



Black River Audubon Society History to Present

By James Jablonski, President

Jim Jablonski, President, Black River Audubon Society, reflects on National Audubon Society's expanding role in environmental activism, the historical success of chapter birding activities, the restorative power of local chapter conservation projects, and an environment under partisan attack.

Introduction & Background

Betsey O'Hagan: Hello, I'm Betsey O'Hagan, Web and Marketing Strategist for the Council of Ohio Audubon Chapters (COAC). I'd like to welcome Jim Jablonski who is an engaged and active leader with Black River Audubon Society based in the western area of Cleveland, Ohio. I'd like to introduce Jim and we have a couple of questions we can talk about.

Jim is going to talk about his connection at the local level to Black River Audubon Society, historical points about the chapter, and interestingly, he's going to reflect on how birding is different today from the 1950's.

Jim Jablonski: Good morning! How are you? I'm looking forward to this interview.

Betsey O'Hagan: Could you speak to your background along with when, how, and why you got involved in birding and with Audubon?

Jim Jablonski: Okay. To tell you the truth, I had absolutely no interest in birds until I retired from my full time job when I was sixty years old. I like to tell people the story about how I decided to put up bird feeders because I was thinking, "What do old people do?" and I thought, "Well, they watch birds!"

The first morning after I put up the feeder, I happened to look out and I saw this yellow bird dropping down out of the sky to the feeder. I had no idea what it was. I had bought a Roger Tory Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America, and ran to get it.

The first bird I ever identified was a goldfinch! Believe it or not, at sixty years old and goldfinches are all around us and I had never seen one. I never cared enough to see one. So, until that moment, I had very little interest in birding.

From that point on, my interest was sparked and I joined Black River Audubon - but I was still working a part-time job. I did not become very involved until I became a board member.

I was asked to become a board member in 2013. That is when my interest really started to take off. I joined Audubon because being retired I wanted to be around people again. I thought that was a good way to do that, in addition to birding. I've found some of the most cordial people I've ever met. I think birders are that way in general and I've been a part of it ever since and will continue to as long as possible!

Unfortunately, that is the story of many people - not starting until they retire. I've always regretted I did not become interested earlier, I am not the birder I could have been because I started so late. I want to make the most of what I can do right now.

National Audubon Society

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Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you. Could you help listeners to understand more about National Audubon and its mission? What it does and how it relates to local chapters?

Jim Jablonski: People think of it as the bird watching group but it's more than that and becoming more and more. It has been from the very start, a conservation group. Maybe that has lapsed a little bit at times with its long history going back to the nineteenth century. It started that way and is definitely becoming that way again because of the environment and birds are under attack despite the fact we just celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the Bird Migratory Treaty Act.

More so than ever, the environment is threatened. And it's coming from the top levels of our government and country. Something I never expected to see even though I said I had no real interest in birding, and I really didn't. I have had a general interest in the environment all my life. I thought in the 1970's, "Well, we really turned the corner!" We're turning back in the old direction I'm afraid.

National Audubon is becoming more involved as an activist group and also more involved in supporting local chapters and projects that might help their local environment.

We were involved in one last year trying to bring back a small area of that was donated to the Elyria by our founder, Jack Smith. The property is right off the near downtown area in a very rundown neighborhood. We're trying to bring it back as a place migratory birds and pollinators can benefit from. It is adjacent to the historic Black River. That is one project National Audubon helped us with quite a bit. We received some good publicity as a result of that and we are trying for another similar project through the Burke Plants for Birds Fund. We've applied for another project through the Burke Plants for Birds Fund for a project in Oberlin, Ohio. The local chapters need to show the initiative to apply for those grants and have some expertise to know what is appropriate for their local area. Luckily, we have both right now and it's been a good relationship with National Audubon in that way.

That touches upon some of the things National Audubon is about nowadays.

Audubon Great Lakes

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Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you so much. You attended the recent Audubon Great Lakes conference. Could you talk about how National Audubon reaches into the various regions of the United States and subsequently into different locales? Could you speak about how National Audubon is organized according to regional flyways?

Jim Jablonski: Yes, the conference was last fall and hosted by Audubon Great Lakes located in Chicago, Illinois and serves the Great Lake states. Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and reaches to Pennsylvania, New York which did not seem to be as well represented as the mid-western states. The conference had a wide variety of topics discussed.

The ones I was interested in, and it's not just a midwestern thing but is an issue within Audubon. I was interested in presenters who presented on diversity among Audubon members. As I pointed out in the beginning, I didn't get involved until I was sixty. If you look at local Audubon groups, and this is not present at the national level, but at the local level the groups are largely made up of people fifty to sixty and over and almost predominately

white. There's diversity in gender but not in terms of age or ethnicity. Those are the topics I was interested in and those are not just midwestern concerns.

We have to make local Audubon's much more diverse, I think it would be more effective. It's not just that we would be reaching out in some paternalistic way, those people, we actually need them in our chapters. For one thing, the young are going to be experiencing problems in the future that we aren't solving today and we need to get them involved.

Minority groups need to be involved because they're the ones being impacted the most by environmental degradation. We all are, but minority groups in particular. They can bring a very important point of view to local chapters and the projects that they ought to be pursuing.

What Are Flyways?

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Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you. Why are the regions called, "flyways".

Jim Jablonski: Different regions of the country have different environments and different relationships with birds. Ours, centers around water, the Great Lakes. In the southwest, it would be different although water is part of it there also. Many of the birds have adapted to the hot, dry conditions there. Every part of the country has its own local concerns that may be addressed better locally than regionally then National Audubon can by itself. I think it's organized in that way for that reason. Also, flyways are major migration routes for birds from the subtropics to the subpolar and polar regions. There is an obligation to maintain the stopover areas for those wonderful birds that we enjoy every May and October. So, Great Lakes has a special function to see things are well maintained in that respect also.

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Betsey O'Hagan: That's very interesting and certainly links all the way back to local chapters and their endeavors to conserve the local natural areas. It's all one system.

Jim Jablonski: In part our concern in the project last year was that it is habitat along a Lake Erie tributary. That was one of our reasons for becoming involved in that. We found out it's going to need constant maintenance. That is another thing local chapters ought to be aware of, that a project is never finally a success it has to be continuous.

Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you Jim. That certainly helps us to understand the interconnectivity and appreciate the various relationships between nature, people, and geography.

Black River Audubon Society History

Coming back to Black River Audubon Society and your interest in it, why did become interested in the history of the chapter?

Jim Jablonski: My avocation was interest in different branches of history. I became increasingly interested in local history since I retired and my interest in birds was growing. I realized as we were doing this park project last year, I didn't think I paid attention to when Black River Audubon began. The city had already put up a sign at our park, "Black River Audubon Park" and they included the founding date of the chapter. Sixty years ago! I didn't realize it and became interested in having a celebration for it.

Being the Board President, I brought it up at the board meeting. Everyone agreed and we planned a celebration that we had in the fall that we combined with an outstanding speaker, Julie Zickefoose, scheduled on the chapter speaker program.

I also became interested in chapter history and learned about essentially our founder, Jack Smith, even though others were involved. I wrote a few articles and particularly about the chapter's early days history for our newsletter.

My research discovered there were many ways birding was similar and the chapter was similar then as now, but there were many ways it is quite different. That makes history interesting, similarities and differences between times. There were quite a few of both between 1958 and 2018. Black River Audubon then and now.

I also found out that Jack Smith, was one of the co-founders of the Council of Ohio Audubon Chapters (COAC) back in 1969. He was instrumental in it but I do not know enough about his involvement to speak to it now.

Black River Audubon Society Leadership & Activity

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Betsey O'Hagan: Who were the leaders of Black River Audubon Society and how many people were involved? How did the chapter all come together?

Jim Jablonski: Jack Smith was always considered to be the founder even though there were others. The reason for that is that as a young man, he was born 1927 or so, graduating from high school around the end of World War II, and he was an avid birder right from the very beginning. He had a certain amount of charisma about him in a very quiet way, and he was

able to collect a number of friends and talk them into bird watching at a local park. Not the one I've been mentioning but an old park, the first park in Elyria, Ohio called Cascade Park because of two waterfalls. It is located right in the middle of the city.

There was also another park donated by a founding family in Elyria called Elywood Park right across the river from Cascade park. Elywood was only about twenty acres or so but it was heavily wooded right in the center of town but it drew quite a few birds to it.

Jack Smith started bird walks in the park first mentioned in records in 1951. They began drawing quite a few birders to these Sunday bird walks. Every Sunday! They would go on bird walks weekly. Today, chapters schedule bird hikes once a month. Back then they did them weekly on Sunday mornings. I guess the 1950's were not the church going population we think! A lot of people were birding on Sunday mornings at the very same park every week. Today we have to travel all over but then, there were not the opportunities to travel to other parks at that time. Metro Parks in Lorain county were not even in existence then. They went to Elywood Park and Cascade Park on a weekly basis. It seems it might have been just during the migration seasons, in the spring and fall.

These walks grew and grew. It was reported that occasionally they drew one hundred people to Elywood Park on Sunday mornings! Which is amazing as sometimes our monthly walks don't draw ten people. That was through the 1950's. By 1958 people wanted to formalize the group and started a bird club associated with National Audubon Society. A number of civic leaders, all of them, and some well set because the 1950's were an entirely different time for Elyria and the rest of the country. They met at the local YMCA, encouraged by Jack Smith, about twenty-five people came together.

People in general in the 1950's were constantly joining groups, that they were very social. They had five at the original meeting and it quickly expanded from there. But not only did they have joiners but people who were committed to working for the social group. I am amazed because today when I join a group I often become president because very few people have the time or the inclination to take over the positions. Back then it seemed many, many did. And they were all younger people. At this time, Jack was probably about thirty years old and so were most of the others. They had the director of the YMCA and local businessmen involved in the group. They had Perry F. Johnson, if you're familiar with Lorain MetroParks Sandy Ridge Preserve, the building is dedicated to Perry Johnson, he was the chief naturalist for the MetroParks for years. A number of school teachers were involved and by early March 1952 they had their first regular meeting, moving very quickly because people were really involved more than birders are today. So, it was a different in that respect.

Birding in the 1950's in Elyria, Ohio

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Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you. You've outlined an interesting case of how a chapter came together and the different times in society. Your story shows how activity often comes down to leadership and passion and the willingness of people to get connected, participate, and help make things happen.

Jim Jablonski: I do want to point out because I can comment on the differences between then and now, and these walks did draw between sixty and one hundred people. They continued to after the group was formed at the very same park one week after the next.

Another thing was the local newspaper was the source of bringing people together. It wasn't a personal computer! The local newspaper is still the main source of getting the word out about our meetings. At all of our meetings I will ask, what brought you in? Where did you see the publicity about the meeting? Almost invariably, its one local newspaper or another. Mainly because the people who are interested are older people who are still readers of newspapers. In the paper, they would announce every bird walk and the results of every bird walk. You wouldn't dream today of sending in a list of birds to the paper to have them publish it! The local media was very supportive.

They also said in the media that the bird walks would have four sub groups each with their own leader. Today we have eight to ten birders in a walk. Back then, they had eighty to one hundred people and they needed to split up into groups. They would go to different parts of the park and they would have four, and maybe even more, group leaders as they go out on these morning walks. Absolutely amazing!

What struck me was the difference between then and now because I always thought people weren't that interested in the 1950's. I knew it was around but I didn't think that that many people were interested.

Was it more popular then than now? I don't really think so. I think that there are many more birders today than back then. But how do we prefer to do our birdwatching? That is what's changed.

I think today we prefer to bird individually or with one or two friends. Back then, people loved to be in groups. And they loved to learn from different group members. Today, how do we learn? We can learn individually. You can learn on the computer. You can bird by yourself. On your cell phone and learn. I don't think it's the same as learning from other birders first hand, face to face. You are learning in the moment and picking up on the emotions of others.

But people today, and I'm not certain why this is, prefer to be away from groups. Groups to younger people, especially, are a hassle. I always hear 'you get involved in politics' and they don't want that. It's unfortunate, but maybe times will change again.

Chapter Leadership Legacy

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Betsey O'Hagan: Well, that's fascinating! You've talked about the origins of the chapter and the leadership, how many people were involved, and then Jack Smith's role in the founding.

Jim Jablonski: Jack Smith rarely wanted to be in the central circle role, but he kept things organized, he kept it going, he was the spark that got everyone involved. He had a quiet charisma. Unfortunately, I did not get to know him well. I was not fully involved until his passing. I was asked to be on the board the year after he died. Although I met him and could pick up on his personality, I never got to know him well, unfortunately.

Betsey O'Hagan: Those are good skills even today in leadership! So he as a leader with his individual personality, he was able to sustain and grow the interest in birding in your area through the chapter activities. Over his lifetime, how was he a leader in that way?

Jim Jablonski: Everything. A lot of this I'm getting through second hand, but when I joined the board just a year after he passed away, he was approaching legendary status. He'd often be brought up in meetings about the great things he would do. The big help he would provide in a quiet way. He didn't want to be known very much for what he was doing. Jack was also very successful in life, he would help out, every chapter has some funding problems, and he would help out when he needed to.

He is one reason why even today and even though we don't have a great budget, we are free of fundraising concerns such as what I heard about other groups at the COAC meeting this past summer. People were talking about what they do for fundraising, and I thought, "Good Lord, we don't have to do that." It's not that we're extremely well funded and we can do anything we dream of, but we don't have to hound people for gifts every December. What a great gift he gave in that respect. Not even thinking of the finances, but thinking of the freedom that he gave us. I was told at a meeting that his comments were we should never have to worry about funds. We should have to be concerned about birds.

We're not funded like National Audubon, but our survival is not at stake. It's important in a town like Elyria that has been so depressed since the early part of this century.

Betsey O'Hagan: That's a wonderful story and certainly instructive to Audubon chapters, their members and leaders today, how one person can make such a difference.

Jim Jablonski: It's not just the way he directly helped the group, it was the way he was able to draw a large membership to the group because those people were also sources of help to the group, it was not just him. But a lot of it was his personality.

Betsey O'Hagan: That is fascinating how one person with such a constructive, positive attitude can make such a difference, and even in their absence, continue to generate these ripples of goodwill and support citizen science for a good and better culture. And taking care of our planet. That is fascinating. Thank you for sharing that story.

Jim Jablonski: And that's just the way to describe it.

How Birding Has Changed

Betsey O'Hagan: Is there anything you'd like to sum up about how birding is different and similar today? How does birding work today from your vantage point as a historian?

Jim Jablonski: It's different today because it's more individualized. The going and watching birds is more of an individual thing. I think that's one reason for the incredible popularity of the upcoming Great Backyard Bird Count. It's really for the most part, an individual project. People want to see their individual numbers of birds and compare them to other people's. So there is still a little bit of a social component but not in the same kind of way.

We want to bird electronically more often, we want to learn electronically rather than with other people because we maybe we can read more, more quickly. Whereas if you're out with a group it's kind of hit-and-miss, did you ask the right person? And then you get sidetracked in the conversation, that's the way conversations are and that's the way they should be! So, you might not learn as quickly that way. But I do think you learn more meaningfully that way. And you may be more likely to retain when you learn that way than if you read something on your cell phone. That is one way it's different, it's more individualized than back then.

In ways that it is similar, is that people have the same passion for birds I think but people choose to pursue it in different ways. They do it more often through reading, through the Internet and different websites rather than through other people.

The other thing that I think may be different today is that back then many more birders were younger people. Today, when I go on bird walks, everybody is usually fifty and older which is something we really have to do something about. Don't ask me how to get younger people

involved. Some just happen to be and they end up being the best damn birders you'd ever want to meet! When they get involved when they're ten or younger because at those ages they learn to identify with it and they also learn much better. I've always told younger people that learning about birds is like learning a language, you have to start when you're young to really become good at it. I also tell them you have to start when your eyesight is good and your hearing is fine!

I try to encourage young birders because at age eighteen it's going to be very hard to sway them to birding. When they're six, seven, eight, that's probably the best time to get them involved. Some will lose interest but some will retain it for life.

Betsey O'Hagan: In closing, is there anything you see for the future or that you would recommend the birding community pay attention to?

Future Focus

Jim Jablonski: I would not have thought of this three years ago, that we have to keep on top of what's going on in Washington. Because it seems that right out of the gate two years ago, the environment started coming under attack and we need to pay attention to that. It's sickening that I have to say that and I wish it was something more philosophical, but it is something very practical, it's politics, and that is something we need to pay attention to.

Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you Jim. A great way for people to do more and connect up with Black River Audubon Society in Lorain county area.

Jim Jablonski: People can check our website which is www.blackriveraudubon.org and we are on Facebook and our mailing address is Black River Audubon Society, P.O. Box 33, Elyria, Ohio 44035 and a lot of people still prefer to contact us that way.

Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you for taking the time to tell us more about the efforts and service that National Audubon provides all the way down to the local chapters and the people, their leadership and contributions, and how birding has evolved and is changing but that the primary target, what we must all keep in mind, is to safeguard our environment and that has never changed.

Jim Jablonski: And it never will! We're always going to have to be paying attention no matter who is in power.

Betsey O'Hagan: Thank you Jim.

Jim Jablonski: Thank you, I appreciate you doing this.

