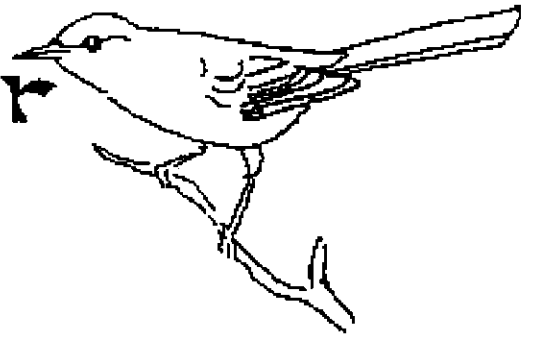


The Gnatcatcher



Newsletter of the Juniata Valley Audubon Society

P.O. Box 71, Tyrone, Pennsylvania 16686

Vol. 30, No. 6 – November 1998

Conservationists Hail New Federal Funding Proposal for Wildlife

Outdoor enthusiasts are hailing the recent introduction of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1998 in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Reinvestment and Environmental Restoration Act of 1998 in the Senate as the most promising opportunity in modern times to provide dedicated funding to fish and wildlife conservation programs across the country.

The acts will provide funding for three purposes: coastal impact assistance, land-based recreation, and wildlife conservation. Both bills dedicate a percentage of federal offshore oil and gas revenues to states for wildlife programs. Under this legislation, Pennsylvania's natural resource agencies could receive approximately \$30 million annually, \$12 to 14 million of which would be dedicated to fish and wildlife conservation, outdoor recreation, and environmental education programs.

"This could not come at a better time," said Pete Colangelo, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. "Pennsylvania has many critical conservation needs, particularly among those species that are not fished or hunted. These funds will help us prevent species from becoming threatened or endangered by protecting important habitats and monitoring populations to identify species at risk before it is too late. In addition, these funds will enable us to provide innovative fish and wildlife-based recreational and educational programs for children and adults. Pennsylvanians consistently express strong support for these goals, but funding to support such efforts has always been extremely limited."

"Many of our nongame birds and mammals are declining at an alarming rate, and funding is needed to determine the cause of these declines and implement solutions to the problems," said Don Madl, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. "At the same time, conservation programs would be much less expensive and more successful if action was taken to prevent wildlife populations from becoming threatened or endangered in the first place. This funding offers us an opportunity to do that."

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November Program

"FALCONRY TODAY." Master falconer Mark Shields, of Sinking Valley, will give a slide show/talk on the "sport of kings" as it exists today. He'll give a short history of the sport and address the falcon species used, the equipment necessary, and the permitting and apprenticeship required. It is expected that Mark will show at least one live specimen of a falcon species.

7 P.M., Monday, Nov. 16 at the Visitor Center, Canoe Creek State Park, off Rt. 22 east of Hollidaysburg.

Field Trip

1998 JVAS CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT. Debbie Haine, coordinator. Phone 695-8239. (See page 3 for details.)

All day, Saturday, Dec. 19

Next Board Meeting

Tuesday, Dec. 1 at the Visitor Center, Canoe Creek State Park. All members are welcome.

The Gnatcatcher

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Juniata Valley Audubon Society
 Charlie Hoyer, Editor
 P.O. Box 71
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Articles may be submitted directly to the editor. The deadline for the February 1999 issue is Friday, January 29.

The Juniata Valley Audubon Society (JVAS) is a chapter of the National Audubon Society serving members in Bedford, Blair, Fulton, Huntingdon, and Mifflin Counties.

Program meetings of the JVAS are held in the Visitor Center at Canoe Creek State Park, near Hollidaysburg, on the third Monday of the month in February, March, May, September, October, and November at 7:30 p.m. (A business meeting is at 7 o'clock.) The public is invited to attend.

The JVAS Board of Directors holds its meetings, which are open to any concerned JVAS member, as announced in *The Gnatcatcher*.

For membership information, please contact Charlie Hoyer at 684-7376.

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- Director of Ornithology . . . Debora Haine 695-8239
- Director at Large Dave Kyler 643-6030

President's Message

Most of you are aware of the recent controversy surrounding the corridor of Interstate Route 99 from Bald Eagle to Port Matilda. While two local newspapers were having a field day creating controversy, environmentalists are making the blacklist of most citizens.

Our real concern should be the destruction of habitat and not the extirpation of the Indiana bat from Pennsylvania. Most wildlife, given a chance, will move out of the way and adapt to similar habitat. I would think that the Indiana bat, being a flying mammal, will move out of harm's way.

Fragmentation of the continuous forest along the selected corridor is the real problem. Several Neotropical migrant birds that need deep-forest nesting sites will be the victims. Opening up clear flyways through the forest will permit cowbirds, wrens, and others to move in. Bald Eagle mountain — in the pathway of I-99 — has been designated a special birds area by the Pennsylvania Audubon Society. Its uniqueness is the continuous forest cover. No one knows the size of a forest tract needed to satisfy this special habitat type.

In the meantime, forests continue to be designated for highway construction. Slowly, forests are being destroyed. Next in the sights of highway planners is U. S. Route 322 from Port Matilda through Philipsburg to the Woodland Exit of I-80.

Forests must be elevated to the equal status of farmland in central Pennsylvania. Fertile farmland is important to preserve in some mountain valleys, but not in the Bald Eagle Valley. Give me a break!

Terry Wentz

Send Your BiLo/Riverside Receipts to Anne

Please continue to mail your cash register tapes from BiLo Foods and Riverside Markets to JVAS Director Anne Borland, at 138A Larch St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648. She redeems the receipts for CA\$H for the JVAS. Thanks, and keep 'em comin'!

... Federal funding

Cont'd from first page

Creating a dedicated funding source to conserve fish and wildlife has been highly successful in the past. Many sport fish and game populations across America have been restored through dedicated funds provided by hunters and anglers through license sales and other user fees.

Recreation funds also are woefully lacking. The demands for wildlife-based recreational opportunities on public land and wildlife-related education programs are skyrocketing. In fact, Pennsylvania boasts more outdoor recreation days per resident than any other state in the nation. Yet, facilities such as wildlife observation areas, educational trails, and nature centers are not as widely available in Pennsylvania as they are in other states. ❖

Canoe Creek State Park Nature Programs for December

Sunday, Dec. 6 — 2 P.M.

Winter Bird Feeding. Learn how you can help our feathered friends through the winter. Meet at the Visitor Center.

Sunday, Dec. 13 — 2 P.M.

Origin of Christmas Greens. Enjoy an afternoon tea learning where and when Christmas greens originated. Coffee, tea, and cookies will be served. Meet at the Visitor Center.

Sunday, Dec. 20 — 2 P.M.

Observing Wildlife in Winter. Enjoy and afternoon stroll along Limestone Trail to observe wildlife and discuss how the animals survive winter. Dress for the weather. Meet at the Visitor Center.

Sunday, Dec. 27 — 2 P.M.

Bats. Join in and learn about the world's most misunderstood creature — the bat. Slide presentation. Meet at the Visitor Center.

Christmas Bird Count — 1998

From humble beginnings nearly a century ago as a protest to the excessive slaughter of birds, the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count has become the world's largest all-volunteer bird survey. More than 45,000 people participate each year in this all-day census of early-winter bird populations. The results of their efforts are compiled into the longest-running database in ornithology, representing close to one hundred years of unbroken data on trends of early-winter bird populations across the Americas. Simply put, the Christmas Bird Count, or "CBC," is citizen science in action.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the CBC. From feeder-watchers and field observers to count compilers and regional editors, everyone who takes part in the Christmas Bird Count does it for love of birds and the excitement of friendly competition — and with the knowledge that their efforts are making a difference for science and bird conservation.

As long as there are birds to be counted, the Christmas Bird Count will go on being the most popular, fun, and rewarding bird census the world over!

This year the JVAS will be doing its bird count on Saturday, December 19. A new compiler, Debbie Haine, JVAS Director of Ornithology, is taking over for Bill King. She will be getting in touch with those who have helped in the past. The Hoyers again will open their home for the evening meal (covered dish) so we can compile our results and share stories of our day in the field.

If you would like any info or have any questions, please give Debbie a call at 695-8239. ❖

— Debbie Haine

(With history info from the Audubon website)



Audubon Armada Ascends The Thousand Steps

By Steve Stroman

On Saturday, October 24 an initially wary — but ultimately enthusiastic — band of twenty-one JVAS members climbed the famous Thousand Steps and enjoyed a 2.6-mile hike in Jack's Narrows on a sunny day full of autumnal splendor. They delighted in a trek that certainly features one of the best combinations of history and scenery in Pennsylvania and learned of the efforts to preserve the 671-acre tract for future generations.

As the local coordinator of the Save Our Steps project, it was my pleasure to serve as hiking guide for my JVAS compatriots. Assuming a smaller group would participate, I also had invited members of the Blair County Conservation Officers Association (BCCOA), whose previously scheduled hike on the steps had been postponed because of inclement weather. Well, with twelve BCCOA participants making a total count of thirty-three hikers, we had quite a group! Everything came off smoothly, though, and a good time was reported by all. Thanks to BCCOA President Tom McMann for acting as sweep for the entire group.

The joint event turned out to be a fine opportunity for socializing and the exchange of ideas and experiences between the two conservation groups. The BCCOA has been involved with many worthy projects (including the recent purchase of two \$100 steps to assist Save Our Steps), and we would welcome the opportunity to explore future events together.

The Thousand Steps (actually, there are more than 1,050) were constructed in 1936 and used until 1952 by Harbison-Walker's quarry workers in their daily commute. Jack's Narrows contains vast reserves of ganister, a fine-grained Tuscarora quartzite that was the principal raw material used for the production of silica bricks. Silica bricks were a crucial refractory, or thermal resistant, material for American industry beginning in the 1890s. They were used to line steel mills, coke ovens, iron and

glass furnaces, and the boilers of steam railroad locomotives — among other uses.

There was nervous anticipation among both Steps veterans and rookies alike as our large contingent gathered at the base of the 800-foot climb. More than a dozen dinkey railroad grades intersect the steps, and they provided fine spots for both interpretation and breath-catching. All thirty-three participants completed the climb, and those in the vanguard included Josh Kyler, Jess Kitchen, Barb Baird, and Josh Huber.

The ascent provides a nice opportunity to observe scores of an unusual fossil from the Silurian Era, *Arthropycus allegheniensis*, which geologists believe to be the burrows of a worm-like creature in an ancient seabed. Despite the cool temperatures, we also were treated to the sighting of one of the northern fence lizards, which can be frequently seen skittering over the rocks in close proximity to hikers in warm weather.

At the top of the steps, we turned east over a new side trail that ends at the top of an inclined plane and a splendid view of Mount Union. Once known as the "Silica Brick Capital of the World," Harbison-Walker and the town's other two refractories employed more than 2,000 people and produced about a half-million silica bricks per day at their peak.

We next headed west to the stone dinkey house where repairs were made to the railroad engines and the ore cars. Continuing on through Ledge Quarry, we were serenaded by chickadees and observed at close distance by juncos. The climax of the hike for many was the spectacular overlook west over Jack's Narrows, Mapleton, the Juniata River, and several mountain ridges.

JVAS participants in the hike were Barb Baird, Marcia Bonta, Dave Bonta, Dave Kyler, Trudy Kyler, Josh Kyler, Jess Kitchen, Steve Stroman, Terry Wentz, Debbie Haine, Marge Hoyer, Charlie

Hoyer, Greg Grove, Lewis Grove, Alice Goodlin, Darrell Goodlin, Joe Marinak, Steve Parks, Pepper Genter, Krsta Genter, and David Genter.

Joining us from the BCCOA were Tom McMann, Donna McMann, Alyssa McMann, Josh Huber, Marcy Kleiner, Steve Kleiner, Steve Mighalls, Jonie Mighalls, Ashley Mighalls, Rick Weimer, Brenda Weimer, and Jarrett Weimer.

In 1997 the 671-acre property containing The Thousand Steps was offered for sale by Harbison-Walker. The Save Our Steps Committee was formed amid concern that public access to the property could be lost forever. The Committee includes representatives from conservation, historic preservation, hiking, tourism, and municipal organizations.

In addition to The Thousand Steps, the tract contains the stone dinkey repair shop, miles of railroad grade, three inclined planes, splendid mountain scenery, two threatened species, a sensitive riparian corridor along the Juniata River, and four miles of the seventy-mile Link Trail connecting Greenwood Furnace and Cowans Gap State Parks.

Save Our Steps received a \$95,000 Land Trust Grant in April from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The group is now within \$10,000 of raising the necessary private match to the grant to save the land, but is facing a deadline in early 1999. Contributions in any amount are welcome and tax-deductible. Those purchasing a \$100 step will receive a certificate suitable for framing and have their name placed on a plaque to be located near the dinkey house. Checks can be made payable to "CPC/SOS," and mailed to the Mount Union Area Historical Society, P.O. Box 1776, Mount Union, PA 17066.

For further information on the Save Our Steps project, or to arrange a slide presentation or guided hikes for groups, please contact Steve Stroman at 643-1444, or at <ssstroman@alleg.edu>.

Thanks to both the JVAS and BCCOA for their interest in and support of Save Our Steps! ❖

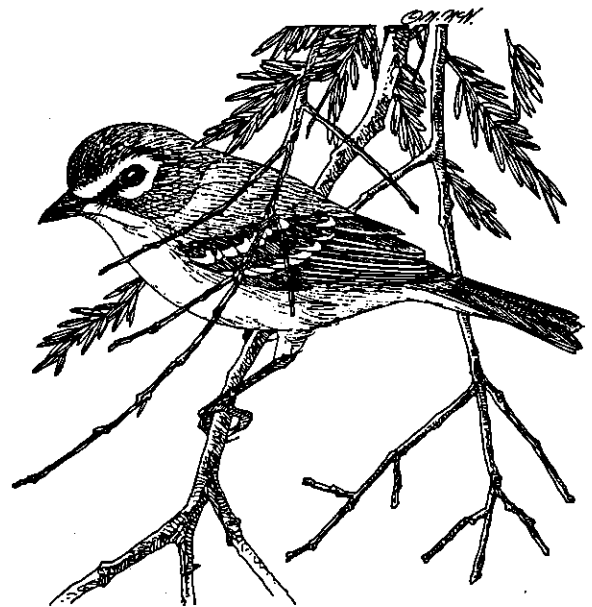
A.O.U. Checklist Changes

Just when you had it all down and didn't need to go to the index every time you wanted to look up a bird, the American Ornithologists' Union has updated its checklist of North American birds in the newly published seventh edition. The new list reflects some of the recent research in avian classifications involving DNA.

Here are some of the changes that affect birds in our area: Vultures are moved to follow Storks as they have been proved to be related species. This means that they now appear before Geese.

Waterfowl order is changed, with Whistling Ducks first, then Geese, Swans, and Ducks. The order of some individual species in these groups also is changed. Shrikes and Vireos are now placed between Flycatchers and Jays. Cardinals, Grosbeaks, and Buntings are moved from their former place before Sparrows to after Snow Bunting. Gnatcatchers now appear before Kinglets.

Finally, the only major change in bird names in our area is that of the solitary vireo, which now is known as the blue-headed vireo. ❖



Peregrine Falcon Soars Off Endangered Species List

Representing perhaps the greatest success story of the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service currently is in the process of removing the peregrine falcon from the endangered species list. An agile, medium-sized raptor known for reaching speed up to 200 mph, the peregrine once ranged throughout much of North America from the subarctic boreal forests of Alaska and Canada south to Mexico.

During the 1960s and 70s it suffered serious population decline due to the use of DDT and other pesticides, which caused them to lay thin-shelled eggs that broke during incubation. They suffered serious reproductive failure.

Congress overwhelmingly passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973 to help species suffering from population declines due to habitat loss, chemical and pesticide overuse, and other causes. The peregrine falcon was added to the list in the early 1970s, when the population in the eastern U.S. was decimated, and western populations had declined by as much as eighty to ninety percent below historical levels. By 1975 the population reached an all-time low of 324 nesting pairs in North America.

The banning of DDT, coupled with efforts to protect the birds' nesting sites and habitat, has led to a strong resurgence in its numbers. Currently, at least 1,593 pairs of peregrines breed in the U.S. and Canada — well above the overall recovery goal of 631 pairs.

Although delisting the peregrine would remove it from the Act's protection, it still would be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The MBTA prohibits the taking, killing, possession, transportation, and importation of migratory birds, their eggs, parts, and nests except when specifically authorized by the Interior Department, such as in the case of regulated hunting seasons for game birds. In addition, the Service will work with state wildlife agencies to monitor the status of the species for a minimum of five years, as required by the Endangered



Species Act. If it become evident during this period that the bird again needs the Act's protection, the Service would relist the species. ❖

— Allison Wells
Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology

Grassland Birds Make Home In Strip Mines

Birds associated with grassland habitats generally occur in agricultural settings in the eastern U.S. Since the late 1960s these birds have declined drastically. In Pennsylvania the Henslow's sparrow, northern harrier, upland sandpiper, and short-eared owl are listed as endangered or threatened. The major factor in their decline is the loss of habitat.

Pennsylvania's Grassland Breeding Bird Survey, established in 1989, monitors grassland bird populations and habitat conditions. Despite the general decline of these birds, the survey did have reason for some optimism.

On seven survey routes that included reclaimed surface-mine lands in western Pennsylvania, the average number of birds counted in reclaimed strip-

Cont'd on page 8

Snaky Summer

What a snaky year it has been! And all because of our guest house bathroom renovation.

This was no easy, change-the-decor kind of renovation. The barely adequate addition to our 1865 guest house needed to be redone from the bottom up. So Bruce and David began by tearing out the old stone foundations and pulling down the sagging ceiling and walls.

That's when we discovered that the bathroom provided superb habitat for several species of snakes. On April 25, as Bruce and David pulled down a portion of the ceiling, a black rat snake tumbled out from its former home. Of course, black rat snakes are known to like farm buildings and abandoned dwellings so its presence was no surprise. This one, and several others, have been policing the walls of the guest house for years in search of the abundant mice who make merry in every room. David has frequently found their shed skins draped gracefully in strategic parts of the guest house bathroom and kitchen and even young black rat snakes recently hatched from eggs laid by their mother.

Then, on May 23, while Bruce and David were carefully dismantling the stone foundations of the guest house bathroom, they found both a northern ringneck snake and a two-foot-long eastern milk snake.

Identified by its golden necklace, the easily tamed northern ringneck is a lovely woodland snake that searches for cover under rocks. Obviously this snake had found ideal habitat in the stone foundations until Bruce and David pulled them apart. So too had the eastern milk snake, which likes to live in deserted homes and spring houses or on rocky hillsides.

Two days later Bruce discovered a tangle of eastern milk snakes in the remains of the bathroom ceiling. He called me to come and look. I climbed up the stepladder and counted five active milk snakes, two of which appeared to be mating. When

they saw me, the other three slithered off into the adjacent kitchen ceiling while the mated ones remained firmly attached, tail to tail.

On May 27 Bruce and David split apart the concrete floor with the help of a powerful, noisy machine. Out popped an enormous black rat snake over four feet long.

Months later, in September, when David was building a brick walk outside the bathroom, he found a baby black rat snake among the bricks and wondered if the snake they had found in the concrete floor had been its mother.

Their last May discovery, on the 28th, was an eastern garter snake basking in the fresh dirt outside the bathroom and an eastern milk snake still clinging to what was left of its old habitat inside. For several more days eastern garter snakes of various sizes appeared in the guest house road drain. We wondered if they, too, had been misplaced by the renovations. However, their preferred habitats are grassy areas, damp, open woodlands, and marshes and bogs so it seemed unlikely.

By June the snake population appeared to shift uphill to our home, although we had no way of knowing whether or not they were former guest house bathroom snakes. On a late, wet morning in mid-June four garter snakes wriggled on the grassy bank outside my kitchen window. Several days later a ringneck snake slithered back and forth over the cement floor of our veranda.

Finally, near the end of July, came the strangest visitation of all. When Bruce returned from the university at 6:15 P.M., he encountered a large, black rat snake — bulging with food — spread across the veranda door stoop. It was too satiated to move or even notice Bruce as he stepped over the snake to get inside.

After that, our snake sightings were sparse, probably because the rest of the summer was very dry. But the bathroom renovation sure made census-ing for the Pennsylvania Herpetological Atlas Project easy this year. ❖

By Marcia Bonta

... Grassland birds ...

Cont'd from page 4

mine land was compared with grassland. Significantly higher numbers of grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows were found on reclaimed mine lands. On some of these sites, Henslow's sparrows were found at densities equal to or greater than those in native prairies.

It is believed that the reclaimed land supports higher populations of grassland birds because, once reclaimed, these fields are not intensely managed. This allows the birds to nest there with little disturbance. ❖

— *Pennsylvania Sportsman*
September 1998

Stone Mountain Hawk Watch November Field Trip Report

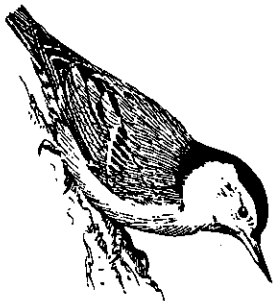
The JVAS field trip to the Stone Mountain hawk watch platform on Saturday, Nov. 7 turned out to be a lackluster one. Although there were ten-mph northwesterly winds, the sky was very heavily overcast.

Compiler Greg Grove tallied in five hours a total of thirteen raptors: one Cooper's hawk, ten red-tails, one golden eagle, and one unidentified species.

It has been a banner year, however, for some species. Through Nov. 7, season records include fifty-one black vultures, 296 turkey vultures, 959 sharpies, 143 Cooper's hawks, and 179 kestrels. ❖

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