

Note: This will be published in Southeast Ohio Magazine's Spring 2011 issue.

Bird's The Word

Bird watching takes flight in Southeast Ohio.

By Amanda Hawkins

On a chilly January morning, an intricate maze of nets and metal traps are scattered about a cluttered yard, surrounding a small house with windows facing an animated world of fluttering life. Shadowed by oak trees, a graying man tramples through melting snow and clumps of birdseed on the edge of a Vinton County forest. He stares down at a cage containing an oblivious Blue Jay, who is happily pecking sunflower seeds. Equipped with thick gloves, he snatches the unsuspecting bird and drops the captive into a white mesh bag.

Success.

Handling a live bird – measuring its wingspan, studying its fat deposits, getting clipped by its sharp claws – is nothing new to Bob Scott Placier, a quiet man who loves to watch and study birds.

Wearing a tattered hat adorned with a fading patch of a Cerulean Warbler, oversized rubber boots and a snug vest, Bob Scott weaves through 50-pound bags of birdseed and stacks of books about ornithology, the zoological study of birds, that line the inside of his house, all while holding the struggling bird.

Bob Scott has been up since the wee hours of the morning, setting seed and preparing for the day. This is his second Blue Jay, which he quickly bands with an aluminum ring before recording the corresponding nine-digit number in a thick notebook inked edge to edge with facts and figures. His kitchen table, although barely visible under a plethora of open books and miscellaneous scattered papers, is typical of an experienced bander's workspace.

The bird's chest rapidly rises and falls as Bob Scott spreads its pale blue wing, recording the length and examining patterns of black and white spots.

“This bird was just born this past year,” he explains, barely hesitating as he prods the bird's wing. “Notice the difference in the feathers between the colors. An older one would have all of these stripes and some barring.”

Gently cradling the bird, Bob Scott steps onto his front porch and a dozen or so birds take flight in fear. He opens his hands, and the feathered captive hesitates before expanding its wings and taking flight toward the trees.

Bob Scott has witnessed this scene replay many times throughout his birding and banding years, which began almost four decades ago after he received his first field guide as a Christmas gift from his parents.

“I put up a feeder outside of my kitchen window,” Bob Scott reminisces. “I already knew of some number of birds, but I started paying more attention to them. Then, of course, I needed to get some binoculars, and I started figuring there’s a lot of other birds out there that aren’t coming to my yard, so I started going places to look at them.”

During his busy college days, birding became a priority to Bob Scott as he drove farther and farther from his home for each new expedition. His first outing brought him to a large reservoir south of Albany to investigate geese and other waterfowl, but he was soon traveling beyond local borders to larger lakes in Ohio. Bob Scott modestly admits that he has traveled as far as the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago and the Cayman Islands for birding.

During his childhood in Chillicothe, he was “actually more of a plant person” and dreamed of a future career as a forester. He later became an instructor at Hocking College’s School of Natural Resources, with his passion for birding becoming the platform for his current career.

“Bird watching is so much more popular than it was at one time,” he remembers. “I can still recall the time when people thought birdwatchers were weird and you were kind of embarrassed if people knew you were one. Now it’s not that way at all, and tons of people do it at all different levels.”

Bob Scott represents southeastern Ohio on the Ohio Ornithological Society’s board and, since it’s inception in 2004, he has seen the organization grow to almost 1,000 members.

Bird watching has become an increasingly popular hobby throughout southeastern Ohio in recent years. Lynda Andrews, the Athens Ranger District wildlife biologist and an active birder, has watched birding grow from a quiet, secretive pastime to a full-fledged sport enjoyed by men and women of all ages.

“Bird watching is really starting to explode as a sport for people,” Lynda says.

Andy and Bill Thompson, publisher and editor, respectively, of *Bird Watcher’s Digest*, have been active birders in Washington County since the early 1970s. They spent their amateur years tagging along with mom Elsa, catching crawdads in the creek and running through fields, scaring birds. Their childhood pastime transformed into an active birding career for both men.

“Although [southeastern Ohio is] not really considered a birding hot spot in the way say the Everglades or Southeast Arizona is, there is a time of year here in May and June when we’re really the envy of a lot of other areas because we have so many birds that spend the winters in Central and South America and come up here to breed,” Bill explains.

Southeastern Ohio is an ideal location for bird watchers of all skill levels because it's a prime rest stop for migratory birds during their extensive flights to Canada or South America.

"I think it's great because we have a variety of habitat," Lynda says. "Some birds only want to use forest; some birds are field or grassland species; some birds are wetland species; some birds like cropland. You can sit from your home or there are even sights on the Hocking Valley Birding Trail [where] you can stay in your car and bird."

The Hocking Valley Birding Trail entices locals to leave their living rooms to become acquainted with the diversity of their winged neighbors. A wetland known as Tansky's Marsh, where the Great Blue Heron, with its large and imposing stature, and the brightly colored Kingfisher claim shelter, is hidden off State Route 93 outside of New Straitsville. Meada Road in Hocking County, a combination of grassland and aquatic habitats, houses the common Grasshopper Sparrow and the White-Eyed Vireo, a songbird found in shrub habitats. Lake Logan State Park, located outside of Logan, is known for the regal Mute Swan and endangered Bald Eagle. The easily accessible locations on the trail contain a myriad of birds and other wildlife.

Lynda describes these trails as a relatively new development offering "a conglomeration of metro parks, state parks, Wayne National Forest [and] non-government organizations that have places out there that encourage people to come out and see what they have."

The Hocking Valley Birding Trail map highlights more than 20 trails, campsites and hotspots for birding and other outdoor activities. Lynda is working with Wayne National Forest constructing large signs at each location to emphasize common and uncommon birds in the area. Tansky's Marsh currently hosts a barely visible wooden sign with fading images of the Red-Bellied Woodpecker and Gray Catbird.

Wildcat Hollow, also on the Birding Trail, is a secluded 15-mile course between Perry and Morgan counties known as a hot spot for the mysterious and elusive Cerulean Warbler. This small blue- and white striped bird frequents The Wayne National Forest in late spring and early summer, and has eluded many a bird watcher. Three-fourths of the entire Cerulean Warbler population live in the southern Ohio and western Pennsylvania area, attracting birders from all over the world. Once Lynda guided a determined birder from Maine down to Wildcat Hollow to have her wish to see a Cerulean Warbler granted.

It's that kind of dedication and persistence that people either admire or question about bird watchers.

So who are these elusive birders? Are they burly men standing on mountaintops, chests thrust in the air with the sunset and birds flying in the background? Are they frail, retired women, with a rusty pair of binoculars and a handbag full of seed weighing them down? Or perhaps they are daydreamers, loners and recluses, trekking through the forest alone in search of solitude and that one special bird.

While there is no typical bird watcher, those who set out on expeditions are passionate, patient and attentive observers.

“You can see birds just about anywhere, and they’re going to be different,” says Lynda. “It’s exciting because you really don’t know what you’re going to see. You go out to a certain habitat and you kind of get a feel for what you might see, but the excitement is in the hunt of finding the birds.”

Exactly when and how birding became a widely known hobby is open to interpretation. The term “birding” as a verb appeared for the first time in Shakespeare’s 17th century comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as “a-birding,” a common hunting practice.

John James Audubon, the man who is often considered the father of ornithology, published a series of illustrations titled *Birds of America* between 1826 and 1838. British author Edmund Selous published his own book titled *Bird Watching*, which is considered to be the first time this official term was used. Half a century later, the Audubon Society, named after John James, was created in 1905 to protect birds and educate the public of the importance of birds to ecosystems.

A wildfire of bird watching began with the publication of more advanced illustrated field guides like *A Field Guide to Birds* in 1934, the emergence of more advanced binoculars after World War II and more interest in the social aspects of birding.

Bill says, “bird watching as a whole in North America sort of had this moment” around 1978 when a large number of people traveled to Newburyport, Massachusetts, to see a rare bird, the Ross’s Gull. That is when people started discovering the growing popularity of bird watching throughout the county. With new advancements in technology and communication, bird watching has become much more accessible.

“Before you would have to call somebody, [you] might send them a letter and wait for it to arrive, and now immediately you can take action. If something unusual or rare happens people can get on a plane tomorrow, inexpensively,” says Andy, Bill’s brother.

But bird watching still seems peculiar to some.

“It’s kind of been stereotypical that it’s the older ladies or whatever, like Jane Hathaway on the Beverly Hillbillies,” Lynda admits.

But now birding is a welcomed hobby, not just a pastime for older women.

“I find it very calming,” says Bill. “Just being able to find a beautiful place and if there’s some birds there to watch, just to marvel in them.”

But it’s more than a relaxation technique; birds are able to do the one thing that has intrigued mankind, from the Wright Brothers to NASA astronauts: the ability to fly.

“Birding is the excitement of being able to find [a bird],” Linda says. “It’s like the hunt without a gun; you’re hunting with the binoculars and not knowing exactly what you’re going to see and then when you see it you can tell what it is and if it’s a bird that you’ve ever seen before.”

Birding can be unpredictable and a little, well, flighty at times, yet many seasoned birders take pride in their favorite pastime.

“You take a certain delight in saying ‘I can call that bird from 400 yards out by the way it flaps it’s wings or the shape or the shadow it casts,’” Andy says. “You can identify birds that way and there’s a point of pride in getting to be good at that.”

Bill and Andy’s father, William Thompson Jr., cofounder of *Bird Watcher’s Digest* with his wife Elsa, was whom they call a “reluctant birder.” He didn’t understand why the family had to stop all the time and jump out of the car to see a new bird.

Andy explains why his father was hesitant to start: “He was emblematic like a lot of people you run into. They maybe, in some ways, won’t cross that bridge until they can do it on their own. He was proud of that – he identified some unusual bird and then he was in the club after that. It brought us together as a family.”

Most birders probably start off like Bill Jr., reluctant and confused. However, once one enters the realm of birding, there are a multitude of approaches to hone one’s birding technique.

Some of the tame birdwatchers enjoy the sport from the comfort of their homes, while others, often deemed “twitchers” or “listers,” venture out into the world in search of their spark birds.

Bob Scott has heard of twitchers. “The British claim it comes from when they’re so excited when they hear about the bird they haven’t seen before that they can go see they start twitching!”

Listers raise the intensity of birding with “spark birds” and extensive lists of every bird they have seen and every bird they wish to see, with lists claiming 8,000 different species of birds.

Although Bob Scott does not consider himself a “twitcher” nor a hardcore “lister,” he would love to see an Albatross.

“I do have a list, I just rarely take off just to add a bird to a list,” Bob Scott says. “But there are a couple of birds that if they were that close, that I would like to see enough, I would take off to see them. Otherwise, I will wait until I can schedule a trip.”

Dozens of birds swarm in and out of Bob Scott's 11 acres of land every day like a high traffic airport. On one cold January morning alone he can see a Northern Cardinal, a White-Throated Sparrow, some Dark-Eyed Juncos, three different types of woodpeckers, a Carolina Chickadee and a Tufted Titmouse. His bird-watching passion transformed from a hobby, to a profession and now a lifestyle.

"I'm fascinated by just about any living thing, but you have to admire birds for their flying, their beauty, their songs, their interesting behavior, the fact that I can have [a bird] in my yard or out here in my woods in the summer time right now could be in the Amazon Basin," he says. "And then they come back! They come back to my place so how they navigate, how they migrate, there's just so many fascinating things about them."