

Birding Lake County. Ohio's Often Overlooked Birding Hotspot By Haans Petruschke

Introduction:

While Magee Marsh is world famous for warblers during spring migration, a couple of hours to the east, along the shores of Lake Erie, you will find areas that offer amazing birding, species not found at Magee, and the surrounding areas, and a natural beauty unlike the flat corn and bean fields of western Ohio. With 341 species Lake County is very well known in Ohio's birding community for both abundance of birds and rarities. On eBird Lake County is in the top 5 of Ohio counties. The area offers spectacular, year round, birding in a less crowded, more diverse, and beautiful habitat. Plus, with downtown Cleveland just 20 to 30 minutes away, easy access to food, arts, and culture unsurpassed in the entire great lakes region. It is the best of all possible combinations.

Locations:

Headlands Area-Mentor on the Lake, Mentor Grand River, Fairport.

The Mentor Headlands area includes Headlands Beach State Park, Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve, Mentor Marsh, Fairport Harbor, and Mentor Lagoons. The area has an impressive list of 334 species with single days during spring migration of more than 130 bird species tallied. Days of 100 or more are common in May and possible even in April. It is the most heavily covered area in the county and can attract 50 or more local birders on a May weekend. The habitat is diverse including lake shore, sand dunes, bottomland forest, marsh, upland forest, pine plantings, river, harbor, and open fields, all in an area that is just a 6.6 mile stretch of Lake Erie Shoreline. All of these areas are easy to access and have ample parking.

Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve, and the adjacent state park, is an excellent starting point for spring and fall migrants, plus waterfowl, shore birds, gulls and terns, which can be found walking along the beach and jetty which leads out to the lighthouse.

Mentor Marsh, was Ohio's first state nature preserve and the only remaining natural marsh along Ohio's Lake Erie shore. . It is being restored to remove invasive phragmites and return native marsh plants. The Wake Robin Trail boardwalk is an excellent place to find Virginia and Sora Rails, bitterns, Marsh and Sedge Wren and a wide variety of sparrow species including Nelson's and LeConte's. Zimmerman trail offers upland forests which attract a variety of migrant songbirds.

Fairport Harbor, offers excellent fall and winter birding with abundant waterfowl and often a good variety of gulls.

Mentor Lagoons, is forested area right on the lake shore which can be loaded with migrant songbirds and offers views of the lake that can turn up unusual species year round.

Great places for lunch are found in the village of Grand River

North Perry:

Lake Erie Bluffs, is a relatively newly opened area along Lake Erie in North Perry. Trails cut through honeysuckle thickets can have large numbers of migrants. It is the best place in the country to find Yellow-breasted Chat. Be sure to also check nearby Lakeshore Reservation as that small park can also have large numbers of migrants in spring.

Kirtland:

Yes Kirtland's Warblers have been found here in both spring and fall. The city is named for the father of Ohio's first ornithologist for whom the famous warbler is named. Huge tracts of old growth forest and the best vistas in the entire state are to be found in this small city on the front of the Allegheny plateau suddenly you are in a mountain like habitat more like western Pennsylvania than Ohio. Deep ravines and river valleys running with clear waters, Hemlock-hardwood and Beech-Maple forests. Kirtland has over 2000 acres of forest preserve within the city limits.

The most well-known birding location is the 3800 acre Holden Arboretum. This area has a list of 221 species which is impressive for an inland location in Ohio. Check the newly restored Corning Lake for waterfowl and bitterns. The canopy walk and emergent tower offer a very different perspective on birds from in and above the trees, and great views of the surrounding forest. With a parking permit and directions available at the visitor center you can walk along a vacated road, which follows the East Branch of the Chagrin River to find Louisiana Waterthrush and Cerulean Warblers. The rugged and challenging 3 mile hike along the Pierson's Creek-Old valley trail will provide beautiful, pristine, forest landscapes and spring wildflowers. Nesting Dark-eyed Juncos, Hooded Warblers, and possible Hermit Thrush are highlights of this natural area. If you don't have the time for the hike, just check the gardens and ponds and you will find good variety. The Rhododendron garden blooms in conjunction with peak spring migration and provides a visual feast. Holden began providing Bluebird nest boxes in the 1950s and the numbers of Eastern Bluebirds found in the central gardens area is sure to impress as well.

Gildersleeve Mountain, which is partially in Chapin Forest, where a short hike will take you to the indisputably best vista in all of Ohio. On days with good visibility the panorama includes the skyline of downtown Cleveland, the Chagrin River Valley and Lake Erie. Old growth, mixed oak, Hemlock hardwood, and Beech Maple forests, plus outcroppings of bedrock create ledges, and provide spectacular natural beauty. Plus the old growth forest are filled with woodland birds. Barred Owls are common although reclusive, nesting Dark-eyed Juncos Hooded Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Scarlet Tanagers, and Winter Wren. Ruffed Grouse is a possibility here. There are good varieties of migrants especially during fall migration. 29 Warbler species have been found here during fall migration including Kirtland's Warbler.

Penitentiary Glen has a variety of ponds, fields and forest habitats and can be productive. The glen itself is a good place to find Louisiana Waterthrush.

Willoughby/Eastlake:

These adjacent towns along the Chagrin River have several excellent birding spots. Chagrin River Park in particular can be very productive. Sunset Park overlooks Lake Erie and can be excellent in winter for gulls, Jaegers and waterfowl. The Eastlake power plant sometimes has open water in winter which attracts large numbers of gulls and waterfowl. Peregrine Falcons have nested on the stack.

Other Areas of Interest:

Arcola Creek Estuary - Madison: This natural estuary along Lake Erie can have shorebirds if water levels are low.

Paine Falls Park- Leroy: Paine Creek and the falls are a good place to find Louisiana Waterthrush without having to hike as one must do in other locations.

Veteran's Park – Mentor. This park features a large pond which attracts waterfowl and a good variety of migrants. It can be especially good on spring days when it is blustery along the lake and the birds seek the shelter of trees inland.

Seasons:

Spring is always the best season for the greatest variety on the southern shore of Lake Erie. Louisiana Waterthrush arrive about the first of April and are the harbinger of neotropical migrants. They are established on territory by the end of April. Depending upon the weather the last week of April through the third week in May will provide peak migrant numbers. May 14th has proven to be an excellent day over the years and is a good day to be birding in Lake County.

Summer is great for nesting species, especially in the forest habitats. Lush green forests with beautiful understory and forest floors covered with ferns and shrubs provide excellent nesting habitat for over 120 nesting species found in the county. Among these are species more often found farther north, such as Dark-eyed Juncos, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Fall can have spectacular numbers of birds as migrants having crossed Lake Erie stop to forage before continuing their journey south. The third week in September is often the best for songbirds, with waterfowl coming in late October and November. Fall is also the time for Jaegers and all 3 species have been found at Mentor Headlands

Winter can be brutal here with lots of snow and low temperatures. But bad weather often brings good birds. Purple Sandpipers are often found along the lighthouse jetty at Mentor Headlands. Good varieties of gulls and waterfowl can be found in the adjacent Fairport Harbor. Snowy and Short-eared Owls are also found in this area regularly. Inland almost anything is possible but highly dependent upon irruption years and weather conditions. Just be sure to dress warm.

About the Author:

Haans Petruschke, has been birding since age 5. A former bird guide, trip leader, and lecturer, he has been featured on Public Radio's Weekend America, and the BBC World Service. He currently devotes

much of his time in the field to documenting breeding birds. In 2011 he confirmed the first breeding Black-throated Blue Warblers in Ohio in over 80 years. He lives in Kirtland Ohio.

<http://weekendamerica.publicradio.org/display/web/2008/04/10/soundtrack>