

THE CUYAHOGA VALLEY TOWPATH TRAIL CENSUS The First Five Years: 2010–2014

By Douglas Vogus

Being a veteran of Christmas Bird Counts since my teens in the early 1980's, taking over Carol Tveckrem's Summit County Breeding Bird Census in 1999, volunteering on Ed Pierce's monthly ONWR Census since February of 2001, and volunteering on Dwight and Ann Chasar's CVNP Spring and Fall Censuses since 2005, I decided in 2010 to start a Cuyahoga Valley Towpath Trail Census. This would be something tangible, something I could call my own. What could be found along the same stretch of habitat, once a month, within the first ten days of the month, on a year to year basis?

The Cuyahoga Valley is a place very dear to me. Before I could even drive I was able to walk to this beautiful area, enjoy the many trails and in many cases, no trails at all. To get into the "guts" of The Valley, as it is locally known. The Valley has changed over the years, mostly for the better. From John Seiberling's vision of a treasured green space to be enjoyed by many, to becoming the vague "National Recreation Area" in 1974, to a full-fledged National Park in 2000, it is (combined with adjacent properties as well as properties within its boundaries managed by the Cleveland Metroparks and Metro Parks, Serving Summit County) a gem nestled in between Cleveland to the north and Akron to the south. It is well over 33,000 acres of wildlife-rich habitat extremely close to home.

The heartbeat of the Cuyahoga Valley is the Cuyahoga River, winding its way out of Akron and heading north to Lake Erie. In 1993 the first twenty miles of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail were opened and it quickly became a favorite, the main artery through The Valley, paralleling the Cuyahoga River. This would be my monthly route around which I would plan my census. As much as I wanted to combine both the eastern and western ridges, with this main artery down the middle, I felt it best to keep it to just the Towpath Trail. A trail that is nice and flat, mostly crushed limestone and a hardly noticeable elevation change. A trail for all ages, all disabilities. Any birds seen on the census could also be found by most anyone due to the accessibility of this trail.

The route I would choose would traverse some of the best habitat found within Summit County and cover 13 miles in length. Starting at Red Lock Trailhead on Highland Road at the *Cuyahoga/Summit* border, the route heads

south through the old canal-era town of Boston, then under both the Ohio Turnpike and Interstate 271 bridges spanning both sides of The Valley. From there it continues past Stumpy Basin to the bustling village of Peninsula. Heading south out of Peninsula it takes you past Summit parks' Deep Lock Quarry as it starts the longest section of unbroken trail between Deep Lock and Bolanz Road and Szalay's corn fields. South of Bolanz Road the surroundings become the large wetland area that makes up the Ira Beaver Marsh, complete with an elevated boardwalk that takes you through the marsh. Past Ira Road it parallels Riverview Road and the Cuyahoga River to the east and the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad to the west as it heads to Bath Road and the Botzum Trailhead parking lot. This ends the section managed by CVNP; as the trail leads you south towards Akron's Merriman Valley and the end of the census route, the lands are managed by Metro Parks, Serving Summit County.

The best word to sum up the habitat along the census route would simply be "river bottom." But it is so much more than that. Gentle, sloping hillsides come down from both the east and the west, covered in red and white oak, black cherry and maple. Once on this river bottom you are surrounded by black walnut, Ohio buckeye and elm. Lining the banks are large cottonwoods and sycamore. Near the village of Peninsula there are many shady ravines cutting into the hillsides; lined with Eastern hemlock, where they are guarded from the sun's prying rays. Many feeder creeks empty into the Cuyahoga River along this route, from Brandywine Creek near Red Lock, Boston Run in Peninsula, Furnace Run near Bolanz Road, to the pristine Yellow Creek near Bath Road, to the not so pristine Sand Run, which tells you that you've almost made it back to the city of Akron.

One can expect to find mostly woodland birds typical of northeastern Ohio, but fly-over species are always a possibility. Being that it is a river bottom, there aren't a lot of fields for grassland species like sparrows and meadowlarks. There aren't a lot of mudflats to produce any good numbers of shorebirds during migration. Other than the Cuyahoga River itself, there aren't very many large bodies of water to get great numbers of waterfowl during migration, just Dover Pond near Red Lock and the aforementioned Ira Beaver Marsh. But the mature woodlands are very good for Pileated Woodpeckers and the large sycamores are good for Cerulean and Yellow-throat-

ed warblers. With that being said, I have tallied 168 different species of birds along with 17 different species of mammals during the first five years of the Cuyahoga Valley Towpath Trail Census.

The first year of the census, 2010, I tallied 133 species of birds and logged 87 hours and 40 minutes of time spent afield. This number included all three falcon species and 24 species of warblers, and it set the template of what I could expect along this route. In 2011 I tallied only 129 species, but of these 129 species, 11 were new to the census, putting the two-year total at 144 species. Two of these eleven were fly-overs, a single Snow Bunting in Jan and two pairs of migrating Common Loons in Apr. Twenty-five species of warblers were recorded with Louisiana Waterthrush and Orange-crowned Warbler being the new additions.

In both 2012 and 2013 I tallied 127 species, yet continued to add some new ones each year. The 2012 censuses saw the addition of five new species of birds to the census, a single Brown Thrasher in Apr, a single Black-billed Cuckoo in Aug, single sightings of Olive-sided Flycatcher and Philadelphia Vireo, both in Sep, and mixed in with a flock of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls was a single Bonaparte's Gull in Nov. Highlights of the 2013 season were a single Evening Grosbeak, flying over and calling in Jan, a single Purple Martin following the Cuyahoga River south in Aug, the first Mourning Warbler of the census (a single male in Oct), and a pair of Lapland Longspurs in Dec at Szalay's corn fields. These new species, along with Common Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Barred Owl, and Cape May Warbler brought the census total to 157 species. Warbler totals for 2012 and 2013 were both at 21 species for the year.

By now I had felt as if the census had peaked as the number of species per year continued to decrease, but 2014 would prove to be the best season to date. The winter of 2013-14 was extremely cold, freezing all the large bodies of water including Lake Erie to the north. This would be a bonus for the Cuyahoga Valley as the only open water to be found was the Cuyahoga River. Suddenly I was getting sightings of good numbers of waterfowl, some I had never seen in all my years of birding it. Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Hooded and Common Mergansers, and new additions such as Redhead and Red-breasted Merganser made it exciting to see what the next bend of the river held. It wasn't limited to waterfowl though. In the winter months many flights of gulls leave the safety of Lake Erie in the morning and follow the river south, only to reverse this pattern in the late afternoon. Based on

sightings from Kent Miller, Ben Morrison, and others at a landfill in *Tuscarawas*, it is my belief that these streaming flocks of gulls follow the Cuyahoga River and then the Tuscarawas River like a road map to reach this landfill to scavenge before returning to Lake Erie to spend the night. My constant gull counting paid off in early 2014 as a single Iceland Gull was found amongst the flocks in Feb and a pair of Great Black-backed Gulls were spotted in Mar.

Good sightings continued from later winter into early spring. A Northern Shrike at Stanford Swamp was added in Feb. Blue-winged Teal at Dover Pond and Bufflehead at the Ira Beaver Marsh, as well as the first Hermit Thrush, were added in Apr. Thrushes are easily found on the wooded hillsides of the Cuyahoga Valley with much lower numbers found in the river bottom, but this would change in 2014 as well. May's census was like 13 miles of the Magee Marsh boardwalk. The first Gray-cheeked Thrush was added to the list along with 10 Swainson's Thrushes; the previous high was only two. Twenty-five species of warblers were seen on May's census with high numbers like seven Blackburnian, 13 Nashville, 11 Tennessee, 10 Chestnut-sided, and seven Northern Parula. Dwight Chasar commented that the spring migration was the longest sustained migration he had seen in the Cuyahoga Valley in years – and I could not have agreed more.

I finished 2014 with 144 species, eleven of them new to the census, and by adding a pair of Orange-crowned Warblers in Oct, ended up with 26 species of warblers. I also set a new high for time afield finishing with 102 hours and 30 minutes. Those who participate in bird censuses in semi-rural areas only to watch “progress” chew it up and change it into semi-urban or completely urban know the heartbreak of returning to “your” area only to see a wetland filled in or another housing or industrial development replacing that prime field for certain sparrow species. Fortunately, the Cuyahoga Valley should remain as it is, simply “river bottom”, yet so much more than that.

Douglas W. Vogus is a life-long native of Summit County, residing in the Merriman Valley area of north-west Akron within the Cuyahoga Valley. He's been an active participant in the Cuyahoga Falls CBC since 1979, the monthly ONWR Census since 2002, and the CVNP Spring and Fall Censuses since 2005. He has also been coordinator of the Greater Akron Audubon Society's Summer Breeding Bird Census since 1999. Doug can be found birding in all four seasons in his local patch, the Cuyahoga Valley. Occasionally other birders have joined Doug for his monthly censuses, but they have remained mostly a one-man project.

CUYAHOGA VALLEY MONTHLY TOWPATH CENSUS

TOTAL HOURS AFIELD

<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>
87:40	86:10	94:55	99:00	102:30

FOOT MILES AFIELD

<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>
154	156	156	156	156

SPECIES BY YEAR

<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>
133	129	127	127	144

TEMPERATURE EXTREMES

	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>
<u>LOW</u>	19 (12/04)	21 (12/03)	27 (01/07)	13 (02/01)	20 (01/01)
<u>HIGH</u>	88 (08/08)	95 (09/03)	99 (07/06)	85 (06/10)	81 (06/07) 81 (08/09)

YEAR TO YEAR COMPARISON

<u>MONTH</u>	<u>SPECIES / INDIVIDUALS</u>				
	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>
<u>JAN.</u>	39 / 1,152	40 / 654	42 / 1,400	48 / 2,385	46 / 1,570
<u>FEB.</u>	43 / 1,244	41 / 1,183	40 / 744	39 / 658	45 / 1,863
<u>MAR.</u>	47 / 1,220	46 / 1,327	47 / 1,008	44 / 689	50 / 1,871
<u>APR.</u>	49 / 758	50 / 975	57 / 691	52 / 730	57 / 878
<u>MAY</u>	86 / 1,202	90 / 763	86 / 786	83 / 1,018	104 / 1,150
<u>JUN.</u>	80 / 1,002	72 / 1,322	73 / 815	79 / 1,013	75 / 894
<u>JUL.</u>	68 / 823	74 / 935	72 / 1,152	76 / 1,601	66 / 1,008
<u>AUG.</u>	60 / 612	52 / 697	55 / 1,445	60 / 1,736	62 / 1,109
<u>SEP.</u>	60 / 952	52 / 524	71 / 1,167	56 / 935	56 / 2,108
<u>OCT.</u>	67 / 5,796	63 / 1,324	53 / 1,250	54 / 1,886	59 / 1,857
<u>NOV.</u>	52 / 1,101	46 / 702	55 / 1,314	50 / 1,457	50 / 1,933
<u>DEC.</u>	45 / 1,480	42 / 763	42 / 999	47 / 1,425	40 / 1,790

LONGEST TIME AFIELD: 10:55 (05/09/2014)

SHORTEST TIME AFIELD: 5:30 (08/06/2011)

MOST SPECIES IN 1 DAY: 104 (05/09/2014)

MOST INDIVIDUALS IN 1 DAY: 5,796 (10/01/2010)

FEWEST SPECIES IN 1 DAY: 39 (01/01/2010 & 02/01/2013)

FEWEST INDIVIDUALS IN 1 DAY: 524 (09/03/2011)