

Evening grosbeak: Another zero for this species.

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Further Afield

by **Robert Harlan**

3361 Columbia Woods Dr. Apt. F, Norton, Ohio 44203

kiskadee96@hotmail.com

It may have been written in the 1920s, but it was new to me. And for a long-time student of Ohio's birding history, it was news as well. Just recently, a friend gave my wife Sandy a microfilm copy of an old article on Ohio birds entitled "A Calendar of Ohio Birds: February." It ran in the 9 February 1928 edition of the *Wadsworth Banner Press* [Medina County], and was written by Professor Allen C. Conger of the Department of Zoology at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio.

As it was well written, thoughtful, and informative, I found the article intriguing, especially given that the author's name was unfamiliar to me. Hoping for similar articles, and maybe even a regular column—after all, why would someone write an article entitled "A Calendar of Ohio Birds: February" and not have other monthly articles in mind?—I scheduled an extended rendezvous with the microfilm machine at the Wadsworth Public Library. This search revealed the rest, twelve monthly articles in all, which appeared in the *Banner Press* from 5 January 1928 through 6 December 1928. The January article was prefaced with an editor's note, which alerted readers that it was the first of a series to appear "in this newspaper." "Readers," the editor continued, "by clipping each of these articles as it appears, you may collect a complete calendar of birds to be found in Ohio." Sounds like fun.

But who was Professor Allen C. Conger? Carol Holliger, archivist at the Archives of Ohio United Methodism at Ohio Wesleyan University, was kind enough to fill me in. Included in the thick file of material she mailed to me was another copy of Conger's January column, published in the *Ohio Wesleyan Transcript*. Presumably, the articles first appeared there, and were then distributed to other Ohio newspapers such as the *Banner Press*.

Here is Conger's life story (condensed form): born in Zanesville, Ohio, November 23, 1887; received B.S. degree from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1908; received M.A. degree from Ohio State University in 1912; married Miriam Vesper Bright in 1912, and raised three children; became Associate Professor of Zoology at OWU in 1923, then named full Professor in 1935; served as Registrar of OWU 1933-53; moved to northern California in 1959 to be closer to his children; and died in 1973, at the age of 86.

Somewhere in there, he also found time to qualify for *Who's Who in America*; join numerous fraternal and professional organizations; author numerous papers, including *The differentiation of lateral lines in Lepidosteus osseus* [Longnose gar] (1912), *Some entomophilous flowers* [those dependent on insects for pollination] of *Cedar Point, Ohio* (1912), and *A key to Michigan vertebrates, except birds* (1920); organize OWU summer courses at Lakeside, Ohio; serve as curator of the OWU natural history museum; become skilled at cabinetry; and build a cabin in the woods. A busy man, and an interesting one, I think.

It's been nearly 80 years since Professor Conger wrote this series; a lifetime for us, but a wink in time's eye otherwise. It's good for us to track the timing of avian arrivals and departures—we never know when the unexpected might become the expected. As global warming theorists, or maybe Bob Dylan, might say, "The Temps They Are A-Changin'."

So let's join Professor Conger and his calendar of Ohio birds. January

seems a reasonable place to start. My comments will intrude from time to time, but for the most part, the Professor will be our guide.

January

Warmly clothed, we set out across snow-fields sparkling with wintry sunshine to renew the acquaintance of feathered friends. Leafless trees and shrubs and a bird population now at lowest ebb make this the best time for the novice to begin the study of birds. In surroundings at all favorable, the bird feeding station brings many species to our very window sill, where much may be learned of bird ways without setting foot out-of-doors.

Certainly, this low-key approach still holds much appeal, as it is probably the favored observation technique for most birdwatchers. The typical feeder birds listed by Conger (cardinal redbird, blue jay, junco, white-breasted nuthatch, chickadee [either? both?], tufted titmouse, and downy woodpecker) still attend our feeders today, and of course the following admonition still holds true: *You may rest assured that the ubiquitous English Sparrow will always be present as an uninvited guest.* Today, house sparrows are far fewer than in Conger's day, but they're still here, and as far as most birders are concerned, they're still uninvited.

For those bold bird students willing to venture afield, foregoing the cozy repose of feeder-watching for weed patches, Conger assures them that tree sparrows, juncos, a few song sparrows, and goldfinches *in their dark dull winter disguise* should be available, while open fields should offer *Horned Larks, an occasional Meadowlark, or a Crow.* I'd prefer the meadowlark, thanks.

If open water can be found, watch for the kingfisher and perhaps other water birds; add in several species of woodpecker in treed areas; and hope for the occasional bronzed grackle, *and perhaps the Cross-bill.* Bleak open fields in northern Ohio might supply snow buntings and Lapland longspurs, and rarely a northern shrike might patrol brushy pastures, also home to the infrequent chewink [towhee]. The fortunate birder might spy *the Golden-crowned Kinglet and the Cedar Waxwing, nomads and gypsies, whose visits can never be predicted.* All in all, a January day with the birds should supply the keen observer with 20-30 species, *a splendid start on a creditable bird-list [for] the year 1928.*

February

As a brotherhood, we birders are forever and unanimously guilty of one grandiose transgression— we are abundantly overzealous in our anticipation of the arrival of spring. Each spring, every spring, and without fail. The first teasing hint of warmth wafted northward on a mild February breeze simply does not warrant the application of a t-shirt and shorts, nor will it bring the yellow warblers back any sooner, no matter how earnestly wishful we may be. Of course, as soon as we acknowledge these realities, just as quickly we blithely choose to ignore them. We wouldn't want to spoil a time-honored tradition, now would we?

And a long-standing tradition it is, as Professor Conger acknowledges. Whether February 1928 or February 2007, the month is forever beguiling. Here is the Professor's 1928 version: *Spring is coming. The evidences are all around us. The sun lingers a little longer each day; the coal pile is a decreasing variable approaching zero as a limit; and last but not least, the annual crop of news items regarding 'the first Robin' has begun to blossom into print. Who shall say whether a Robin is a first one or a last one, since some of them do not choose to run from the rigors of our Ohio winters? The birds which did desert us last autumn are not to be deceived by a few mild spring-like days which the weatherman may*

generously give us during February. At least the birds won't be deceived. We, on the other hand, may choose to be.

Professor Conger also advises us that February is a good time to pore over seed catalogs and to prepare our bird houses; he reminds us that our congressmen will be glad to provide us with the advice of experts, as furnished in the form of government bulletins. By the last week of the month, bird activity should be increasing, from *northward flying Crows, the advance guard from the great roosts of the south, to the genuine "first robins" dotting our lawns.* It is only a matter of time now.

March

Whether a lion or a lamb ushers in the month of March, we are now certain to witness the prologue of one of Nature's most fascinating mystery plays— the annual northward pageant of migrating birds. For some species this is a journey of thousands of miles, beset with many hazards, yet something which we have vaguely called 'instinct' drives them to undertake this perilous trip, and guides them like weaver's shuttles back to their proper place in the pattern of bird-life of North America.

Indeed. And for the benefit of pastorally-challenged readers, who, like me, are products of an adulterated suburbia, and therefore bereft of any familiarity with weavers' shuttles, *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* informs us that a weaver's shuttle is "an instrument used by weavers for passing or shooting the thread of the woof from one side of the cloth to the other between the threads of the warp." For those readers not familiar with a "woof," *Webster's* tells us that this represents "the threads that cross the warp of a woven fabric; the weft." For those readers not familiar with a "warp" or a "weft"— well, join the club.

But the shuttle, whatever it is, is in motion. During the first half of March, Professor Conger promises the return of the killdeer, the meadowlark, the mourning dove, the bluebird, and the red-winged blackbird. Between March 10th and 25th, *Marsh Hawks beat back and forth above our lowlands in search of luckless meadow mice* as red-shouldered hawks circle high overhead. *Phoebe now calls her name in emphatic accents.* Look also for *that big, handsome, rusty-colored Fox Sparrow, another bird of passage with only a stop-over privilege.*

March 15th to March 30th brings *that master aviator, the turkey vulture, and the cowbird, a blackguard who shuns domestic cares.* Meanwhile, *the rather rare Migrant Shrike (Butcher Bird) resumes operations* where suitable impaling spikes have been installed. Look also for the sapsucker and the field and vesper sparrows; *possibly the Chipping Sparrow and Purple Martin will be with us before the month ends, but we had better leave them to head our April list.* And so we will.

April

Busy weeks loom just ahead for the bird student, advises Professor Conger in April, 1928, and his counsel still holds true for us some 80 years later. Amidst the arriving martins and the assorted striped sparrows, do not overlook the *red-brown coat of the Brown Thrasher [as it] flashes into a thicket.* Our list of new arrivals continues to expand, as hermit thrush, Louisiana water thrush, barn swallow, chimney swift, ruby-crowned kinglet, and blue-gray gnatcatcher are all now scheduled to appear, along with male house wrens, which are fully prepared to make expert judgment on the handiwork of bird-house builders.

They never like mine. About April 20, both orioles should arrive, along with various varieties of warblers and vireos, the catbird, and the wood thrush.

And now the peak is reached. A careful observer, Professor Conger places the peak between April 25th and May 5th. This seems a bit early to me—being a northern Ohio boy, I expect the zenith of migration about May 7-20. Regardless, by late April the dam is bursting, and we should be on the lookout for whip-poor-will, sundry flycatchers, rose-breasted grosbeak, and seven more warblers. The scarlet tanager *awakens our admiration*, and the bobolink arrives in our meadows, *bursting with song*. Look also for the olive-backed [Swainson's] thrush, and its russet companion, the Wilson's thrush [veery]. The *feathered monologist*, the red-eyed vireo, also unceasingly announces its newly established presence from selected wooded retreats, especially in the far south.

May

Did you bid our feathered winter visitors goodbye, or did they steal away without your noticing their departure? While we may miss them on future trips, their places are now taken by so many new arrivals that we shall be too busy to mourn their going.

Call me callous, but I do not believe I have ever mourned the northward departure of an American tree sparrow. But Professor Conger still has a valid point—in our record-keeping efforts, we often tend to focus more on arrival dates than on departure dates. Thus, while we can generally predict within a few days when most species will arrive here (whether in spring or fall), we tend to be a bit murkier when someone asks us to report our *last date* for singing yellow warblers, or for wintering snow buntings, or the like. Consider this a call for more thorough record-keeping.

But back to May 1928. During the first ten days of May, Professor Conger urges us to watch for the nasal nighthawk, the plaintive pewee, and meadowlark-like dickcissel. Even better, 11 more species of warblers are expected, *and this means real work and puzzled brains for bird students*. Among them are the magnolia, golden-winged, and parula, the sky-blue caerulean, and the necklaced Canadian. *We must not miss the Blackburnian*, but our best efforts may fail to get a glimpse of the clownish chat, *which has come to mock us from his tangled thicket lair...He is at once the delight and the despair of the bird student who would study him at close range*. More manifest are the chestnut-sided and bay-breasted warblers, *which bear such fitting titles that a good clear view identifies them without resort to bird book or guide*. Perhaps this was the case in Professor Conger's day, but oddly, today one may frequently witness Magee Marsh boardwalk birders confound the two. Fortunately, I keep a detailed logbook of all such occurrences, so watch out.

As May continues, *[t]he roll of birds is almost complete*. We can expect to add the two rain-crows [cuckoos], the alder [now both willow and alder] flycatcher, and two tardy warblers, the mourning and the blackpoll. It's been a good ride.

Here, with the impending arrival of summer, Professor Conger draws the curtain on spring migration, dissolving instead into nesting-season studies. We'll take this opportunity to fade out also, and plan to catch up with the Professor again soon, somewhere down the trail. He seems like a friendly enough sort; I don't think he'd mind.

Grand Lake Saint Marys: Introducing Some Fragments of its Ornithological History

by Bill Whan

223 E. Tulane Rd. Columbus, OH 43202

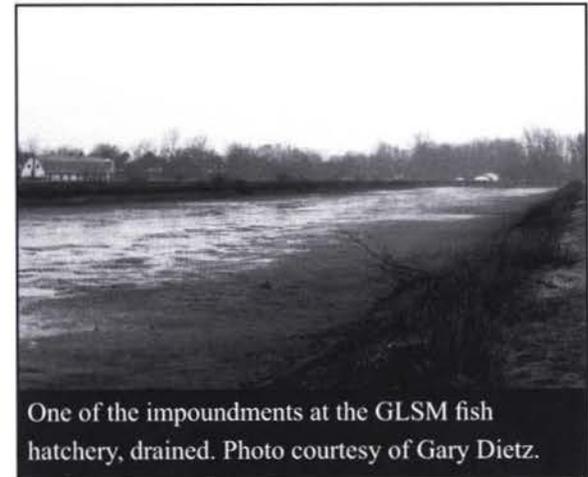
billwhan@columbus.rr.com

Ohio is not blessed with many natural lakes. Nearly all we possess are remnants of melting glaciers. Next to Lake Erie, Medina County's Chippewa Lake—at 385 acres—is the largest. Counting its many artificial bodies of water, Ohio has over 50,000 lakes and ponds, but only 33 of them make the Cleveland Museum of Natural History's list of natural ones, for which an important criterion is support of native lacustrine vegetation.

During the past hundred years large artificial lakes in Ohio have usually been constructed for purposes of recreation or municipal water supply or both. During the nineteenth century, however, the most important water projects were designed to advance commerce in Ohio by means of two canal systems:

the Ohio-Erie in the east, and the Miami-Erie in the west. These networks, including their spur lines, passed through 44 of Ohio's 88 counties, extending over 1000 miles. Their construction began by 1825, and by 1855 canal traffic reached its peak. Facing competition from railroads, the canal system declined rapidly soon thereafter. The severe flooding of 1913 erased many aqueducts, locks, and other facilities, reducing Ohio's canals to historical traces.

The most substantial remnants of this once-proud accomplishment are the reservoirs, originally constructed to act as reliable sources of water for the canals. The principal reservoir for the Ohio-Erie Canal was the Licking Reservoir (now Buckeye Lake); a 1902 account by Lynds Jones of the bird life of this body of water may be found in the *Ohio Cardinal* 28(2). The Miami-Erie Canal's most significant, the Grand Reservoir (now Grand Lake Saint Marys in Mercer/Auglaize counties), will be treated below through historical accounts of approximately the same vintage. The Grand Reservoir was not a wholly artificial imposition on the landscape. Economy required its construction on low-lying



One of the impoundments at the GLSM fish hatchery, drained. Photo courtesy of Gary Dietz.