

## WINTER BIRDING WARMS MY HEART

By Andrew Pegman

It is late November in northeastern Ohio, and the temperature reflects it. The air is cold and the wind is whipping the last few leaves off the branches. Fortunately, I am still inside my warm home, but I won't be for long. I reach for my ceramic mug; the coffee is strong and very hot. I take a sip and open the blinds. For a long moment, the wind stops, and there is only stillness, darkness outside.

Almost magically, a buck materializes from a neighboring woodlot, seemingly from nothingness. It takes a step, then pauses and surveys its surroundings. Then, for reasons known only to it, the massive buck puts its head down and makes a right turn onto my winding suburban street, galloping as if its very life depends on it. The cold clacking of its hooves beats out a staccato message against the cold pavement, and the sound echoes through the empty air. Moments later, the buck retreats sharply back into the woods. I look up and see a hawk perched on the limb of a massive sugar maple, watching the buck disappear. The noble hawk lets out a piercing cry and takes flight. Nature always speaks, if we only listen.

But I did not awaken before the sun on this cold day to gaze reflectively through my kitchen window; I am going winter birding. I set my empty coffee mug down, and begin the process of getting ready. First, I climb into my thermal gear. The hardwood floor is cold, but the woods will be much colder. I add a second pair of socks and slide into my lucky fishing sweater. I don't know why it's lucky; I never catch any fish when I wear it. Plus, I'm not going fishing. Nevertheless, it's the warmest sweater I own, so it's the right choice.

After gathering up enough gear to survive in the wilds for several decades, I am finally ready

to depart. As always, I am heading to the deep forest near the Chagrin River. As always, I am departing roughly three hours later than I had originally intended. As always, I will return home half-frozen. Old habits are hard to break.

Winter birding in Ohio is a different kind of birding. It is not for everyone. Some would argue that it is not for anyone, but I disagree. It does require a bit more preparation than the average birding excursion, but with careful planning that time can be minimized. For example, the process of getting dressed for winter birding, if done properly, should only take about twice as long as the actual trip itself. I always try to reach my destination by late morning, say one or two p.m. Every birder must stand rigidly by his or her own code, especially in adverse conditions.

Because it can get so cold, it can be tough to spend too many hours outdoors during the unforgiving Ohio winters. But even if the birding time is short, the memories are long. I have seen some remarkable things while winter birding. I have seen golden sunlight gleaming on frozen treetops against a clear blue sky, I have witnessed the silence of an open forest, and I have seen fellow birders, hearty companions, rubbing their cold hands and warming their hearts by sharing laughs and stories. I've even seen a few birds.

Truly, winter birding is not for everyone, but there is a great outdoors outside our frozen doors. The winter's cold embrace awaits us.

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