

THE GNATCATCHER

Newsletter of Juniata Valley Audubon

VOL. XLVI, NO. 1 — JAN / FEB 2014



A Big Winter for Snowy Owls

Visiting Pennsylvania and Other Mid-Atlantic States

Marcus Schneck, nature and outdoor writer, at pennlive.com/outdoors

Excited anticipation is spreading through the birding community across Pennsylvania, and the entire Mid-Atlantic and Midwest, as the first wave of what some believe will be a historic southward movement of snowy owls happens this winter.

In Pennsylvania, the big white birds with black markings have been documented near Myerstown in Berks County, near State College in Centre County, in Chester County and in Presque Isle State Park on Lake Erie. Snowy owls also have been reported in several other states and southern Canadian provinces. Noting that birders in Newfoundland have been seeing 150 snowy owls in a single day of birding, Don and Lillian Stokes, two of America's preeminent

bird and birding authorities, in their Stokes Birding Blog, predicted, "There are more owls on the way and this could be a historic event."

Anthony Gonzon, biologist with the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, agreed, "This year is quickly shaping up to be extraordinary and unprecedented. Over the course of six days surrounding Thanksgiving, at least six snowy owls have been sighted, providing Delawareans a great opportunity to share in this phenomenon."

As a top-of-the-food-chain predator in its Arctic home range, a snowy owl normally eats hundreds of small rodents called lemmings each year. But lemming populations in the Arctic are cyclical, rising and falling as results

of population size, habitat conditions and their own food availability. When lemming populations fluctuate, the owls irrupt, or disperse widely to the south, to find food that's sometimes well outside of their normal range. An irruption may also occur when high lemming populations enable snowy owls to produce large broods that are unsupportable by local habitat as the owlets mature.

Snowy owls are big birds, with wingspans as large as five feet. They are the largest North American owl by weight, weighing as much as six-and-a-half pounds. Males are smaller than females. They range from nearly all white in adult males to white with many dark bars across the forehead, breast and belly in juvenile females. Adult females and juvenile males fall somewhere in between.

Would-be snowy owl viewers are encouraged to put the needs, safety and comfort of the bird ahead of getting closer for a better look or photograph. Keep your distance: do not disturb or flush the owl. Remember snowy owls normally inhabit a region where they see relatively few people.



U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE PHOTO

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JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Tyrone, PA 16686-0042

The Juniata Valley Audubon Society (JVAS) is a chapter of the National Audubon Society and is dedicated to the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the Earth's biological diversity. Juniata Valley Audubon accomplishes its mission through advocacy, science, land stewardship, and education — working directly with Audubon Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania state office of the National Audubon Society.

The JVAS is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit, educational organization as described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Gifts are deductible for income tax purposes (Tax ID # 25-1533496).

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UPCOMING JVAS PROGRAMS

*Our programs, designed for a general audience,
are free and open to the public.*

Directions: Take Interstate Rt. 99 to the Bellwood/Route 865 Exit (Exit 41). Follow Rt. 865 through the Sheetz/Martin's intersection. Proceed about four blocks and turn right at the "Business District" sign just before the railroad overpass. Turn left at the dead end and travel to the stop sign. Continue straight forward a short distance; the library will be on your right.

January 21:

Member's Night



Our annual members' night is always a good time, with lots of laughter and an impressive assortment of slideshows, videos, wildlife art, nature poetry and other by-products of our on-going engagement with the natural world. Contact programs chair Laura Jackson (mljackson2@embarqmail.com) if you'd like to share something with the group.



Program meetings begin at 7 PM in the meeting room of the Bellwood-Antis Public Library, 526 Main St., Bellwood.

February 18:

Of Warblers and Woodrats: PGC Successes and Other Experiments in the South-central Region of Pennsylvania

Justin Vreeland is a Certified Wildlife Biologist and one of the Wildlife Management Biologists for the Pennsylvania Game Commission. He holds the position of Wildlife Supervisor for the South-central Region. Justin will describe three programs in our area that benefit non-game animals. One is a habitat improvement project in State Gamelands (SGL) 322 along a right-of-way that has attracted golden-winged warblers in northern Huntingdon County. He will also describe a ridgetop scrub oak-pitch pine barrens restoration project on SGL 048 in southwest Bedford County. The third project is in State Gamelands 112, 121, and 067 in Huntingdon County that enhances the habitat of Allegheny woodrats.

Photos by: Dr. Stan Kotala

Online at
JVAS.org



or visit JVAS on Facebook

CHAPTER-ONLY MEMBERSHIPS ARE DUE

or Renew

Join

If you join National Audubon and live in our area, you'll be considered a member of JVAS, and receive *The Gnatcatcher* in addition to Audubon magazine. **However, joining Juniata Valley Audubon directly, as a chapter-only membership, does more to support local conservation, education and advocacy.** Your chapter-only membership dues stay with JVAS and are used locally in the Juniata Valley: in Blair, Huntingdon, Centre, Bedford and Mifflin Counties.



JVAS is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, so all donations are tax-exempt (and gratefully accepted).

JVAS membership provides you with the following benefits:

- ▶ Notification of JVAS's exciting activities including monthly nature programs, field trips, and other events.
- ▶ Subscription to the bimonthly chapter newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*.
- ▶ Opportunity to participate in local advocacy efforts to help make a real difference.
- ▶ Opportunity to aid in the preservation of the natural world.
- ▶ Have fun in joining with fellow nature enthusiasts.

Become a JVAS member at one of the annual membership rates as follows:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual, \$15 | <input type="checkbox"/> Friend of the JVAS, \$50 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family, \$20 | <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate, \$100 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting, \$35 | <input type="checkbox"/> Life Membership, \$500 |

Make your check payable to JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON.

New this year: you can choose to opt-out of receiving the printed newsletter. *The Gnatcatcher* is available on jvas.org as a PDF file. If you are doing more reading online these days, you can help reduce our printing and mailing expenses by selecting this option.

Mail to:

JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON
c/o Dr. Alice Kotala, Membership Chair
P.O. Box 42
Tyrone, PA 16686-0042

Name _____

Address _____

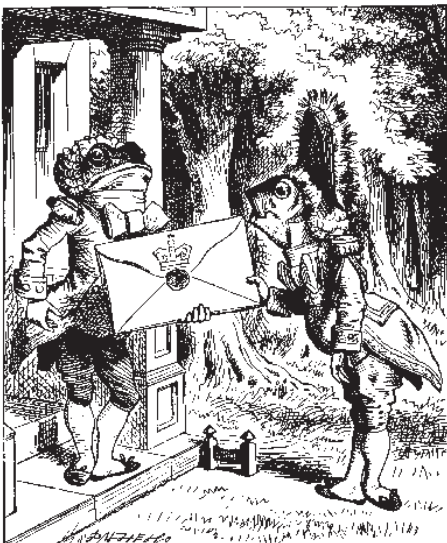
City _____ State _____

ZIP _____ Phone _____

E-mail Address _____



2014



Illustrations for Alice in Wonderland, by Sir John Tenniel



Fort Roberdeau County Park: a Great Place to Enjoy Nature and History in Winter

By Dr. Stan Kotala

Central Pennsylvania was not a location of major battles during the American Revolution, but we do have a unique Revolutionary War site. Between Altoona and State College is Fort Roberdeau, a Blair County Historic and Natural Area.

By the spring of 1778, the American colonies' fight for independence appeared to be over. Philadelphia, the new capital, was occupied by the British. George Washington's army was destitute at Valley Forge, and British sympathizers across the Commonwealth were beginning to take a stand against their rebel neighbors. During this time, supplies for the colonial army were scarce. They lacked the basics of food and clothing as well as most of the material they needed to wage war. In particular, there was little lead for bullets and musket balls.

Daniel Roberdeau, a member of the Continental Congress meeting in York since the capture of Philadelphia, became aware of lead mines in central Pennsylvania. Roberdeau oversaw the building of a stockade to protect the lead mining and smelting in Sinking Valley, part of what is now Blair County, just south of the Little

Juniata River. The fort was a storage depot for ordnance, ammunition, and other supplies until 1780. Rebel settlers often found safety at Fort Roberdeau during times of raids by parties of British rangers and their Indian allies.

After the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the fort fell into disrepair. Parts of it may have been recycled into other buildings. By the 1930s, the site of today's reconstructed fort was known as "Fort Roberdeau Farm." The fort was reconstructed during America's bicentennial year, 1976. Since then, the County of Blair has gradually assembled 230 acres surrounding the fort to protect the integrity of this site. Unlike many Revolutionary War sites, Fort Roberdeau's surroundings are more similar to those encountered in the mid-18th century. The park itself consists of 35 acres of woodland and 195 acres of fields, some of which are farmed.

Several trails run through the woods and fields of the Fort Roberdeau Historic and Natural Area. The Bluebird Trail follows a long but circuitous hedgerow

through fields surrounding the fort. Juniata Valley Audubon installed and maintains 25 bluebird boxes along this trail, and, during the nesting season, the trail bustles with activity as eastern bluebirds and tree swallows vie for possession of these homes and later hunt for insects to feed their voracious young. Twenty-five years ago, the eastern bluebird was a rare sight due to the elimination of hedgerows and the adoption of "clean" farming practices. The widespread installation of birdhouses specifically constructed for bluebirds has brought this species back to become a once-again common inhabitant of hedgerows and open areas. In winter, these fields and hedgerows are great places to see large flocks of horned



JVAS maintains 25 bluebird boxes along the Bluebird Trail at Fort Roberdeau County Park

larks, American kestrels, rough-legged hawks, northern harriers,

and the occasional short-eared owl and barn owl. White-tailed deer and red foxes also are likely to be seen.

mouth of the cave into which this stream sinks. Sinking Valley is named for the prominence of sinkholes throughout its

and perhaps a northern two-lined or a northern dusky salamander. Yes, they are all active in the stream in winter.



JVAS members under one of the ancient white oaks at Fort Roberdeau

The woods at the Fort Roberdeau Natural Area contain a variety of trees, including about a half-dozen ancient white oaks, which exceed four feet in diameter. Unfortunately, the oldest of these fell in the spring of 2009 during a storm. Its massive trunk and limbs lie near a bridge crossing the stream that flows through this woodland. Large spring seeps can be found in these woods, and, if you look carefully, you can see the spathes of skunk cabbages emerging from wet areas, waiting to release their explosive growth.

The small stream that runs through the woods descends into a sinkhole near the fort. From the trail, you can walk down to a small platform at the

limestone topography. Many streams in this valley are above ground in one area and below ground in others, but all empty into the Little Juniata River. The stream at Fort Roberdeau is easily accessible, so you should get close and investigate it. Pick up some leaves that are in the stream and you'll see that most are being eaten by aquatic insects. If you're lucky, you may see caddisflies in their leaf, twig, or stone cases. Looking under rocks will likely give you the opportunity to examine some mayfly and stonefly nymphs,

Because the trails are well-traveled and obvious, and because much of the park is open fields, it's impossible to lose your way in this Blair County park. It's a good idea to visit the park during different seasons to see the changes in the flora and fauna as well as to take advantage of the park's seasonal programs. The reconstructed Revolutionary War stockade surrounding six log cabins is open from late spring to early fall, as is an 1858 barn containing exhibits and a museum shop. During warmer weather, be sure to take advantage of the park's picnic facilities, and White Oak Hall, a large multipurpose facility.



In 2011, JVAS planted 25 white pines in the hedgerows and woods at Fort Roberdeau to provide diversity and thermal cover, as recommended by the Pennsylvania Game Commission

Birds of a feather flock together.

Photo
Credit:
Robert
Royse

The old adage holds true in many circles of our day-to-day lives; from political parties to deer hunters, a common bond is shared (and sometimes lived!) As our similarities, interests, or dispositions cause us to associate with others like-minded, the same reasoning holds true in natural communities (hence the expression). Gray squirrels and white-tails congregate in the oak woods on a mast year, just as sycamores and silver maples grow juxtaposed on river banks. But commonalities in nature are not always as transparent as a taste for acorns or affinity for wet soil. In fact, similarities can be camouflaged or overlooked due to the perplexity of the common bond or the bed-fellows who share it. One such relationship exists between wild turkeys and golden-winged warblers.

What in the world do wild turkeys and golden-winged warblers have in common? Besides the obvious fact that both are birds (with a vast difference in size), these species have more in common than you may think; the most important commonality being the need for early successional or young forest habitat. Young forests are exemplified by a few mature trees, a variety of shrubs and saplings (preferably regenerating hardwoods), and patches of herbaceous cover such as bunches of goldenrod or blackberry brambles. This type of structure is a great place for hen turkeys to nest in the spring, providing concealment from both aerial and terrestrial predators. Quality nesting habitat is often a limiting factor for wild turkey populations in the northeastern United States and coincidentally, golden-winged warblers

use the same young forest to nest in the spring.

The forests of Appalachia are getting



older; they are maturing. In 1980, roughly 29% of the Appalachian forest was in an early stage of succession. Today, approximately 11% of the Appalachian forest qualifies as young forest. Young forest habitat is declining throughout the Appalachian range and consequently, so is the golden-winged warbler population.

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), the leading conservation organization dedicated to improving upland wildlife habitat, and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have partnered on an initiative to create or enhance young forest habitat on private land throughout the Appalachian region. The Working Lands for Wildlife, Golden-winged Warbler Initiative (GWWI) provides

funding for planning and developing young forest habitat for Golden-winged warblers and consequently, all other users of young forest, including

ruffed grouse, whitetail deer, and more than 15 different song bird species. Young forest habitat can be created naturally by windstorms, disease, forest pests, or fires, but since these disturbances occur infrequently or are suppressed (in the case of fire), young forests are created mechanically using silviculture methods, more specifically, timber harvesting. Timber harvesting, along with other forest best management practices, is a great way to increase young forest habitat, manage for wildlife, and provide income to landowners all at the same time.

The NWTF has a top-notch staff of wildlife biologists and foresters throughout the Appalachian region that can meet with private landowners

to discuss where and how to create young forest habitat on their property. The program is available to private landowners in South-central Pennsylvania as well as other portions of the state. To qualify for the program, the property to be managed has to be roughly 1000 feet above sea level and have >70% forested land surrounding the property; both qualifications are fairly easily met in the ridge and valley region of the state. Landowners are asked to create or restore a minimum of 10 acres of young forest habitat on their property. Following a property visit, the biologist will draft a wildlife management plan which includes prescribed forest stand management practices, a schedule detailing when the prescribed practices are to be implemented, and detailed maps describing where each practice will occur. It is important to mention that the wildlife management plan is firmly grounded in sustainable forestry (i.e., forestry practices that maintain forest biodiversity, productivity, and regeneration capacity at several scales). Sustainable forestry practices such as shelterwood timber harvests (i.e., a punctuated timber harvest practice that promotes seedling germination,

JVAS Field Trip

Saturday, March 15

Dunning Creek Wetlands

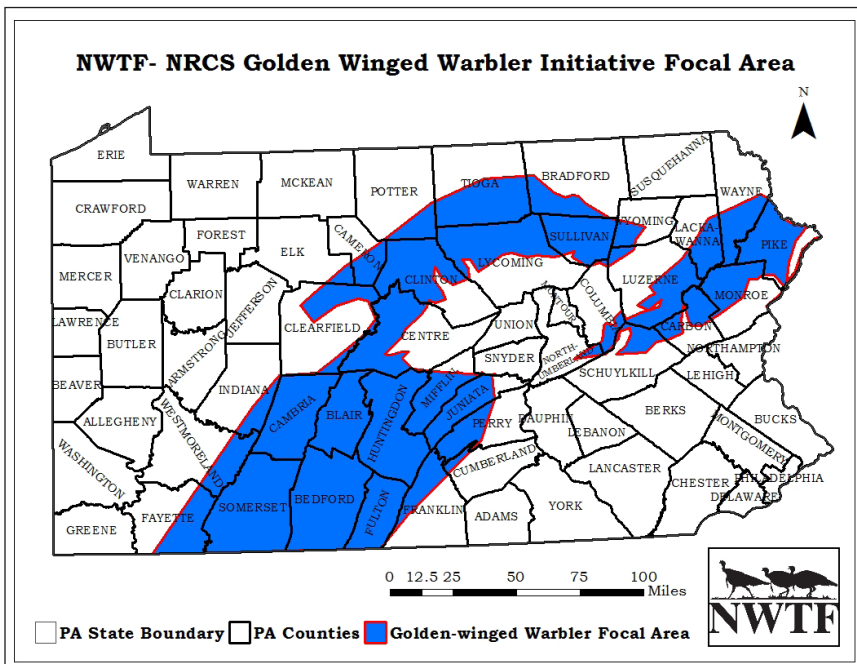
Meet at the Apple Bin Restaurant (it is closed) on Rt. 56 at 8:30 AM to carpool to the wetlands. Hike starts at 9 AM. Bring boots, binoculars, listen to the forecast and dress accordingly. Highlights will include sightings of tundra swans, grebes, and a large variety of ducks. Directions: Take I-99 south to Exit 3. Then take Rt. 56 west toward Johnstown. The Apple Bin is located on the right side with a big parking lot along Rt. 56. The Apple Bin address is 1600 Quaker Valley Rd, New Paris, PA 15554. Contact: Mike and Laura Jackson, at 814-652-9268.

growth, and density) and snag retention are staples in the wildlife management plans and important considerations when managing for wildlife diversity and forest longevity. There is no cost or obligation associated with the initial site visit or the wildlife management plan. If your property meets the qualification credentials and is deemed acceptable, a contract can be signed with the NRCS and the habitat work could be completed on a cost share basis,

with the NRCS toting most of the load. In fact, the landowner's share can be covered by the timber harvest prescribed on the property, and then some. This program is a great opportunity for landowners looking for technical and financial assistance to create better wildlife habitat on their property.

With over 70% of Pennsylvania's forest owned by private landowners, no other entity is as well positioned across the landscape to address priority environmental issues and implement sustainable conservation practices. If you are a private land-owner, I encourage you to come join the flock! If you are interested in the program or have any questions regarding program logistics or qualifications, please feel free to contact Mitchell Blake, Project Biologist, National Wild Turkey Federation.

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 Project Biologist
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 mblake@nwtf.net



JVAS CHAPTER-ONLY MEMBERSHIPS ARE DUE

JVAS Chapter-only membership is on a calendar-year basis, thus chapter-only dues for 2014 are due now! If you haven't paid yet, please see page 3 for an annual dues form. We don't want to lose you! If you have already renewed, Thank you!

If you are a National member, switching to a JVAS chapter-only membership offers a considerable savings in difficult economic times.



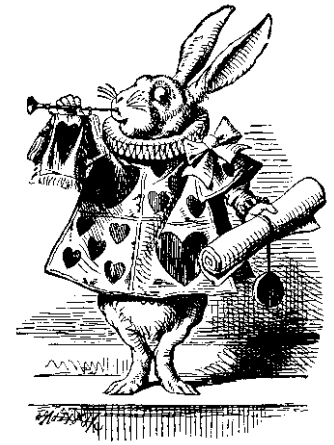
Did you know that our chapter newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*, is available on jvas.org as a PDF file?

You can go directly to: jvas.org/gnatcatcher-archive/ to access back issues.



New this year: you can choose to opt-out of receiving the printed newsletter. If you are doing more reading online these days, you

can help reduce our printing and mailing expenses by selecting the opt-out line on the 2014 dues form. These kinds of savings contribute to our on-going conservation projects, environmental education, and environmental advocacy.



Go ask Alice: everything is not as it appears! Wind turbines, and fracking: are they the best new energy solutions or a house of cards?

Illustrations for Alice in Wonderland,
by Sir John Tenniel

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