

Migrate toward birding as backyard hobby this season

By KATHRYN RIDDLE

"Birding is the most popular outdoor recreational activity," said Dr. Andy Jones, the William A. and Nancy R. Klamm Endowed Chair of Ornithology and Head of the Department of Ornithology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. "You can enjoy birds in any way, on any level. It's a connection to nature even in an urban area."

A Tennessee native who completed his undergraduate studies in biological sciences at that state's university, Andy did field work in the Everglades and the Ozarks before earning his doctorate in ecology, evolution and behavior at the University of Minnesota. He is the first person to hold the newly-created position in the new department at the Museum where his work involves curation, research and outreach. Additionally, Andy will be among staff leading museum-sponsored tours, the one in May combining birding and stargazing in southeast Arizona, and one in August to Venezuela concentrating on that country's birds.

You don't have to travel the globe to enjoy birds, Andy said, because there are many species right in your own backyard, a good place to start especially if you provide feeders. Equipment is simple, too, starting with a good field guide, such as the classic by the late Roger Tory Peterson, Kenn Kaufman's "Birds of North America," David Allen Sibley's "Field Guide to Birds," or Andy's go-to-favorite, "The National Geographic Field Guide to Birds," each with editions specific to birds of eastern and western North America. You should also invest in a good pair of binoculars and follow what Andy said is the "rule of thumb that the second number [the objective lens] should be seven times the first [the magnification lens]. Don't buy binoculars online; you need to test them for your own eyes, and they need to feel good in your hands. You need to practice with them so you're not fumbling on a bird walk. Study your field guide, too, to become familiar with it. There are a lot of species to learn and know, and you get such a positive feeling being able to identify them."

Both Andy and Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland Board President Penny Orr recommend birding in the field with knowledgeable people. The ASGC, one of the oldest continuously operating such organizations dating to its inception in 1923, sponsors annual bird walks that this spring will continue until mid-May. The early Sunday morning walks at nearly two dozen different locations in four counties are sponsored by the Natural

History Museum, the Cleveland and Lake County Metroparks, the Geauga Park District and the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes.

Of the upcoming walk locations, there are two at sanctuaries owned by the ASGC, said Penny, a Hawken Upper School biology and field ecology teacher.

"It is very unusual to own sanctuaries," said Penny. "The ASGC holds and maintains 517 acres of land in trust in four different sanctuaries, with three of them Aurora wetlands.

We have our own Nature Education Center at the Blanche Kathryn Novak Sanctuary that is along with the Aurora Sanctuary and State Nature Preserve a designated focus site in the larger Chagrin River Corridor Important Bird Area."

In addition to bird walks and field trips, the ASGC sponsors some seven lectures each year, usually held at the Natural History

Museum, publishes a monthly newsletter called "The House Wren," provides scholarships for the Educator's Workshop at the Audubon Hog Island facility in Maine, and supports the Natural History Museum's Science Resource Program that supplies classroom science kits to local school teachers.

For more information, visit the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland's Web site at clevelandaudubon.org. On any and every level, no matter how young or old you are, birding can open you to a wealth of pleasure in and beyond your own backyard.



Dr. Andy Jones stands in front of one of the bird dioramas at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Dr. Jones is the first head of the Museum's Department of Ornithology. (Photographs by Kathryn Riddle)