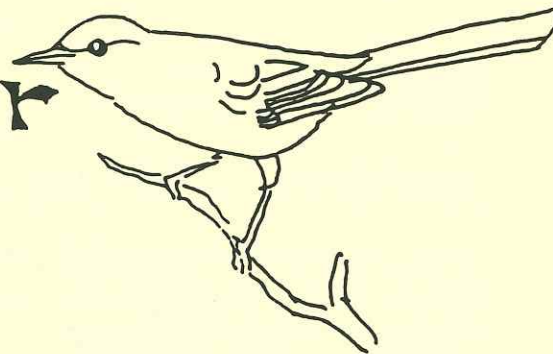


The Gnatcatcher



Newsletter of the
Juniata Valley Audubon Society

P.O. Box 2378, Altoona, Pennsylvania 16603

February 1995

Sharpie Days

By Marcia Bonta

During the last several years, migrating sharp-shinned hawks at Cape May, N.J. have dwindled. At first the birding community was concerned. Then they began looking at the numbers of sharp-shinned hawks recorded in the northern U.S. during the Christmas Bird Count. Those numbers were soaring. The answer to why there are less migrating sharpies seems to be, at least in part, that fewer are migrating. With more and more people feeding birds, the sharpies have an easy source of food throughout the winter months.

I was reminded of that the other afternoon here in Plummer Hollow when I looked out at my feeders hanging from our back porch. There on the ground, 3 feet below the back porch steps, sat a small sharp-shinned hawk. Because of its size, 10 inches from head to tail, I knew it was a male, since females are larger than males.

He had his back to the feeder and to me so I had a beautiful view of his long, banded tail, his dark gray back with white spots spread across his upper wings and middle back, and a small patch of ginger brown on his neck — which meant that he was still not quite in adult plumage, making him a year and a half old. He kept swiveling his head around to look at the feeder and I saw his orange-encircled brown eyes, yellow lores, and black, hooked bill.

Chickadees, a female downy woodpecker, and tufted titmice ignored him and flew in and out of the feeder directly over his head, but he merely glanced at them. Then, a much larger sharpie, a female, flew into a tree at the edge of the woods and on down to hide in the branches of a fallen apple tree. She stayed only a minute or so and was off again, but the male remained seated, occasionally closing or blinking one or the other of his eyes. After 15 minutes he flew up into the grape tangle and house finches scolded him from high in the black walnut trees before he flew off.

(Cont'd on page 5)

February Program

MEMBERS' NIGHT — Various JVAS members will show hobbies, slides, and photographs pertaining to nature.

7:15 p.m., Monday, Feb. 27 at Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church, 5th Ave. & 4th St., Altoona

Field Trip

LOWER TRAIL BIRD WALK with trip leaders Bill King and Dave Kyler (see page 2).

8 a.m., Sunday, Feb. 26

Next Board Meeting

7 p.m., Monday, Mar. 6 at President Stan Kotala's residence. All members are welcome. Phone Stan at 946-8840 for directions.

From the Gnatcatcher's Nest ...

Members' Night is February 27. This is always one of our liveliest meetings of the year. It's your opportunity to show any hobbies, slides, photographs, etc., that pertain to nature.

Tables and easels will be available for you to set up your displays. Two slide projectors will be ready for anyone wishing to give a short presentation.

I hope that all JVAS members will join us for this evening of camaraderie and sharing. (K)

Lower Trail SAP

Come join us for a winter walk on the Lower Trail! Weather permitting, Bill King and Dave Kyler will be conducting a special areas project (SAP) study of bird species along the entire length of the Lower Trail on Sunday, Feb. 26.

Dave will be starting from the Alexandria trail head at 8 am, and Bill will begin at the Williamsburg Trail head at the same time. We'll meet at Etna Furnace around noon.

Carpooling will be available back to either starting location. Be sure to dress warmly and bring binoculars!

Questions? Call either Bill (942-7673) or Dave (643-6030). — DK

Chapter Actions

In January the JVAS Board of Directors took the following actions:

- Testified at a public hearing in favor of the valley alignment (G1-1a/G1-1b) for the new Rt. 220 between Bald Eagle in Blair Co. and Port Matilda in Centre Co. We strongly opposed the ridgetop alignment (RT-G).

- Wrote a letter to David L. Sherman, P.E., project manager for the improvements to Rt. 22 at Water Street. We expressed opposition to the "Revised Southern Alternative" because of its proximity to the Lower Trail, its environmental

destructiveness, and its cultural disruption. We strongly favored the "Revised Northern Alternative."

- Wrote a letter to Rep. Richard A. Geist requesting access of the Environmental Fund for Pennsylvania to the State Employees Combined Appeal. (K)

Introducing the Working Assets Long Distance Co.

The "socially responsible" telephone long distance company, known as the Working Assets Long Distance Co., comes highly recommended by JVAS members Chris and Tim Eddy. According to Chris:

- WALD, like major carriers, offers volume discounts; their base rates are as much as 15 percent lower than AT&T, MCI, and Sprint. And 10 percent goes to groups working for *social and environmental change*.

- WALD is the only phone company that prints its bills on unbleached, 100 percent postconsumer-recycled paper. If every phone company in America did this, more than a million trees would be saved.

- WALD plants 17 trees for every ton of paper it uses. This past year WALD donated 40,000 trees to the Aides Memorial Grove, the New Forest Project, the Garden Project, and Trees for the Future.

- WALD provides an easy way to let your voice be heard. Every month, with your bill, it introduces you to several issues. Citizen letters come complete with phone numbers.

- Last, WALD provides and encourages *free* phone calls to Congress and the White House every Monday for our convenience.

If you're interested, call (800) 788-0898. For each friend who joins, the company will take \$10 off your phone bill. Chris says that she and her husband Tim, as well as family members, have used WALD for several years and they're very happy with the service. If you have any questions, phone Chris or Tim at 942-0987. — Ed.

CONSERVATION

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The following testimony was presented to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation in response to a draft environmental impact statement for the next section of Rt. 220 to be constructed. The options being evaluated by PennDOT are either to use the present valley corridor, or to use a ridgetop corridor on Bald Eagle Mountain. The JVAS board has endorsed the use of the valley corridor.

Good afternoon. My name is Paula Ford. I am presenting this testimony on behalf of the approximately 350 members of the Juniata Valley Audubon Society (JVAS), a local chapter of the National Audubon Society. The JVAS is headquartered in Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. Members of our chapter live in Blair, Centre, Huntingdon, Bedford, Mifflin, and Fulton Counties. As residents of this area, we fully recognize the importance of good, safe highways to both local residents and visitors to our area.

We are, however, very concerned that the RT-G and P2-2 alignments will adversely impact wildlife by severely fragmenting predominantly forested areas and will create high numbers of roadkills. We are also concerned that this ridgetop highway will expose motorists to unsafe conditions. Additionally, using these alignments would significantly increase construction costs.

Our major concern is for the impacts to wildlife.

First, vegetation and wildlife would be exposed to pollutants from traffic.

Second, soils, groundwater, and surface water would be contaminated by runoff of herbicides and de-icing agents. The very fact that the RT-G alignment is a ridgetop alignment means that higher levels of salt and other de-icers would need to be used there.

Third, the area provides nesting habitat for many species of birds. For example, during the recent Breeding Bird Atlas project in Pennsylvania, the following birds were documented as breeding in the area of the proposed highway construction: Wood Duck, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Broad-

winged Hawk, Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Common Raven, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Golden-winged Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

These birds are just a sampling of the rich avian biodiversity of the area. Migrant species add to this list. The Bald Eagle ridge, like other ridges in the Appalachian Mountains, is a significant migratory route for birds, especially raptors. Large numbers of Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles use the ridge as a primary flyway.

We speak on behalf of these birds and those who appreciate the value they add to the quality of life in Central Pennsylvania. There seem to be no good reason to support the construction of Route 220 along the RT-G and P2-2 alignments. These alignments would be more expensive, less safe, and would significantly impact our wildlife. We strenuously oppose construction of the highway in these areas and urge PennDOT to eliminate them from consideration. We urge PennDOT to construct the highway in the G1-1a or G1-1b alignments, where a corridor already exists. Thank you.

— PF

Endangered Species Targeted

Several powerful leaders of the new Congress hope to weaken the Endangered Species Act in spite of the fact that numerous polls have shown that the American people support it. Please write to both U.S. Senators and your Congressman to express your views on endangered species protection. The following are some facts about the Act that you may want to use in your letters.

- Funding for conservation programs within the Department of Interior budget accounts for only 0.193 percent of the total federal budget.

- The federal government would spend less than

\$60 million on endangered species in 1995. This is less than 25 cents per U.S. citizen per year.

- The amount spent on all endangered species programs per year is equal to the cost of about 1 mile of new urban interstate highway.

- Elimination of below-cost timber sales in national forests would save more than \$200 million per year.

- Elimination of forest road programs from the 1995 Interior budget would save nearly \$100 million.

- Slashing a few bucks from the Interior budget now from endangered species protection will cost the American public far more 10 years down the road.

Remember . . .

the Endangered Species Act protects *us* !

Address your letters to the Honorable Arlen Specter (or the Honorable Richard Santorum), U.S. Senate, Washington, DC 20510. And to the Honorable Bud Shuster, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515.

If you have time to write only one letter, please send it to Sen. Specter because he is more moderate than the other two members of Congress. — *PF*

A Thank You from Honduras

The JVAS's International Issues Interest Group has purchased and sent six pairs of binoculars and two tents to a major environmental group in Honduras, Central America. This equipment will help their people get to know the bird life better in the most spectacular park in the eastern section of their country, the Sierra de Agalta National Park. This gift is part of a continuing relationship that the JVAS has had with environmentalists there.

Last year we sent Mike and Laura Jackson to Honduras, where they had the opportunity to visit the Sierra de Agalta, and a few months later we were privileged to host Manuel and Mirza Rey, who also had been associated with the park.

My wife Marcia and I, as well as the Jacksons,

second the final comment of Ms. Cardinas in her thank you letter [reprinted on pages 7 and 8]: The birding is excellent in Honduras! There are few tourists to scare the birds off, if anyone in the JVAS is interested in taking a fascinating birding trip to a beautiful, safe country. — *BB*

WRCF Buys "Bat Church"

The Wildlife Resource Conservation Fund recently purchased the "bat church" near the entrance to Canoe Creek State Park for \$5600. The old church [*Gnatcatcher*, Jan. '95] is crowded with thousands of little brown bats and contains 2.5 tons of droppings.

WRCF Executive Director Frank Felbaum says one of the studies at the church will attempt to create a new image for the bats that many people fear because of an undeserved reputation that they carry rabies.

The WRCF operates solely through contributions from individuals, contributions from donations through Pa. income tax filings, and the Conserve Wild Resources license plate program.

Until the introduction of the colorful license plates framed with a saw-whet owl on a hemlock branch, the fund was slim, dispensing approximately \$300,000 annually to research groups. This past year the fund divided \$685,000 among 57 groups.

The Conserve Wild Resources registration plates are available anytime, not just at renewal, Felbaum says. The one-time fee of \$35 is in addition to the cost of the registration fee. Of that amount, the state's constitution dictates that \$20 goes to the Department of Transportation and the remaining \$15 goes to the fund.

To date, some 180,000 people have bought the plates, which raised more than \$2 million. Now, the plates are available for motor homes and trailers. Before, they were available only for vehicles weighing under 9000 pounds.

So far, all the plates picture the owl, but that's expected to change. In 1997 a new species, yet undetermined, will be on the plates. — *Ed.*

Sharpies (Cont'd from page 1)

I've never seen a sharpie kill a bird in our feeder area and have always suspected that the reason was our feeders' setup. A recent study seems to prove it. According to researchers Erica Dunn and Diane Tessaglia, sites visited by hawks tend to share certain characteristics: deciduous woodland exists within a half mile of the feeding station (our woodland is several yards away), the feeding area is large with many plantings (ours is small with no plantings), there are more than six feeders (we have two), a variety of foods is put out (we feed only black oil sunflower seed, millet, and cracked corn), a large number of birds is present (we rarely have more than 40 at a time), and food is provided year-round (we feed only from early November to the end of April).

Those people who do have the right feeder setup have seen successful predation by sharpies. The same study, based on the responses of 567 participants in the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Feeder Watch, recorded 1138 incidents of predation by sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks and house cats, which accounted for 80 percent of feeder predation. Ten species of widely distributed, flocking songbirds were those preyed on most heavily by hawks. But the researchers concluded that hawk predation at bird feeders does not affect the numbers of total songbirds killed because hawks must catch a certain number of prey species every day whether at feeders or in the wild.

So, if you see a hawk grab a bird at your feeder, consider yourself privileged to watch a predator catch its prey. If you can't look at it philosophically, then change your feeder setup to make it less attractive to hawks.

Send Your Bi Lo/Riverside Receipts to Anne

Please send your grocery receipts from Bi Lo Foods and Riverside Markets to Anne Borland, at 138A Larch St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648. She redeems the slips for \$\$\$ for the JVAS. — Ed.

BOOK REVIEW



Hollows, Peepers, and Highlanders: An Appalachian Mountain Ecology

by George Constantz

1994, Mountain Press (\$14 — paperback)

Have you ever wondered how natural selection influences the social interactions of the birds at your feeder? How spring wildflower ephemerals know when to bloom? Why acid rain kills some forests more quickly than others?

These questions and many more are addressed in this delightful new paperback. And I do mean *addressed*, not *answered*, for although Constantz is a professor, he's very honest about what isn't known, or why he personally disagrees with a popular theory. In other words, he's a good scientist.

Probably, too, he's followed the example of his self-deprecating neighbors, the "highlanders" of the title. Evidently feeling his own writing is no great shakes, he quotes from the likes of Robert Frost, Annie Dillard, and Chuck Fergus when he wants a lyrical touch. But the main thing is he's writing about what he knows and loves — the ecology of the Ridge and Valley section of West Virginia, where he lives. Science informed by home-grown passion can never be dull!

Perhaps because I'm not a scientist I did quibble with a few of his interpretations, which I found a bit too conservative. For instance, in a discussion of recent studies suggesting that trees may somehow broadcast warnings of pest invasions to nearby, unrelated trees, he wonders how kin selection could possibly favor such a response. (This is a good example of the neo-Darwinian perspective he brings to bear on most of his topics.) Well, what about all that underground life that we're barely beginning to understand? What if closely related mycorrhizal fungi are the agents communicating distress? I also was surprised that the chapter on leaf coloration said nothing about the role of so-called foliar fruit flags in attracting the attentions of migrating birds to high-energy fruits.

But all carping aside, this book gives a wealth of information, explains well the unavoidable jargon, and provides a full glossary and bibliography. It would make an excellent high school or college text. In fact, it belongs on the bookshelf of every nature lover in central Appalachia.

— Dave Bonta

Game Commission Seeks Input On White-tail Management

The Pennsylvania Game Commission recently held a public meeting at the Hollidaysburg Jr. High School on the state's deer management program — the sixth of nine such hearings the Game Commission is holding in various areas this year. A crowd of 580 showed up, the highest attendance yet, said Executive Director Don Madl.

Many hunters, farmers, and property owners, along with some JVAS board members, packed the auditorium.

"I feel that in the past years, the Game Commission has lost contact with its public," Madl said. It's hoped that the meetings will help the commission create hunting and conservation guidelines to benefit more of the majority, he explained.

Many hunters expressed concern that the Game Commission was trying to decrease the white-tailed deer population by issuing too many licenses.

"There just aren't the large numbers of deer out there to compete with the abundance of hunters," said Bud Hostler, a hunter from Tyrone.

The Game Commission estimates there were one million deer in the state prior to the 1994 season.

With last winter's severe weather killing so many deer, Thomas DeAntonio, a hunter from Altoona, wondered how the commission came up with that estimate.

Property owner and JVAS board member Bruce Bonta, of Plummer Hollow, disagreed that the deer population was too low. "There are too many deer around now for the health of the forest," Bonta said. "They are affecting the timber supply by destroying too many saplings that should be allowed to grow."

Don Leppert, a hunter from Osterburg, suggested that nighttime buck hunting should be prohibited because it often leads to crop damage.

George Barid, a hunter from Mill Creek, told the Game Commission representatives that if they continue to decrease the size of the deer herd the agency will lose much of its revenue because hunters will travel to other states where the supply is more ample.

— Ed.

Stoking the Fire

Have you ever wondered how some song birds endure the cold and ice of winter? Les Line's article in the February-March issue of *National Wildlife* states, "Chickadees conserve energy in severe cold by lowering body temperatures at night and entering regulated hypothermia. This reduces the amount of calories, and therefore the amount of food, that they need to maintain body temperature. They also store food, which they may relocate and use as much as a month later."

This facet of bird behavior I observed one winter evening in a song sparrow in my bird essay as follows:

The day after Christmas my little friend, the Song Sparrow, ate his supper here at twilight. Had it all ready and waiting for him, too. Right in his favorite spot — the ground in front of the brick wall behind the forsythia bushes.

Being as he was powerful hungry, he ate and ate. Never saw him spend so much time eating. But then he was stoking his body fire for the cold winter night ahead.

"The life of each creature the Lord makes His care" — even that of my little friend, the Song Sparrow.

— Rachel Chipperfield

Editor's Note

Please accept my apology for the lack of illustrations to add some life to the newsletter, but I really had to squeeze in some time to produce what you see here. Marge and I have been busy unpacking boxes the past couple of weeks. Yes, we finally are moved from Warriors Mark to our new home on Brush Mountain near Skelp!

Let's hope I can get back on track again with the March issue. Which reminds me — I'm always looking for input from our far-flung members. Where are those reports on unusual bird sightings or other items of a local flavor? Send them in!

JVAS Christmas Bird Count Results

On Saturday, Dec. 17, 1994 members of the JVAS participated in the 95th NAS Christmas Bird Count. The day was cloudy and wet. It rained lightly in the morning but by afternoon there was an occasional glimpse of the sun. Twelve field participants — their efforts not being dampened — logged a total of 39.5 hours and 277 miles by car. The species count was 56 with a total of 3570 individuals.

Although we didn't break any past JVAS record we did see an interesting variety. This was the largest variety of waterfowl since I've compiled the count over the past 9 years with the majority of these being seen by Terry Wentz at Canoe Creek State Park. Thanks to Terry and to all who spent their time during that busy season.

- Great Blue Heron 4; Canada Goose 19; Wood Duck 1; Green-winged Teal 1; Mallard 15; Ring-necked Duck 1; Ruddy Duck 2; Sharp-shinned Hawk 2; Cooper's Hawk 2; Red-tailed Hawk 10; Rough-legged Hawk 1; Am. Kestrel 15; Ring-necked Pheasant 2; Ruffed Grouse 13; Wild Turkey 56; Am. Coot 45; gull species 1; Rock Dove 835; Mourning Dove 61; E. Screech Owl 6; Barred Owl 2; Belted Kingfisher 5; Red-bellied Woodpecker 22; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 1; Downy Woodpecker 61; Hairy Woodpecker 17; N. (Yel.-sh.) Flicker 8; Pileated Woodpecker 15; Horned Lark 21; Blue Jay

78; Am. Crow 128; Com. Raven 3; Black-capped Chickadee 168; Tufted Titmouse 100; White-breasted Nuthatch 74; Brown Creeper 8; Carolina Wren 8; Winter Wren 2; Golden-crowned Kinglet 20; Ruby-crowned Kinglet 2; E. Bluebird 24; Hermit Thrush 9; Am. Robin 33; N. Mockingbird 6; Cedar Waxwing 12; Eur. Starling 668; N. Cardinal 84; Rufous-sided (E.) Towhee 1; Am. Tree Sparrow 65; Song Sparrow 19; White-throated Sparrow 32; White-crowned Sparrow 3; Dark-eyed (Slate-col.) Junco 306; House Finch 296; Am. Goldfinch 26; House Sparrow 152.

It's time to make plans for the 96th Christmas Bird Count. The NAS has set the count period for Saturday, Dec. 16 through Tuesday, Jan. 2. Does anyone have a preference for Saturday versus Sunday, or before Christmas or after? What about our traditional pot luck meal afterward? Should the meal continue to be at White Oak Hall in Fort Roberdeau County Park, at one of our private homes (if not many attend), at a local restaurant, or should we have one at all? How would you suggest increasing the participation in the count? Your input will be greatly appreciated. I'd like to pass this information on to our planning committee so please call me, Angeline Stout, at 946-1783 (evenings) or drop me a note at R.R. 3, Box 72E, Altoona, PA 16601.

— AS

January 11, 1995

Dear Juniata Valley Audubon Society,

On behalf of GEO (Grupo Ecologico de Olancho) Gualaco, I would like to thank you for your donation of binoculars and tents. As you can imagine, equipment of this kind is difficult, if not impossible to find in Honduras. Your donation will enable us to increase our trips with the group to Sierra de Agalta National Park, as well as enhance environmental education activities in Gualaco.

For instance, there is a remnant patch of forest on the outskirts of Gualaco in which we regularly bird. We have found over 150 species in the area and we like to take as many group members as possible with us. In the past most of the walk was spent trying to share my binoculars and my husband's scope with everyone, hoping the bird wouldn't fly off too soon. But last Sunday, everyone had their own binoculars and I think they went home being more hooked on birds than ever. We even got a new bird for the area! It was a blue-hooded euphonia -- a species we never expected to see there.

To show our appreciation for the equipment, the group has decided to send you one of our best T-shirts. I don't know how you will decide who gets to keep it, but may the best birder win!

In closing, I would like to say that I hope our two groups will remain in contact. Although GEO Gualaco is not strictly a birding group, I think it would be a tremendous benefit for them to remain in casual contact with you. I say that not for the occasional donation of equipment, but for the knowledge you can share with them about what it means to form a group on the basis of an environmental issue. It will also help them to know that they are not alone in their interest and concern for these same issues. Unfortunately, it is hard to find such dedication to environmental causes in Honduras, and at times the group feels isolated in its efforts. I also hope that someday you will visit us personally. There is still a lot of birding to be done!

Sincerely,

Debbie Cardinas, PCV

EDITOR'S NOTE: The deadline for March's issue of *The Gnatcatcher* is March 8. Please submit articles to editor Charlie Hoyer, P.O. Box 32, Tyrone, PA 16686-0032.

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