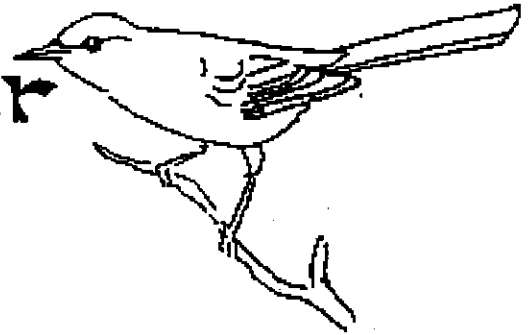


The Gnatcatcher



Newsletter of the
Juniata Valley Audubon Society

P.O. Box 71, Tyrone, Pennsylvania 16686

Vol. 31, No. 5 — October 1999

Canoe Creek Bat Colony Tops 20,000!

By Dr. Stan Kotala

Halloween is approaching, bringing thoughts of pumpkins, trick-or-treaters, scarecrows, and bats.

Many JVAS members may be surprised to learn that we live near the largest maternity colony of little brown bats in the northeastern United States — located in the Turkey Valley Church, at Canoe Creek State Park.

The church was abandoned by its human congregation long ago, but had been known to house a large number of bats for several years prior to its purchase in 1993 by the Wild Resource Conservation Fund. Since being protected and managed by the park and the Pennsylvania Game Commission, the population of little brown bats in the church has flourished, growing from 7,000 in 1989 to 11,000 in 1994, and to 22,000 in 1999.

Park visitors often remark on the absence of mosquitoes, which are eagerly consumed by the bats. Farmers in the vicinity of the park use little or no pesticides because the bats are such effective predators. Each bat eats as many as 500 insects per hour for a feeding period of about five hours per night. This means that the colony of 20,000 bats eats fifty-five million insects nightly.

To accommodate the expanding colony, in 1995 Cal Butchkowski, of the Pennsylvania Game Commission, built a large "bat condo" about a hundred yards southeast of the church. This large bat house is home to 800 bats.

[*Cont'd on page 4*]

October Program

"JUNIATA WETLAND MONITORING PROJECT." Becky Albaugh will talk on the Juniata Wetland Monitoring Project, a two-year effort to determine the ecological condition of wetlands in the Juniata River Watershed. Becky has been assisting the Southern Alleghenies Conservancy, a regional, nonprofit conservation organization selected by sponsor U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to coordinate the project. Becky will tell about the functions and values of wetlands, the types of wetlands, and some of the plants and animals that live in wetland communities. She also will relate what the project has accomplished so far and what its future holds. Becky is an environmental educator who served for twelve years as a teacher-naturalist and program director for Jamestown Audubon Nature Center in Jamestown, N.Y. prior to relocating to central Pennsylvania in the fall of 1998.

7 P.M., Tuesday, Oct. 19 in the Visitor Center at Canoe Creek State Park.

October Field Trip

RAYSTOWN FIELD STATION — BIRD-BANDING. Bird-bander Chuck Yohn (speaker at our September program) will give a tour of the Raystown Field Station at Juniata College, talk about its facilities and programming, and demonstrate the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program, a North American cooperative bird-banding effort.

Sunday, Oct. 31. (Note schedule change!) Meet 8 A.M. at Rothrock Market, at the intersection of Rt. 26 and Rt. 994, James Creek. Trip leader: Shirley Wagoner (643-4011).

Next Board Meeting

7 P.M., Tuesday, Dec. 7 at the Visitor Center of Canoe Creek State Park. All JVAS members are welcome!

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JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Charlie Hoyer, Editor

P.O. Box 71

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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 Tuesday of the month in February, March, May, June, September, October, and November at 7:30 P.M. (A business meeting is at 7 o'clock.) The public is invited to attend.

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President's Message

Probably most of you enjoy feeding and observing birds at a backyard feeder throughout the fall and winter months. One of the first outdoor projects that I did when I moved to my current residence in Stormstown six years ago was to install two birdfeeders on a post outside my kitchen bay windows. Both are readily observed from my dining table and provide much conservation and enjoyment during mealtimes.

I wasn't very successful the first three winters in attracting birds to my feeders, even though there seemed to be plenty of birds in the neighborhood. My homesite is in a former farm field, and the birdfeeders are about 100 yards from the nearest tree cover — except for a forty-foot-tall black cherry tree within thirty feet of the feeder location. I've allowed about one acre of my land to revert to old field habitat. Also, I've planted a corridor of trees and shrubs to provide cover and safety for birds that fly from the distant fencerow. Still I didn't get great numbers of birds in winter.

This past summer, I decided to keep the feeders filled and added a birdbath. I'm amazed at the increased number and variety of bird species that frequent my feeders now. In addition, my wife Debbie and I have landscaped the perimeter of our house with mostly native and desirable seed-producing plants for birds. Landscaping for wildlife definitely works. We're anxious to see if the winter feeder population increases this year.

To keep track of yearly winter bird populations, Cornell University has established Project FeederWatch. This is the oldest and largest of the Lab of Ornithology's Citizen Science programs that has collected data since 1987. The FeederWatch database is now one of the largest of its kind and is a proven tool for tracking winter bird populations. We've signed up to participate in this program for 1999 and you may want to participate also. There's a \$15 fee, and additional information is available on the Web at:

<<http://birdsource.cornell.edu/pfw/pfwwhat.htm>>.

Terry Wentz

Don't forget to send your BiLo Foods and Riverside Markets cash register tapes to Anne Borland at 138A Larch St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648.

Anne redeems the tapes for \$\$\$ for the JVAS.

CONSERVATION
**C
O
R
N
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R**
By Sarah Miller

'CatStop' Stops Cats From Killing Birds

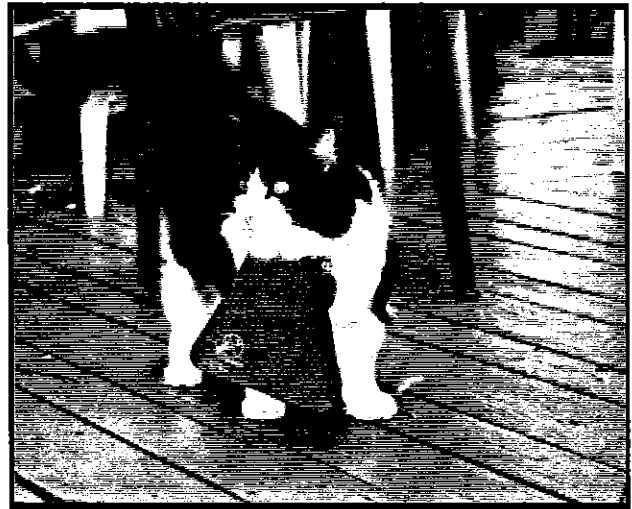
After my cat brought in its third victim in as many weeks — this time a mouse — I had had enough! If I had the chance to do it over again, I would have raised my cats indoors, but now they are accustomed to going outside and therein lies my dilemma. I love my cats, but I also love the wildlife that is abundant around our house — the many songbirds, squirrels, chipmunks, and mice that visit our feeders and live in our flower beds. But with the latest carnage at my doorstep, I knew I had to take action. The cats were immediately grounded, and we were subjected to their plaintive wails as they begged to be let outside.

In the United States, studies have shown that free-roaming cats kill millions of birds and small mammals each year. And this is not just feral (wild) cats, but your well-fed house pets, too. By preying on birds and small mammals, cats also decrease the availability of prey for native predators. I certainly didn't like the fact that my cats were contributing to this staggering statistic!

Then I saw an advertisement in the Sep/Oct 1999 issue of *Birdwatcher's Digest* for a product called CatStop™. The CatStop is a neoprene and nylon contraption that attaches to your cat's collar like a bib. The inventors claim that the device stops cats from hunting birds (and to a lesser degree, small mammals) by blocking paw-to-eye coordination. Although our cats seemed to be more interested in mice and chipmunks than birds, we have observed the telltale pile of feathers under the feeder from time to time. After calling up their Web site I thought to myself, why not try it? At about \$9 a piece they seemed like a bargain — and these were desperate times!

My CatStops (one purple and the other Siamese blue) arrived in the mail soon after, and I anticipated the typical cat reaction to this large foreign object

attached to their necks. But, surprisingly, my cats didn't seem to mind. Despite making walking a challenge, they seemed oblivious to it. I have noticed, however, that they have begun to lose interest in going outside and their stints in the yard are much shorter and more infrequent. We're hoping, with the help of the CatStop, to eventually convert them to indoor cats. For now, when they do go outside, it's not without their CatStop and although they still have been able to hunt small mammals, the number of casualties is down and our birds appear to be safe. ❖



'Weed' Sporting His CatStop

What You Can Do to Help

- If possible, keep your cats indoors. The American Bird Conservancy has advice on how to convert your outdoor cat into a contented indoor pet. For information on the Cats Indoors! program, send an e-mail message to the American Bird Conservancy at: <abc@abcbirds.org>;
- Neuter your cats and encourage others to do so;
- Don't dispose of unwanted cats in rural areas. Instead, contact your local animal welfare organization for help;
- Locate birdfeeders so that cover is not provided for cats; and
- Don't feed stray cats. Feeding maintains high densities of unwanted cats that destroy wildlife and compete with native predators.

To find out more about the CatStop or to order one of your own, check out the CatStop Web site at: <<http://www.catgoods.com>>.

20,000 Bats [Cont'd from first page]

In addition to these maternity sites, Canoe Creek State Park contains the largest bat hibernaculum in Pennsylvania. Six species of bats spend the winter in abandoned limestone mines on Moore's Hill: little brown bats, eastern pipistrelles, big brown bats,



Canoe Creek State Park visitors gather at the Turkey Valley Church to listen to park naturalist Kerry Estright-Przszak's lecture on bat ecology.

small-footed bats, long-eared bats, and the federally endangered Indiana bats. More than 13,000 bats hibernate in this mine complex!

Thousands of people come to the park each year to witness the nightly emergence of the little brown bats from the Turkey Valley Church. On some evenings, the grassy hillside next to the church serves as a amphitheater for groups of a hundred or

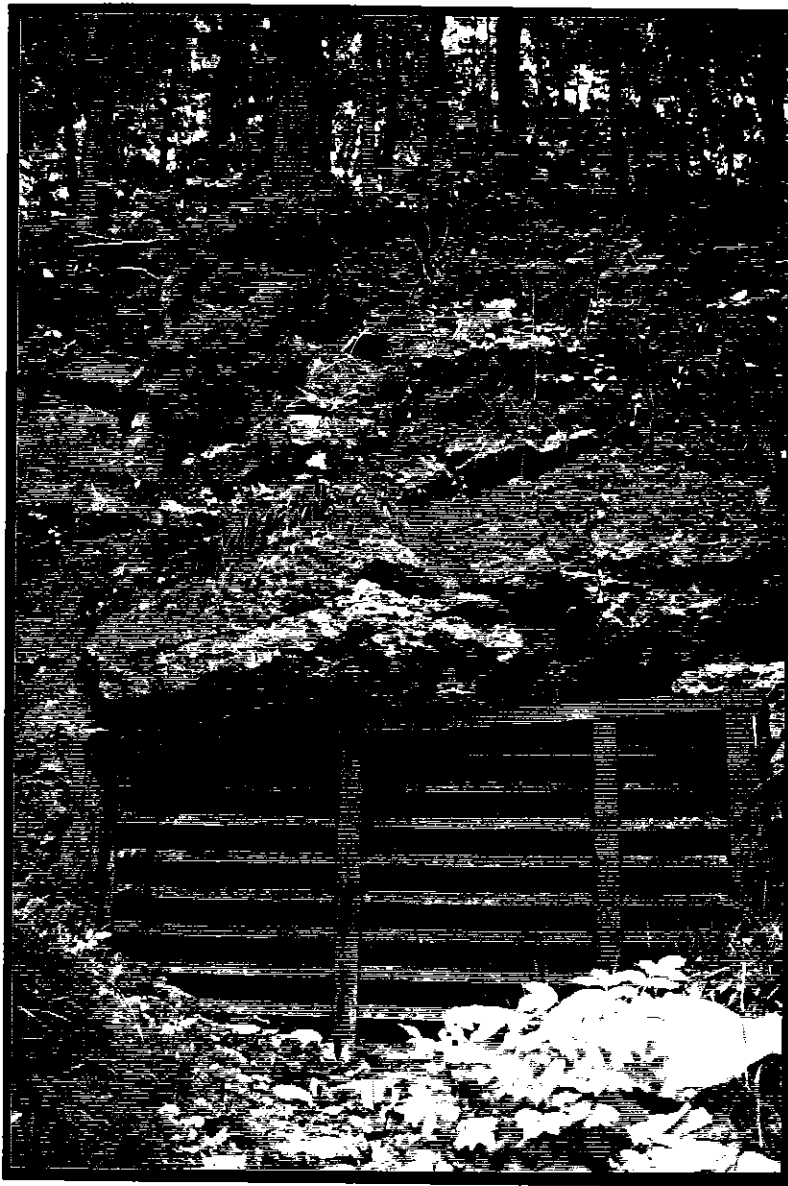
more visitors listening to the park naturalist discuss the life history of bats.

If you haven't visited the "bat church" yet, make plans to do so next year. Or, better yet, take a walk up Moore's Hill to the hibernaculum before this year's last leaves fall, and you may see groups of bats flying around the entrance prior to their going into the mine for five months of hibernation. Watch them and think of the thousands of bats hanging from the mine's ceiling, waiting for spring.

Want more information on bats? Try viewing the Wild Resources Conservation Fund's video, *Season of the Bat*, which was filmed in State Game Land 166 and Canoe Creek State Park. It's available for \$20 from the Wild Resource Conservation Fund, P.O. Box 8764, Harrisburg, PA 17105-8764.



The "bat condo" at Canoe Creek State Park is home to 800 little brown bats.



Abandoned limestone mines on Moore's Hill serve as a hibernaculum for six species of bats. The gate prevents access by vandals while allowing free passage for bats.

If you'd like to help survey bats, consider becoming the South-central Regional Coordinator for the Pennsylvania Bat Concentration Survey. You'll work with James Hart, of the Shippensburg University Vertebrate Museum, and Terry Hassinger, of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Phone James Hart at (717) 532-1145.

Happy bat-watching to you all! ❖

September's JVAS Field Trip to SGL 166

The passage of Hurricane Floyd had left bright-blue skies and crisp, autumnal air in its wake on September 18, and a few JVAS members took full advantage of nature's gift. Helena Kotala, Dr. Stan Kotala, Gary and Sarah Miller, and Steve Stroman joined Pennsylvania Game Commission land management officer Steve Kleiner for a bicycle tour of State Game Land 166, the crown jewel of Blair County's natural lands.

Steve explained how the Pennsylvania Game Commission systematically had bought about 11,000 acres of land protecting the headwaters of Canoe Creek, designated by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection as a high-quality, cold-water fishery. Almost the entire watershed is publicly owned and will be left unspoiled permanently.

During the trip JVAS members observed swamp sparrows, common ravens, an eastern ribbon snake (very uncommon), aquatic red-spotted newts (and the terrestrial sub-adults known as red efts), chain pickerel, brook trout, and monarch butterflies. JVAS Conservation Chair Sarah Miller pointed out fascinating wetland flora such as tussock sedge (*Carex stricta*), sweetflag (*Acorus calamus*), soft rush (*Juncus effusus*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), and swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*). Nature's bounty surrounded us.

The four-hour field trip left us refreshed and enchanted with the awesome beauty of unspoiled nature. We left "the beaver dams" dreaming of returning soon to this great, green wildness. ❖

— Dr. Stan Kotala
Elberta, Sinking Valley

Herpetological Atlas Data Due

Driven by shorter and cooler days, timber rattlesnakes seek out their ancestral dens. Wood turtles return to sparkling streams, where they will remain submerged till spring. Woodland depressions waiting to fill with autumnal rain beckon marbled salamanders to deposit their eggs. Spring peepers call half-heartedly from golden hillsides prior to burrowing under a cover of brilliant leaves. The 1999 Pennsylvania Herpetological Atlas season draws to a close.



Marbled Salamanders

This year has been remarkable for the Atlas project in the western Ridge and Valley Region. Volunteers in our area have reported more than 1000 new sightings, breaking all previous records.

If you participated in the project and made observations in Blair, Huntingdon, Bedford, Fulton, Mifflin, Juniata, or Perry County, please send your data to Dr. Stan Kotala, Western Ridge and Valley Regional Coordinator, Pennsylvania Herpetological Atlas Project, R.R. 3, Box 866, Altoona, PA 16601-9206.

Thanks for your help! ❖

— Dr. Stan Kotala
Elberta, Sinking Valley

Birding in Pennsylvania Goes Electronic

If you're interested in up-to-the minute information on Pennsylvania birds and have access to e-mail and the Internet, you should consider joining PABIRDS, an electronic list for Pennsylvania birders. An electronic listserv is like a giant bulletin board, except it's electronic and the information is communicated to you instantly.

The PABIRDS list is hosted by the National Audubon Society, and the list moderator is Carmen T. Santasania. To join the list, send an e-mail message to: <listserv@list.audubon.org>, leaving the subject blank (or if your e-mail program does not permit this, you can put anything in the subject as the listserv software ignores the subject). In the message, type subscribe PABIRDS YourFirstName YourLastName.

Example: subscribe PABIRDS jane doe

Then, just follow the instructions.

If you have any problems or questions, send an e-mail message to the list moderator at:

<71634.41@compuserve.com>. ❖

— Carmen T. Santasania, President
Pennsylvania Audubon Society

You 'Otter' Have This License Plate

The first "Conserve Natural Resources" license plate issued by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had raised nearly \$3 million for the Wild Resource Conservation Fund. The saw-whet owl plate has been retired; however, in its place is a new plate featuring a river otter. The new plate is now available for \$35, which is in addition to the regular vehicle registration cost. The WRCF will receive \$15 from each registration to support research and education projects dealing with Pennsylvania native plants and nongame wildlife.

Applications are available at various state offices and facilities. Or write to WRCF, P.O. Box 8764, Harrisburg, PA 17105-8764 for an application.

Go ahead, do something wild! ❖

Habitat vs. Highways

Many mornings I sit on Coyote Bench along the Far Field Trail, listening to the noise of humankind that assaults me from all directions. In Sinking Valley the steady drone of tractors in the spring drifts up as farmers work their fields, which are now large expanses of green and brown without the hedgerows that once sheltered wildlife.

From the lower end of the valley, the limestone quarry, locally owned and fairly unobtrusive for more than 100 years, was bought up by the New Enterprise & Lime Co. several years ago. Immediately the company greatly increased its production, gobbling up a large chunk of land and increasing noise and air pollution so that on a clear day it sounds as if the machinery, two miles away as the crow flies, is driving across our yard. Once again habitat has been destroyed, and the wildlife driven from that portion of the valley, including, I was told after the fact, a colony of bank swallows.

What wildlife is left searches for dooryard shrubs and trees in the valley or migrates to our mountaintop. Each mountaintop in the Ridge-and-Valley region is a wildlife refuge because the rich valleys are either heavily farmed or heavily developed. Thank God for steep, rocky ridges that keep most development at bay.

But not the highway builders — not in our area anyway. Now that most of the valleys have been

disfigured by major roads, they are eager to do the same to mountaintops. Instead of rebuilding the portion of U.S. Route 220 that already crosses the Bald Eagle Valley, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation plans to build a new, four-lane highway along our mountaintop. After a gallant battle, led by Ed Perry of the State College U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office, they have lost to the Army Corps of Engineers, which has decided that the ridgetop alternative will not destroy as much habitat as the valley alternative.

According to Ted Williams, in his "Incite" column in the September/October issue of *Audubon*, that is nonsense. But environmentalists were ridiculed by the local press when they tried to point out the importance of the ridgetop to migrating raptors, nesting Neotropical birds, and rare bats. It's all about development, Williams thinks, as he notices the "for sale" signs covering the open land along Route 220.

I only know that since the portion of Route 220 — now I-99 — has been connected through Altoona, the noise pollution has been terrific as the din of trucks and cars streaming past day and night never abates. In addition, the toll on wildlife, particularly deer and an occasional black bear, has been high. But the survivors have fled to our mountaintop and our biodiversity continues to increase. What will happen to the wildlife in Bald Eagle Valley without a mountaintop to flee to? ❖

By Marcia Bonta



Stone Mountain Hawkwatch Field Trip Report

On Sunday, September 26, twelve intrepid JVAS members (with lunch and binoculars in hand) made their way to the Stone Mountain Hawkwatch to observe the fall hawk migration. The weather was warm, visibility was good, and a slight wind was blowing from the southwest.

The following species and numbers were recorded for the day: osprey (7), bald eagle (1), northern harrier (2), sharp-shinned hawk (32), Cooper's hawk (2), broad-winged hawk (33), red-tailed hawk (16), American kestrel (3), peregrine falcon (1), and two unidentified raptors for a grand total of 99.

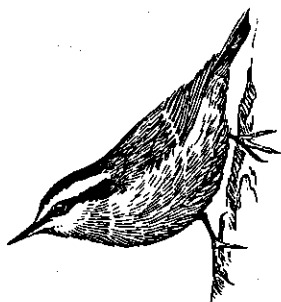
Of interest is that the number of broad-winged hawks sighted on that day brought the total number of broad-wings to 1358 for the season, which is a new season record.

The Stone Mountain Hawkwatch is now in its ninth year of operation. Manning of the hawkwatch will continue at Stone Mountain through the months of October and November. Coverage will be on weekends (depending on weather) and on some weekdays. If you would like to join us, please call Dave Kyler at 643-6030 for directions and/or the coverage schedule. ❖

— Dave Kyler

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