore from the East River by the NYPD. No, I speak specifically of singing, but *non-territorial* males; unattached individuals who lurk on the sidelines, eagerly licking their chops in hopes that some tragedy should befall an attached male, causing a territorial opening to appear. Floaters seem to like it here in Norton.

Actually, floaters are probably present everywhere, but are simply not easily detected as such. They are, however, readily detected in the not-so-rich habitat surrounding our apartment, which consists of a thin strip of wet, dying woods behind us (about 25 yards deep), and a one-tree-wide border of large trees across the parking lot. I can sense your envy.

Typically, our floaters sing only once or twice, and then are never heard from again, as they wander past. Some are probably failed nesters, or late spring or early fall migrants, but most appear to be opportunistic ne'er-do-wells, awaiting their big chance to hit it big with a female on the rebound.

Even if no one else finds this interesting, I do, and therefore I will happily supply you with our entire June floater list. Behold: white-eyed vireo, 6/1/04; white-eyed vireo, 6/1/06; swamp sparrow, 6/6/06; wood thrush, 6/7-10/06; tree swallow, 6/10/04; rose-breasted grosbeak, 6/11/02; willow flycatcher, 6/11/05; brown thrasher, 6/12/04; yellow-throated vireo, 6/13/05; eastern wood-pewee, 6/15/02; great-crested flycatcher, 6/15/04; common yellowthroat, 6/17/02; scarlet tanager, 6/19/06; brown thrasher, 6/24-25/03; eastern wood-pewee, 6/28-30/05; blue-winged warbler, 6/28/06; Baltimore oriole, 6/29/06; and common yellowthroat, 6/30/05. I won't bother you with our July floaters. You can thank me later.

In a way, floaters represent a seldom detected, but viable contingency plan for nesting populations. A number of floater studies appear in the literature; a prominent example is provided by Robert E. Stewart and John W. Aldrich in their examination of a 40-acre plot of spruce-fir forest in northern Maine in 1949. First, the authors mapped the territories of males of all species between 6 June and 14 June, and determined that territorial males numbered 148. They then spent 130 hours removing, with 16-gauge shotguns, as many birds as possible from the area between 15 June and 8 July. By the end of the period, they had collected 302 territorial males from the plot, indicating that over twice as many males were ultimately removed as were present initially. "The rapid influx and establishment of new territorial males, following the removal of the former occupants, account for the large number of males collected…" report Stewart and Aldrich [see *The Auk*, 1951, 68:471-482].

That's a lot of floaters, or at least it was, before their abrupt "removal." Since I don't own a 16-gauge shotgun, I'd like to reassure any Norton-area floaters that they are welcome in my neighborhood. After all, what could be

Historical Status of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis* in Ohio

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Abstract: Ohio presents a unique problem in assessing the former range of the ivory-billed woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*. There are four pieces of archaeological evidence for the occurrence of the species in the state, but historical records of the species are lacking in the ornithological literature. One is left to determine the validity of the archaeological evidence for its past occurrence, and to continue the search for historical evidence in the early settlement literature. This paper assesses archaeological and written evidence for the occurrence of the ivory-billed woodpecker in Ohio – more specifically the three areas of Ohio with evidence (Cincinnati, Muskingum County, and the Scioto River Valley) and concludes that the bird was most likely present in the state during the early days of European colonization.

Introduction: A variety of evidence is adduced to support the past occurrence of the ivory-billed woodpecker in Ohio. Most comes from archaeological discoveries in Native American sites in the state. Other evidence appears in records of the species from neighboring states. The state of the evidence leaves the issue incompletely resolved, although the species does appear on the official state checklist (Ohio Bird Records Committee 2005). Peterjohn (2001) accepts the species to the Ohio avifauna based solely on archaeological finds. Jackson (2006) accepts the species for Ohio, but appears more hesitant about the value of the archaeological evidence.

Records of historical occurrences of non-game bird species are not always easy to recover. Succeeding in such a search requires a number of coincidences, most beyond the modern researcher's control. First, few early explorers or settlers had enough interest in wildlife to identify correctly various species, making credible records of many birds understandably difficult to find and evaluate. Second, a reporter had to have noticed an encounter with a species of current interest, rather than the edible game in which early visitors were usually most concerned. Third, in order for it to enter the historical record, the witness had to write the encounter down or tell someone who would record it. Fourth, and perhaps most unlikely of all, a modern reader with an interest in birds must have the good fortune to find and report such a written reference to a particular species. With all these eventualities separating the modern ornithologist from historical events, one should not be surprised that early records are difficult to find and, once found, often unclear. Those problems grow still more difficult when investigating a species' status at the edge of its known range.

Even with records in hand, evaluating the historical record of the ivory-billed woodpecker in Ohio remains a fascinating puzzle. In considering the historical occurrence of a species, it is useful to have a plan of what constitutes admissible evidence and what weight can be granted to each of at least eight kinds of evidence that can be entertained in a discussion of ornithological records from the past (both prehistorical and historical):

1. A well documented specimen held in an accredited institution—this is the standard for scientific physical evidence. Hahn (1963) located 413 specimens of ivory-bills in collections around the world, 13 of them in Ohio. A distressing number of these specimens, nearly all skins, lack adequate documentation. None is known to have originated in Ohio.