



THE VALUE OF COMMON

JOHN A. RUTHVEN | SPILLWAY FISHING | SNOWSHOE HARE

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COVER FEATURE

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

8 THE VALUE OF COMMON

You might be surprised at some uncommon facts about Ohio's most common birds.

FEATURES

12 IN HIS OWN WORDS

Ohio native John Ruthven has enjoyed an amazing career as a wildlife artist.

20 RESHAPING THE LAND FOR WILDLIFE

Reclaimed surface mines are managed to create fantastic habitat for grassland birds.

22 TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE DEEP

Tracking walleye and saugeye is easier thanks to advancements in telemetry.

24 GO WITH THE FLOW

Fish remain active at reservoir spillways and warmwater discharges during the winter.

26 AN ANTLER TREASURE HUNT

Look carefully and you might find a white-tailed deer antler hiding in the brush.

28 RARE HARE

Snowshoe hares find it tough to gain a foothold in the Buckeye State.

ON THE COVER: AMERICAN ROBIN

photo by CHRISTOPHER DAY

You've seen them hopping around your yards and flocked together during the winter. The American robin is Ohio's most common breeding land bird, and one of its most colorful.

DEPARTMENTS

4 WILD THINGS • NEWS FROM AROUND THE DIVISION

6 LAW ENFORCEMENT • BEHIND THE BADGE

7 OUTDOOR SKILLS • ICE FISHING

16 WATCHABLE WILDLIFE • INDIGO BUNTING

18 WILDLIFE ART • CATTLE EGRETS

30 BACKYARDS FOR WILDLIFE • Q AND A ►

31 FOR WILD KIDS • BUILD A BIRD FEEDER

32 BRIAN GETS A BEAGLE • RUBY LEARNS TO HUNT

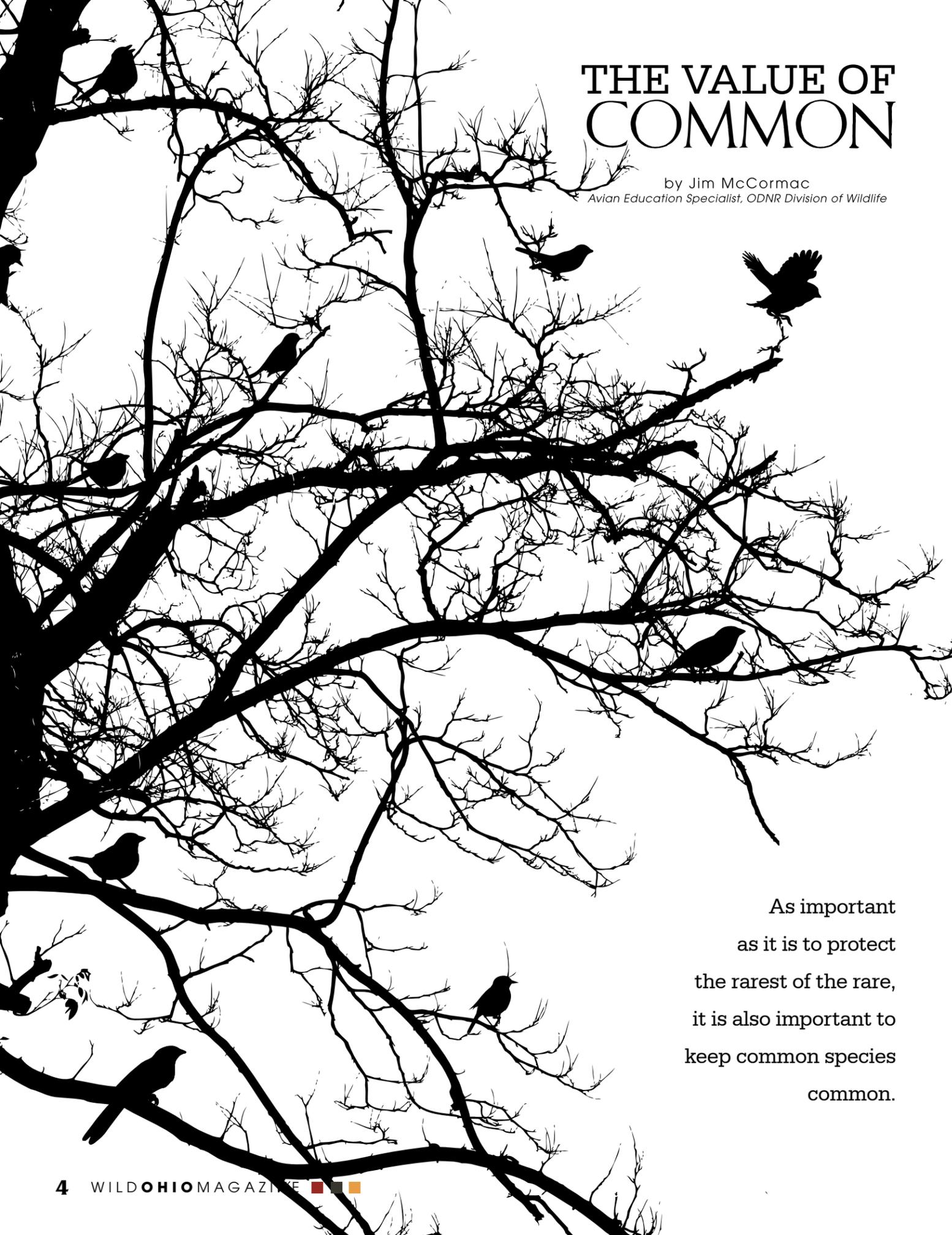
33 CONSERVATIONIST CORNER • JOHN ROCKENBAUGH

34 READERS' PHOTOS • IMAGES FROM AROUND OHIO

35 WILD GAME GOURMET • VENISON AND DUCK PARMESAN

EASTERN RATSNAKE
MATTHIJS KUIJPERS





THE VALUE OF COMMON

by Jim McCormac
Avian Education Specialist, ODNR Division of Wildlife

As important as it is to protect the rarest of the rare, it is also important to keep common species common.

Ohio is a bird-rich state, with about 425 species recorded to date. That's more than any surrounding state's list, with the exception of Michigan. Ohio's list constitutes a big chunk of the 950-plus species recorded in North America north of Mexico. Our bird diversity speaks to the range of habitats found in Ohio: western prairies, Lake Erie, the Ohio River, and Appalachian foothills. The Ohio bird list continues to grow and one or two species are added each year.

Of our birds, it is the rarities that generate the most attention. For much the same reasons as a massive white-tailed deer buck or whopper northern pike create a stir, so does an unusual bird. For instance, a few federally-endangered Kirtland's warblers appear at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area each spring. The 13-gram songbird is a highlight for experienced and beginning birders alike.

There is something in human nature that emphasizes an interest in the rare and unusual. Unfortunately, people tend to focus on rare individuals and can become dulled to the commonplace, even though many of the most abundant animals are also the most beautiful.

The organization Partners in Flight (PIF) has assembled a nationwide census which endeavors to provide estimates of breeding bird populations by state and Canadian province. The PIF population database only reviews landbirds, or nonaquatic species. Included in their database are raptors, woodpeckers, passerines (commonly called

songbirds), and more. Songbirds constitute about 43 percent of Ohio's bird life. Passerines are also known as perching birds; all of them have three toes that face forward and one facing backward. In Ohio, our songbirds include flycatchers, sparrows, warblers, thrushes, blackbirds, wrens, chickadees, and finches. This group constitutes perhaps the most conspicuous and widely-viewed birds. For instance, nearly all the backyard feeder birds are songbirds, as is most of the species singing in nearby fields or woodlands. Colorful songbirds often have attractive songs and charismatic behavior. It's no wonder why the backyard bird-feeding business is a multibillion dollar industry.

About 180 species of birds breed in Ohio each year. Some are extremely rare, such as the king rail, and unlikely to be detected by a casual observer. The ODNR Division of Wildlife lists 18 breeding species as endangered or threatened, and these birds attract great interest. Birders enjoy discovering rarities such as black terns or upland sandpipers, and such birds can draw crowds. Protection of rare birds is important. They often occur in specialized habitats which have also become scarce. For instance, the vast majority of birds listed as endangered or threatened occur in either grassland or wetland habitats – plant communities that have been greatly diminished since European settlement. As a consequence, many species of fauna and flora that depend upon such habitats have also become scarce.

As important as protecting the rarest of the rare is, it is also important to keep common species common. The vast majority of bird species that breed in Ohio are at least fairly common, and many are abundant. Sometimes it is easy to get jaded to the mundane, even though some of our most beautiful birds are also our most numerous. Here are some interesting facts about the top 11 breeding birds in Ohio, by abundance.



AMERICAN ROBIN
STUBBLEFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY

No. 1 AMERICAN ROBIN 6.6 MILLION

One of our most widely recognized songbirds; the robin is an extrovert in a family – the thrushes – that is known for shy, skulking species. Robins profit greatly from anthropogenic (human-caused) changes to the landscape. The robin is a ubiquitous fixture in nearly every habitat, from urban lawns to remote forests. A pair of robins can produce two or three broods per year. It is the most common bird species in Ohio, with an estimated 6.6 million breeding individuals. That's about one robin per every two Ohio residents.



KILLDEER PLAINS WILDLIFE AREA
JIM MCCORMAC

No. 2 SONG SPARROW
5 MILLION

This is a secretive species far less known to most than the robin. If one is attuned to their beautiful melodic songs, it quickly becomes clear that song sparrows are everywhere. While singing males may perch in plain sight, for the most part these sparrows lurk in dense cover and are difficult to spot.



SONG SPARROW
JIM MCCORMAC

No. 4 HOUSE SPARROW
3.4 MILLION

The nonnative house sparrow's presence is a case of attempted biological control gone awry. Scores of birds were repeatedly released in the eastern U.S. in the latter half of the 19th Century. It was thought that house sparrows would feed on agricultural pest insects. Unfortunately, this species feeds mostly on vegetable matter and was utterly ineffective in its derived objective. House sparrows are seldom far from people.



HOUSE SPARROW
ERNI

No. 5 EUROPEAN STARLING
2.6 MILLION (TIE)

In a stark testimony to the globalization of many wildlife species, the European starling is the second nonnative species among Ohio's top 10 list of most common breeding birds. In an ill-advised and foolish effort to introduce various species mentioned in the plays of William Shakespeare, Eugene Schiefelin released approximately 100 starlings in New York City in 1890 and 1891. Now, an estimated 200 million starlings occur in the Americas. This species is a cavity-nester and displaces many native birds from nest holes, as does the nonnative house sparrow.



EUROPEAN STARLING
ANATOLIY LUKICH

No. 7 RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD
2.5 MILLION (TIE)

An excellent harbinger of spring, male red-winged blackbirds return to territories with the first warm snaps of late winter or early spring. Singing males deliver a familiar gurgling konk-a-ree-onk! song from the top of a prominent perch, and flash their conspicuous scarlet shoulder epaulets. Males are notorious polygynists and sometimes have a harem of up to 15 females. Blackbirds form enormous flocks in late fall and sometimes gather in massive winter roosts.



RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD
JIM NELSON

No. 10 BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER
1.8 MILLION (TIE)

Gnatcatchers generally stay high in tree-tops and are often overlooked. The easiest way to detect them is by their constant fussy, twanging notes. Gnatcatchers seasonally return in March and April and occupy all corners of Ohio, then retreat south in fall. Gnatcatchers construct an intricate cup nest built of plant fibers secured with spider and caterpillar silk, and shingled with lichens.



BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER
STEVE BYLAND



CHIPPING SPARROW
RICHARD KELLER



COMMON GRACKLE
TOM REICHNER



INDIGO BUNTING
AREND TRENT

NORTHERN CARDINAL
STEVE BYLAND



No. 9 NORTHERN CARDINAL
2.2 MILLION

Ohio's official state bird, the northern cardinal is also perhaps our most widely recognized songbird. Sometimes odd individuals appear, and occasional cardinals can be nearly white if afflicted with a condition known as leucism. Much rarer are birds that are golden-yellow – these individuals possess a genetic anomaly known as xanthochroism. If all goes well a cardinal can live a long time. The longevity record for a wild cardinal is 16 years.



MOURNING DOVE
JERRY ZITTMAN

No. 10 MOURNING DOVE
1.8 MILLION (TIE)

Hunters are quite familiar with the only non-songbird to make this list, the mourning dove. Nesting doves are found in all areas except mature woodlands. A pair of mourning doves averages four nesting attempts per season. The dove is North America's most harvested bird species and one of the country's most abundant birds, with an estimated population of 100 million.

OHIO'S TOP 25 NESTING LAND BIRDS BY ABUNDANCE

The cumulative total of Ohio's Top 25 nesting species encompasses 48 million birds. Most of these species are well-known to birders and naturalists, and provide a big part of nature's ambience. Keeping most of these species common requires the conservation of large blocks of land that support a wide range of habitats (wetlands, mature woodlands, shrublands, and meadows). The ODNR Division of Wildlife owns and manages around 200,000 acres which supports all of the native species on this list, and many others. Acquisition and protection of high-quality habitat is the most important way to help our native bird populations. ♡

The number following the species indicates estimated number of breeding individuals in Ohio. Go to partnersinflight.org for more information.

1. American robin, 6.6 million
2. Song sparrow, 5 million
3. Chipping sparrow, 3.5 million
4. House sparrow, 3.4 million
- 5t. Common grackle, 2.6 million
- 5t. European starling, 2.6 million
- 7t. Indigo bunting, 2.5 million
- 7t. Red-winged blackbird, 2.5 million
9. Northern cardinal, 2.2 million
- 10t. Blue-gray gnatcatcher, 1.8 million
- 10t. Mourning dove, 1.8 million
12. American goldfinch, 1.5 million
13. Gray catbird, 1.4 million
- 14t. Cedar waxwing, 1.2 million
- 14t. Common yellowthroat, 1.2 million
- 16t. Brown-headed cowbird, 1.1 million
- 16t. House wren, 1.1 million
18. Red-eyed vireo, 1 million
19. House finch, 800,000
20. Eastern towhee, 770,000
21. Yellow warbler, 700,000
22. Horned lark, 700,000
23. Eastern phoebe, 650,000
24. Wood thrush, 620,000
25. Barn swallow, 610,000