



ONAPA NEWS

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This reptile is strikingly beautiful

By **Guy Denny**

I clearly remember my very first encounter with a venomous snake in the wilds of Ohio. It was on one of those gorgeous autumn days in October of 1970. I was recently hired as Chief Naturalist with the ODNR Division of Parks & Recreation, and I was in the company of former Chief Naturalist Dick Moseley, promoted to Recreation Supervisor for the Division of Parks & Recreation, and Bob Paton, one of the founding fathers of the Buckeye Trail Association.

We were pre-hiking the trail in Shawnee State Forest along which we would be leading hikers as part of the Division of Parks

& Recreation's Annual Fall Hike and Campout at the park. It was on one of those beautiful crisp autumn days with sunny mild temperatures, clear deep blue skies, and the onset of fall color. By noon, traveling along a ridgetop, we decided to sit down to eat our lunch before hiking the last mile or two of our journey.

Dick Moseley was the first to spot it a little less than two feet from where I was sitting on the ground, well within striking distance. It was so well camouflaged among the colorful fall leaves, none of us saw it when we first sat down. But now, there it was, peacefully coiled up, minding its own business, and apparently totally unintimidated by our close presence.

Accordingly, we figured if it could mind its own business and tolerate us, we, in turn, could go about eating our lunch without bothering it. And so it was, yet none of us could help but admire the beauty of this colorful symbol of Ohio wilderness.

I was in awe of its beauty. Having previously worked as a naturalist for Toledo MetroParks and for the Willoughby Eastlake School System, often giving reptile talks, I was well acquainted with and had handled most of the snakes native to Ohio.

However, I had never had a first-hand encounter with any of the very rare three species of venomous snake native to Ohio. The Northern Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*) is a strikingly beautiful snake. As its common name implies, it has a very conspicuous, unpatterned bright copper-colored head of varying shades. When viewed from above, the base of the triangular-



Photo by Carl R. Brune

Northern Copperhead

shaped head is clearly wider and larger than the neck. The eyes are also very distinctive with sinister-looking cat-like pupils that are vertical and elliptical (non-venomous snakes have round pupils). Conspicuous heat-seeking pits are situated on both sides of the head between the nostrils and eyes. These pits are used by pit vipers to track down small rodents and other prey after having been fatally bitten. The medium sized body, usually 2 -1/2 to 3 feet long, but rarely longer, is somewhat pinkish to grayish brown, marked with a series of darker, often two-toned, chestnut-brown to reddish-brown hourglass-shaped cross bands, with dark borders. These bands are wide on both sides of the body, but narrow on the top of the snake's back which accounts for the characteristic hourglass or dumbbell-like pattern. Copperheads can be somewhat variable in body color. Although an extremely rare find, patternless specimens have

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By day, it's secretive

been reported and documented from Hocking County in recent years.

A distinctive triangular head, elliptical pupils, and heat-seeking pits are also characteristics of the only other two very rare species of venomous snakes native to Ohio, the small Massasauga Rattler (*Sistrurus catenatus*) and the very much larger Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*).

Unlike copperheads, both of these snakes can be readily identified by their having conspicuous rattles at the tips of their tails. Although one often hears that venomous cottonmouths also inhabit Ohio, that's



definitely not the case. The closest normal ranging populations of the Western Cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus leucostoma*) to Ohio is at the extreme western tip of Kentucky, notably near Fancy Farm, Kentucky.

As my first and later encounters with a copperhead revealed, copperheads tend to be secretive and rather passive by day. They are usually content to simply bask in the sun, relying on their camouflaged markings to conceal them from danger. If disturbed, they generally tend to quickly slip into cover. However, if thoroughly provoked, they will vibrate their tail rapidly and strike repeatedly. By night, they have very different personalities, becoming more alert and pugnacious. These are largely nocturnal hunters during the hotter days of summer when they become very active and more aggressive under cover of darkness.

Early in my career, my dear friend Larry Henry, a ranger/naturalist at Lake Hope State Park in Vinton County, showed me how he would collect copperheads as well as timber rattlesnakes for public display at the nature center, always releasing them at the end of the season. After a very hot summer day ending with a cool evening rain, snakes would move onto blacktop pavement to warm up. Using a flashlight we would encounter several copperheads stretched out on the roads. Under these conditions, copperheads are anything but passive. Upon being approached, they would immediately strike out violently and repeatedly in all directions. I was shocked the first time I encountered copperheads under these conditions. Having grown up in rural Lawrence County, Larry knew how to pick up venomous snakes and showed me how copperheads can pivot their fangs in such a way that if you don't have the proper hold of their head they can nick your finger. When being handled, copperheads not only try to bite, they also often spray a foul smelling musk which, contrary to folklore, does not smell anything like cucumber. It was a lesson well learned, but I never had Larry's nerve or the



Photos by Carl R. Brune

Northern Copperhead's distinctive head (left); at right, snake crossing the road.

desire to pick up a venomous snake by hand. I prefer to use a snake hook, thank you.

In the United States, reportedly, more people have been bitten by copperheads than by any other venomous snake. Yet deaths from copperhead bites are virtually non-existent. Most bites result from people unwittingly stepping on, sitting on, or touching unseen snakes camouflaged by their cryptic color patterns. The bite is extremely painful and can do seriously tissue damage, but the amount of venom injected is not fatal to a healthy adult. But anyone bitten should seek immediate medical attention. Even tiny newborn copperheads with their bright yellow-tipped tails are venomous.

Of the three venomous snakes native to Ohio, copperheads are more numerous and the ones most commonly encountered. Although they occur throughout much of unglaciated Ohio, they are now primarily limited to a relatively few counties in the extreme southeastern quarter of our state. Although they can be found in a variety of habitats, they show a preference for open Oak-Hickory forested rocky hillsides and ridge tops with rock outcroppings suitable as wintering and denning sites. When not basking in the open, they are typically encountered hiding under rocks, decaying logs, and slabs of wood as well as debris such as boards, metal sheets, cast off furniture and other discarded rubbish. They seem especially fond of the litter found around abandoned buildings. In rural settings, they are not particularly averse to human inhabited dwellings and may be found in close proximity to homes and barns where there are plenty of hiding places and prey, including small rodents, amphibians, lizards, and insects, especially large caterpillars and cicadas. So the message here is if you are fortunate enough to encounter a copperhead in the wild, admire its beauty, but don't touch. It won't bother you if you leave it alone and just simply savor this rare encounter in the wilds of Ohio.

ONAPA's Tenth Annual Meeting earns a 'high five'

By Dick Moseley

ONAPA's Tenth Annual Meeting at Caesar Creek Visitor Center was a successful endeavor for all who attended. We had a beautiful morning of great speakers, good food, and wonderful afternoon field trips that were enjoyed by all. President Guy Denny welcomed the 65 registered members and guests to the meeting and thanked committee members Deborah Karr, Jim Mason, Dick Moseley, and Jennifer Windus for making arrangements for the meeting. He also thanked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for allowing ONAPA to use this facility at no cost.

He then introduced ONAPA Board Members present and recognized Terry Duncan, ONAPA Webmaster, and Jan Kennedy, Social Media committee member. Seasonal Stewardship Assistants Lydia Radcliffe, Mariola Castrejon, Rachael Patterson, and Jordon Tackett were introduced as the backbone of our Stewardship Program.

He then introduced Vice-president Jennifer Windus who gave an overview of the Stewardship program and its activities. She noted that they attempt to do two projects per week and to date this year they have completed 44 projects around the state. She noted that ONAPA has added 20 partners in addition



Photo by Jan Kennedy

Dave Nolin pulls double duty, leading a hike at Doorley natural area after his presentation earlier in the day.

to DNAP preserves, which indicates that a lot of Ohio's natural areas managed by other organizations need our help and expertise.

Following the reports, Dave Nolin, Retired Director of Conservation for Five Rivers MetroParks in Dayton, gave a wonderful talk entitled "Reconsidering Ohio's Pre-European Settlement Vegetation and its Relevance Today." His presentation was well received and prompted many questions.

Later in the morning session, DeVere Burt, Director Emeritus of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, gave an outstanding presentation entitled "Art and Science on the American Frontier—The Audubon Story." His ability to make such a presentation about the life and accomplishments of John James Audubon in the early frontier of what is the present Mid-west was remarkable especially since he gave the presentation without using notes. He also brought along some of his artwork which reflects the work of Audubon's endeavor to document birdlife on the frontier. Many present remarked afterward how wonderful these presentations were and some noted that this was the best Annual Meeting to date.

After lunch and the annual business meeting, members departed for field trips to Caesar Creek Gorge State Nature Preserve led by Dick Moseley, Huffman Prairie Natural Landmark led by Daniel Boone, and Doorley Natural Area led by Dave Nolin. It was a hot afternoon but all seemed to enjoy their field trips to these natural areas.



Photo by Terry Duncan

DeVere Burt (right) explains details of his art inspired by John James Audubon's *Birds of America* to Gordon Maupin.

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Clockwise from top left: Cedar Bog; Myersville Fen (Photos by Jennifer Windus); Chaparral Prairie; Prairie Fringed Orchid Survey (Photos by Lydia Radcliffe)

Projects accomplish much despite heat of summer

By Jennifer Windus

ONAPA kept its stewardship assistants and volunteers busy in some hot weather this summer. As you can see from the list (*see box*), we had 20 different projects which covered rare species surveys, removal of invasive plants such as purple loosestrife, sweet-clover, Japanese stiltgrass, and narrow-leaved cattail, as well as removal of woody species in several preserves. We worked on some very hot, humid days which wore all of us out, but we accomplished important work.

There is plenty of work to do and partners requesting help, so we are continually looking for more volunteers. Two of our stewardship assistants, Rachael and Jordan, went back to college in mid-August and a third, Madison Brown, started full-time at Cedar Bog in late July as the new preserve manager. We look forward to working with her at Cedar Bog and wish her all the best! We have two stewardship assistants, Lydia and Mariola, still with us for the fall and winter. The October-December schedule will be posted to the website by late September.

June—August Stewardship Projects

- June 1 – Lakeside daisy seed collection
- June 13 – Chaparral Prairie; sweet-clover removal
- June 15 – Cedar Bog; Showy lady’s-slipper survey
- June 20 & July 19 – Jackson Bog; removal of purple loosestrife, cattails, and woody species
- June 22, 27 & 29 & July 6 – Eastern prairie fringed orchid surveys at nine sites
- June 13 & August 24 – Daughmer Savanna; teasel and woody species removal
- July 18 – Honey Run Highlands Park; woody species removal
- July 27 – Cedar Bog; tower mustard survey & clearing
- August 1 – Clifton Gorge; woody species removal
- August 3 – Wolf Run Regional Park; woody species removal
- August 10 – Kiser Lake Wetlands; woody species and cattail removal
- August 15 & 22 – Myersville Fen; woody species and purple loosestrife removal
- August 17 – Brinkhaven Oak Barrens; woody species and Japanese stiltgrass removal
- August 29 – Kitty Todd Preserve; woody species removal

August field trips focus on spiders and birds

By Guy Denny

ONAPA's 2023 field trips are wrapping up, with two in October. In August, two field trips focused on insects and birds rather than our usual emphasis on botany.

On the Hunt for Spiders of Ohio



Photo by Bob Burns

Black and Yellow Garden Orbweaver

Even if you aren't especially fond of spiders, you would have enjoyed Dr. Richard Bradley's trip held in Knox County August 19. Participants were treated to information about spider ecology, and how to find and identify several species of common spiders found around our yards.

Sizes of spiders ranged from the eye-catching large Black and Yellow Garden Orbweaver Spider (*Argiope aurantia*), which is perhaps the most conspicuous and familiar spider in Ohio, to the very small Bowl and Dolly Spider (*Frontinella pyramitela*) found at ground level on most people's suburban lawns, especially when morning dew makes its web very noticeable.

Another familiar and common outside spider found throughout the state is the Grass Spider (*Agelenopsis pennsylvanica*). The web is a dense sheet of criss-crossing silk threads with a distinct funnel-shaped retreat at one end where the spider waits to ambush its prey.



Photo by Bob Burns

Grass Spider

And, while hiking through the woods, you are likely to run into the Spined Micranthema (*Micranthema gracilis*) since it has the habit of building its webs across trails which a hiker might not notice until they get a face full of web. These spiders are easy to

identify by their peculiar and very conspicuous hard spiny abdomen.

Rich Bradley's extensive knowledge and enthusiasm is contagious helping us develop a new awareness and appreciation for these eight-legged wonders of nature.

Tour of Fall Shorebird Identification along Lake Erie

Whether you are botanizing or birding with naturalist Jason Larson, you are in for a memorable and most enjoyable adventure, like our August 26 outing.

The day started out at Metroparks of Toledo's Howard Marsh near the township of Bono, where participants were delighted by an array of notable birds, especially Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*). The plumage

of these beautiful long-legged waders were once extremely rare birds to see in Ohio, but within the last few years they have started to nest in large Ohio wetlands including Howard Marsh where we saw several during our visit. We were also treated to good views of Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*), Forster's Terns (*S. forsteri*), and Common Terns (*S. hirundo*). Close by were a pair of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinators*), and then suddenly a pair of Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) flew right over our heads at treetop level.

Missing were the normal assortment of small shorebirds that should have been here this time of year. Heavy rains during the days leading up to our visit flooded agricultural fields further inland providing ideal habitat for these migrants headed south. As usual, when one goes birding with Jason along the shores of western Lake Erie, we all gathered at Blackberry Corners Tavern for lunch with delicious homemade pies, and wonderful camaraderie. Jason has offered to lead a spring birding trip back up to western Lake Erie next May, so watch for the announcement in next year's *ONAPA News* and at ONAPA.org.

Editor's Note: ONAPA member and photographer Tom Fishburn took a lot more fabulous photos of the shorebird field trip. You can visit his site at [2023 August 26: ONAPA at Howard Marsh - fowlman1954 \(smugmug.com\)](http://2023_August_26:_ONAPA_at_Howard_Marsh_-_fowlman1954_(smugmug.com))



Photo by Tom Fishburn

Black-necked Stilts

Explore the amazing diversity of Ohio's North Coast nature preserves

By Dick Moseley

Seven State Nature Preserves occur along the shore or on an island of Lake Erie and contain significant and unique communities that are important components of Ohio's State Nature Preserve System. North Pond and North Shore Alvar are located on Kelley's Island. Lakeside Daisy, Sheldon Marsh, Old Woman Creek, Mentor Marsh and Headland Dunes are along the shore of Lake Erie. They are worth the visit. You will be amazed by the variety of habitats and unusual species of plants and birds you will see at these preserves.

Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Research Reserve is a 571-acre nature preserve located near Huron, Ohio and protects one of the last remaining freshwater estuaries on Lake Erie. This area became a member of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System in 1980, the only fresh-water estuary in the system when it was designated. This preserve contains a variety of aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Due to its diverse habitats, it is home to 829 species of flowering plants including American water lotus, White water lily, Swamp rose mallow, as well as 51 species of fish, 1,373 species of aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates, and myriads of microscopic species of aquatic flora and fauna. When you visit, start at the Visitor Center to view the exhibits describing the sanctuary and its flora and fauna. The preserve is located three miles east of Huron on U.S. 6.

Nearby, Sheldon Marsh Nature Preserve is a must see during bird migration season. Migratory birds often stack up here when north winds discourage birds from flying across Lake Erie — they stop to feed and rest before crossing the lake. This 472-acre preserve has a variety of habitats including a mature forest, marsh wetlands, open fields, and barrier sand beach. This property was once the main entrance road to Cedar Point Amusement Park until the new Cedar Point Causeway to

the entrance was constructed in July, 1914. In 1954, the area was purchased by the Sheldon Family and was operated as a private nature preserve that many called "Sheldon's Folly" since the road on the property ended at the open water of Lake Erie. The property was acquired from the family in 1979 by the Division of Natural Areas & Preserves. The preserve is located three miles west of Huron on U.S. 6.

Next, we travel to the Marblehead Peninsula to a preserve that was acquired to protect an Ohio endangered and Federal threatened species, the Lakeside Daisy (*Hymenoxys herbacea*). This 136-acre preserve began as a 19-acre area that was acquired from the adjacent Marblehead Quarry, operated by Standard Slag Company. Colleen "Casey" Taylor and Ruth Fiscus championed the protection of the Lakeside Daisy and encouraged the Division to acquire this site with Income Tax Check-off funds in 1988. In 1989, LaFarge North America acquired the quarry and through their cooperation additional quarry lands were acquired to increase the preserve to its present size. LaFarge Corporation (now Holcim US) has allowed ONAPA to continue to collect Lakeside Daisy plants and seeds from the active quarry area and move them to a site on Kelleys Island State Park to create another population of this endangered species. Thanks to this year-long on-going project, the population on this site has been very successful.

Lakeside Daisy is perhaps the rarest native plant species in Ohio and is the largest natural population of this species in the U.S. The preserve is spectacular when the Lakeside Daisy is in full bloom during late May when bright yellow flowers cover the landscape. A variety of plants grace this barren limestone landscape other times during the summer include Spiked blazing-star, Stiff goldenrod, and Great Plains Ladies' tresses. Lakeside Daisy State Nature Preserve is located on Alexander Pike one mile south of SR 163 in Marblehead.

We now hop on a ferry in Marblehead and travel to Kelleys Island where we can visit two State nature preserves: North Pond and North Shore Alvar. Both are located at Kelleys Island State Park on the north side of the island. North Pond is a 30-acre pristine wetland preserve which has a natural channel to Lake Erie at the North Bay of the island. Many of the wetlands in the western basin of Lake Erie have been impounded with dikes and weirs which artificially control water levels. However, North Pond is one of the few natural wetland ecosystems still connected to the lake; an interesting array of plant and animals can be seen from the mile long boardwalk trail and observation tower. It is a great area for observing migrating birds and waterfowl during the spring and fall. The preserve is located on Ward Road, one-half mile east from Division Street.

At less than an acre, North Shore Alvar is the smallest nature preserve in the state system. Don't let the size fool you, it is



Photo by Ian Adams

Sheldon Marsh State Nature Preserve

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Photo by Guy Denny

North Shore Alvar State Nature Preserve

perhaps the most unique ecosystem in the state. “Alvar” is a plant community consisting of mosses and alkaline-loving herbaceous plants that grow on limestone or dolostone bedrock with little or no soil. Alvars occur in the Great Lakes Region in the U.S. and Canada and also in the Baltic Sea area of Europe which is where the Swedish name “Alvar” was derived. This is a community of sparse vegetation which grows along the Lake Erie shoreline and was created by ice, wind, and wave action. Only a few plants are able to survive in this special environment such as Northern Bog Violet, Kalm’s Lobelia, Balsam ragwort, and Pringle’s Aster. The preserve is located at the north end of Division Street and west of Glacial Grooves State Memorial.

Now we are headed to the eastern coastline of Ohio to visit two more preserves on the edge of Lake Erie. Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve is located at the eastern end of Headlands State Beach Park in Mentor, Ohio. This 25-acre preserve is one of the few remaining sandy beaches and dunes complex left along the shore of Lake Erie due to extensive development over the years. This unique community has several Atlantic Coastal Plain species which have persisted since glacial times on the beaches and dunes of the Great Lakes.

Eastern coastal species such as beach pea, sea rocket, seaside spurge, beach grass, and purple sand grass are still found on the sand dunes of the preserve and are not found growing naturally away from Lake Erie in Ohio. The grasses (Beach grass and native Switchgrass) help to develop the accumulation wind-blown sand to build and stabilize the dunes along the beach. Many other species occur on the dunes and shoreline as a result of this dune development and include Clammy weed, Cocklebur, Wild bean, Wafer ash, Cottonwood and willow to name a few. A boardwalk trail and observation deck provides easy access to the preserve and the lake. Headlands Dunes Nature Preserve was dedicated on May 13, 1976, to protect this Lake Erie dune community for this as well as future generations to see and enjoy.

Just around the corner is Mentor Marsh State Nature Preserve which is a 666-acre wetland designated as a National Natural Landmark in 1966. This significant marsh along Lake Erie has a variety of plant communities that occupy the old river bed and flood plain of the Grand River. This old river bed was abandoned due to stream piracy eroding the neck of the land which separated it from Lake Erie to form a new channel in its present location where it enters the lake. Beech-



Photo by Ian Adams

Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve

Maple Forest dominates most of the high ground in the preserve while swamp forest and cattail-phragmites communities dominate the marsh’s wetlands. In 2004, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History began a restoration project to eliminate the non-native Reed grass (*Phragmites australis*) from the wetlands of the marsh. Through their efforts, many species of wetland birds have returned to the marsh to nest, including American & Least Bitterns; King, Virginia, and Sora Rails; Common Gallinules, Wilson Snipe and Prothonotary Warblers. Waterfowl, wading birds and shorebird migrants also use the marsh to rest and feed on their journey.

Mentor Marsh has the distinction of being the first natural area to be designated as a State Nature Preserve when it was dedicated on May 10, 1973, by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Today, Mentor Marsh, which is jointly owned and managed by ODNR and the museum, has a visitor center and trails for viewing the marsh and its flora and fauna. The preserve is located on Corduroy Road, one-half mile north of S.R. 283 in Lake County.

Now that you have virtually visited these seven nature preserves via the article, you need to physically visit these sites and enjoy their diversity both as communities as well as the plants and animals they contain. You will be amazed by their differences in size and their nature. Just think when you are done visiting these unique areas, you will only have 134 more preserves to visit around the state.



Ohio Natural Areas & Preserves Association

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