



## **THE OHIO BIRD CONSERVATION INITIATIVE (OBCI) LESSONS IN RESILIENCE: ADAPTING TO CHANGING LANDSCAPES**

**WITH MATTHEW SHUMAR, PROGRAM COORDINATOR, OBCI**

**Betsey O'Hagan:** Welcome, I'm Betsey O'Hagan, Digital Strategist and Network Developer for the Council of Ohio Audubon Chapters (COAC) and we're here today talking with Matthew Shumar who is Program Coordinator for the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative (OBCI). Matthew, I'd like to say hello and welcome you!

**Matthew Shumar:** Thank you, thanks for calling me today, Betsey.

**Betsey O'Hagan:** Well, we're looking forward to the conversation. We have a couple of simple questions, and you know so much, so I'm excited to hear about what it is you have to offer and share with our listeners about what it is you do and more about how we can learn about the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative and all that it does to promote conservation in the State of Ohio and probably elsewhere.

So, if I may begin, Matt, what is your background? And when and why did you get involved in birding and then ultimately, in the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative?

## BACKGROUND

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**Matthew Shumar:** My background is in Wildlife Biology. I have a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree both in Wildlife Science and Forest Science. The focus of the research and the work that I've done over the past fifteen years or so has been specifically on ornithology and landscape ecology. So I'm really interested in species distributions, why they occur and where they occur on the landscape and how human impacts influence and change those distributions over time.

I am not a native Ohioan. I came here about ten years ago to coordinate the State Breeding Bird Atlas. I came in on that about half way through the project to take over leadership there. I finished the field seasons out at the end of 2011 and then we published those results three years ago in a book, "The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Ohio".

While I was working on the Atlas, I became involved with the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative. At the time, as Chair of their Conservation Planning and Research Committee, which is really focused on synthesizing a lot of the work done in the states, really stepping down from continental and regional plans to work on bird conservation in Ohio. In 2012, I became the Chair of that committee.

Then, about three years ago, the project coordinator at the time, Amanda Duren, had left to take another position working for the American Bird Conservancy in Pennsylvania and the timing was about right and I was really familiar with all the partners in OBCI, so that's how I got involved with the organization taking over as project coordinator and doing that since about 2016.

## HISTORY OF THE OHIO BIRD CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** Very good. That gives us a nice understanding of how you became involved and how different things developed. Can you tell us just a little more about the history of the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative? How did it get started and who was involved and any other information you might share with us?

**Matthew Shumar:** Yes, sure, I'd be happy to. OBCI got started in 2004. That came out of an interest in stepping down a lot of the successful partnerships that had been implemented for bird conservation since about the 1980's.

So, if we think about throughout North America, the United States and Canadian governments had been working together and created the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in the 1980's and began working on additional plans throughout the 1990's.

That spawned a lot of working partnerships, like 'Partners in Flight', regional joint ventures, and so here in Ohio, we have two regional joint ventures that overlap the state, so the Appalachian Mountain Joint Ventures, which covers southeastern Ohio and then many of the states from the southeast all the way up through New York, and then the Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes Joint Venture, which covers most of the rest of the state.

These partnerships were really working to synthesize and coordinate between organizations in the area for bird conservation. That's what Partners in Flight had been doing and they had worked to develop a number of plans to synthesize the information that we had on bird populations and trends in those species and what we needed to do for successful conservation strategies.

At the time, there was a state-wide Partners in Flight group in the late 1990's and into the early 2000's. At that time there was a broad interest in many of these regional collaboratives in stepping down what had been done with the North American Bird Conservation Initiative and Partners in Flight in addressing more fine scale statewide needs.

So, Ohio was one of the first states to develop a statewide Bird Conservation Initiative. That spawned out of the Partners in Flight working group for the state. In the early 2000's it became an official consortium in 2004, so OBCI is itself not really an organization, it's more of a consortium of agencies and institutions within Ohio and surrounding areas working on bird conservation.

That's everywhere from state and federal wildlife agencies such as the Ohio Fish and Wildlife Service, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, to groups like Audubon, the Nature Conservancy, Universities throughout the state, and any other private or public entities that are interested in bird conservation and fostering this collaborative approach.

To date, we have a little over one hundred organizations in the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative. We work together to pool resources on all the efforts that we do for bird conservation within the state and within the region.

## **ORGANIZATION, LEADERSHIP, AND FUNDING THE OBCI NETWORK**

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** That's excellent. What an excellent model of building networks to share intelligence so that everyone who contributes and collaborates can more finely tune their strategic activities. And remain up to date on what the changes are, what the triggers are on different causes and effects so we can address climate change. That's really great!

Could you tell us a little more about this fine organization and how it is funded? Who the partners are and are there leaders in it? Or are there just collaborating partner organizations, individuals, and members who lead with a strong collaborative spirit? How does the forward motion work and how is it supported financially?

**Matthew Shumar:** Yes, that's a really good question. So, to get back to the organizational structure, it's really a consortium, so we don't have any staff on hand. I'm the only employee per se for the organization and the funding for my salary comes almost entirely to date and historically, from the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

We've been really fortunate in Ohio, for the most part we've had a fantastic and progressive state wildlife agency. They've had a strong interest in non-consumptive, non-game wildlife conservation, and as long as I've been in Ohio working on the Breeding Bird Atlas and now the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative, they've been incredibly supportive of that effort.

Additionally, the position is based out of the Ohio State University (OSU), the School of Environment and Natural Resources. They have been great in providing a match in resources for OBCI. That position is written through an agreement that the Division of Wildlife has had with OSU for a number of years called the Terrestrial Wildlife and Ecology Lab (TWEL).

That agreement supports a number of research projects that are done throughout the state, typically with graduate student research, both masters and doctoral students, looking at conservation issues throughout Ohio as it pertains to not only bird research but mammals and amphibians as well so there is a lot of work done here on salamanders and timber rattlesnakes and bobcats and coyotes, as well as all of the avian research that's been done in Ohio. The resources here at our office primarily come from OSU and my salary from the Division of Wildlife.

Funding for our projects, historically, has been come and play by using those partner resources and match. So, a lot of what we do relies heavily on those partnerships and the resources they're able to contribute to those projects. We do a lot of fundraising through grant writing and some donations as well. Charitable donations can be made through the Ohio State University Foundation. We also receive a number of grants at the national level, statewide level, and even more locally in some of the city work we do.

A lot of my duties entail not only the outreach and research aspects of OBCI, but a lot of the the administrative and fiscal operations as well. We do a lot of fundraising through grant writing for our projects.

## **EMERGENCE OF THE OBCI MODEL**

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** Very good. What a wonderful example of innovation networks and innovation knowledge networks can accelerate practical and pragmatic solutions to address local issues as well as regional ones.

I love how the organization of the Initiative links in the public, through public tax dollars and donations, all the way through to connect to Ohio's wonderful university and college research network, and then right down to our public and governmental agencies who are tasked with the job of preserving and protecting the environment and all of the various species within it.

It's really excellent! What a great story!

What was the nucleus of how this started? Did it arise out of a small coalition meeting? How did OBCI actually coalesce in the very beginning? Do you know?

**Matthew Shumar:** A lot of that came out of the framework and the workings that was done at the larger regional level. I mentioned earlier that the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, and beyond that, so translating that with Partners in Flight to the continental Landbird Conservation Plan for Canada and the Continental United States.

It became clear quickly that a different framework was needed for a lot of the migratory land birds. Particularly the song birds that didn't have a lot of direct tie-in to funding through, say, hunting permits and things like that. So, there was a real strong interest in understanding and collaborating on research needs for these species.

At the time there were local working groups that were subsets of Partners in Flight and Ohio had a Partners in Flight working group, a small group. Within that group, the Ohio State University, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, Black Swamp Bird Observatory, the Nature Conservancy, and a few other folks, really started to work together to figure out how we could take this regional or larger model and step that down to work on this hierarchical level of conservation.

It was in the early 2000's that they started to work together to form the foundation of what was to become OBCI. And that was probably just half a dozen groups and organizations that I just mentioned that still play a huge role in bird conservation in Ohio and regionally with our important partners in OBCI.

So OBCI is governed or led by a steering committee. On that steering committee are elected officers representing organizations from within the network and that are doing conservation work in Ohio. Currently on our steering committee, we have folks from Black Swamp Bird Observatory, Ohio State University, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, the Ohio Biological Survey, the University of Toledo. That is growing and changes over time. We typically have about ten to twelve people on that board to sort of lead where we're going in a lot of our efforts.

## RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION AND URBAN BIRD CONSERVATION

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** Very good. So, from your perspective, has OBCI helped the state of birding? The quality and quantity of research, and helped to cultivate connectivity and collaboration, and I assume, raise public conservation awareness from what it might have been before OBCI and what it is today in thanks to OBCI's activities? Would you say that's true? Having been with the organization for a time now, how do you view OBCI's impact from the past to the present, and to the future?

**Matthew Shumar:** I think OCBI has been a tremendous resource for the state and even regionally. If we take a look back at these organizations like Partners in Flight we have an understanding that it takes a large coordinated effort to get successful conservation strategies implemented.

We're talking about species that are highly mobile, they spend portions of their life in different parts of the globe. We're really working together, nobody's working in a bubble. There's such a need for collaboration, not only for different aspects of a project, but to tackle different geographic areas as well. OBCI and groups like the Joint Ventures and Partners in Flight have been really crucial in bringing folks together from academia and the agency side so that these folks are talking to each other.

In the past, there had often been fantastic research that had been done, but getting recommendations from that research implemented into conservation work was a whole different step. So, organizations Joint Ventures, Partners in Flight and statewide conservation initiatives were really essential to quickly further conservation efforts.

I would say OBCI has been great at bringing those efforts to public awareness as well. One, just by coordinating all of our partners. There are a lot of organizations out there that do really effective outreach in terms of birding and bird conservation, like the local Audubon Society chapters, Nature Conservancy, and Black Swamp Bird Observatory, the Ohio Bluebird Society, so these groups are really great at getting that information out there.

But if we can get folks to work together that really takes it to another level and especially if we can implement some of the research and needs that has been very crucial.

One thing we've learned in the past few years is the urgency for urban bird conservation. Particularly, as we're discovering through our Lights Out project. This is an effort to make urban landscapes safer for migratory birds. We're addressing issues related to reflective glass and light. We'd only be able to approach this type of issue and implement successful conservation strategies through a network and OCBI has helped to facilitate that.

We have a lot of great partners working in all of our regional Lights Out efforts, especially in Cleveland, that's been a landmark effort there. It's a very challenging landscape to work in. It's not like conservation issues we've dealt with typically or historically that often involve figuring out how to conserve large patches of more natural habitat.

But with a continually urbanizing landscape, we're beginning to understand that there is an urgent need to understand how these landscapes impact wildlife and especially migratory wildlife and then implementing whatever is needed to be done within a complicated framework where there are countless stakeholders and land owners. We're really only able to do that through a partnership like OBCI.

## **A REGIONAL MODEL FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE**

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** Very good. What a wonderful model, again, a network model to accelerate relationships and knowledge sharing and collaboration on different projects. So do other states have an OBCI? Does this model exist in other states and how does it usually present itself?

**Matthew Shumar:** There are a handful of states. To my knowledge there are about eight states that use this type of model and that has been to varying success. I'll say the key to making sure that these types of partnerships remain effective is by having at least one paid staff member.

Only about half of that small number of states that have these types of programs have had independent paid staff. Some of them have utilized agency time as an extra duty and that's been to lesser success and some organizations have dissipated or fizzled out simply because there's nobody there that has the time to run this.

There are a few states, Maryland is one right now that is doing really good work and they have an active Lights Out project there and are doing a lot of bird conservation work in a really critical ecosystem in the coastal areas.

But there are not a lot of states that have replicated this and it invariably comes down to trying to figure out those funding issues. This is an increasingly difficult social and political landscape to fund conservation work. I'd like to see more states take this template and run with it but a lot of states don't have agencies that are as progressive as ours.

I don't know that folks really appreciate the amount of diverse work that Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and especially the Division of Wildlife, really fund. Hopefully, we'll see some more work done in other states but right now it's on a fairly limited basis.

## **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** Well, thank you.

From your perspective, you sort of have the luxury of a metaview, to see across the landscape that you're working in, with the various partners, the different projects, and various environmental issues, and the challenges and problems that are out there that need to be addressed...can you tell us about some creative activities or innovative solutions that OBCI partners are working on in the state?

**Matthew Shumar:** In the past, OBCI's network and a lot of the work we have done has been informed by bird researchers. We've worked closely with folks at academic institutions or wildlife agencies whether that's the Fish and Wildlife Service or the Ohio Division of Wildlife, or the U.S Forest Service, but there's a real need - as we're understanding through our Lights Out program - to tackle conservation in urban landscapes.

That requires a whole new level of partnerships and approaches to conservation and often getting outside of our bubble, so we need to engage the folks that aren't bird researchers or aren't conservation organizations. We need a better tie and partnership with private industry and individual residents throughout the state.

We're still trying to figure out how best to achieve that through our Lights Out efforts and we are having some successes there which is very exciting. So, working with local government has been important but also engaging some of the private businesses in these areas as well.

Moving forward and currently, there is a real interest in growing OBCI's network to not only include these traditional conservation organizations in our work but private businesses or individuals who have an interest or see a mutual benefit in a lot of the conservation work that we do. We hope OBCI grows to be a larger network that involves a lot of these different types of organizations and individuals.

## UNDERSTANDING SCIENCE IN COMPLICATED ENVIRONMENTS

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**Betsey O'Hagan:** What you're expressing really hits home with the acceleration of the need to fully embrace our environment and all of the challenges we are now facing in every aspect of our lives. Conservation or bird watching at one time would have been secondary, like art class in school, and should the budget needed to be cut, it is the first to go. From my view, it seems to be similar in conservation.

I love how you're talking about how working together collaboratively is a way to help address the accelerating polarities, the political and social issues, compounded by imploding biological systems because we have so many people on the planet and limited resources, and then the advancement of technology, where you can really in one click communicate, as well as transfer money - getting things done. So, everything is so accelerated.

So, I love how you're talking about this and how working together can really, in a networked way, and a collaborative way, can help to address these things.

So, what do you see for the future? What do you think people should pay attention to? And what would you suggest people do to get more involved, where can they learn more, and where can they donate to help your wonderful efforts?

**Matthew Shumar:** They can go to our website at <https://obcinet.org/> We also have an additional website for the Lights Out efforts and all of those efforts can be found at <https://ohiolightsout.org/> I would encourage folks to look at the resources there.

Because of our past and our interest in regional and local conservation efforts and tying that into what conservation agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ohio Division

of Wildlife are doing, we have a strong interest in ornithological research and bringing that to a level further of understanding that habitat is needed throughout Ohio.

It's interesting when we think about the political landscape and even our technological landscape, everybody is so tied in and yet some things are often surface level and we take for granted. I think we're losing some interest in our understanding of science as well. I would encourage people to check out the scientific research we do because a lot of that informs our recommendations for conservation strategies.

As we've mentioned a few times, the human population globally, and especially within Ohio, is growing. The need to understand our impact on those systems is critically important. It goes beyond just claiming preservation of areas but really understanding how we affect that system and understanding different conservation approaches because sometimes they may seem counter intuitive.

We need to understand how our energy use plays into all of this, how things like non-native invasive species ties into all this, and how feral and free ranging cats have tremendous impacts on wildlife populations.

So, really going beyond an interest and a passion for the outdoors and conservation, which is a wonderful start, but also fostering a love for science itself. Because a lot of that will become more and more important as we get into a more complicated ecological and urbanized system.

**Betsey O'Hagan:** Well, thank you so much! It's been a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you for sharing all of this wonderful information.

**Matthew Shumar:** It was my pleasure.

**Betsey O'Hagan:** You're welcome! We are all certainly more informed about the good work of the Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative and all that it does. Thank you!