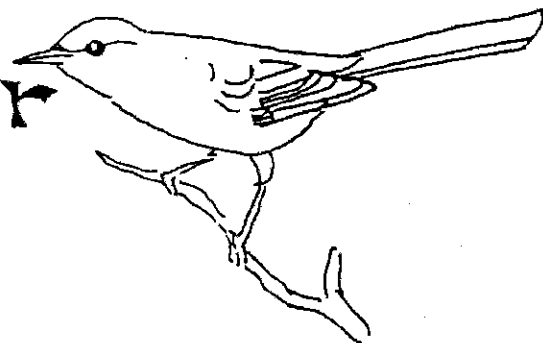


# The Gnatcatcher



Newsletter of the  
**Juniata Valley Audubon Society**

P.O. Box 32, Tyrone, Pennsylvania 16686

Vol. 32, No. 4 – September 2000

## **\$12,500 Awarded to JVAS for Blair Gap Run**

The Juniata Valley Audubon Society has received \$12,500 from the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Protection Program for the Blair Gap Run stream restoration project.

The Blair County Conservation District has been working with Duncansville Borough since 1999 to develop a project for the restoration, protection, and improvement of a 1700-foot (0.3-mile) section of Blair Gap Run. This section of stream is within Duncansville Borough Municipal Park property in Blair County. The project will use “bio-engineering” or “soft armor” techniques to restore various sections within the stream as well as protect other reaches from erosion and scour.

The proposed budget for the project would utilize \$34,400 from “Growing Greener” funds, \$2,000 from Duncansville Borough in “In-Kind Services,” and \$12,500 from the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Protection Program. It is expected that the WPWPP funds will be used to purchase plant and stabilization materials and to facilitate the educational aspect of the project through interpretive signage.

Community volunteers will provide the labor for much of the live plantings associated with stream restoration. In addition, the Blair County Conservation District has received a request from the Duncansville Boy Scout Troop #30 to provide information on the “Adopt-A-Stream” program for this reach of Blair Gap Run and beyond.

This very visible and much-used portion of Duncansville Borough Municipal Park will benefit greatly from the project. ❖

### **Game Commission To Hold Fall Meeting in Huntingdon**

A fall meeting of the Board of Game Commissioners will be held on Wednesday and Thursday, Oct. 11-12 at the Days Inn, Rt. 22, Huntingdon. The meeting will begin at 8:30 A.M. on both days. On Wednesday, Oct. 11 the Board of Game Commissioners is scheduled to gather public input and receive reports from the Commission staff. On Thursday, Oct. 12 the Board is scheduled to consider various agenda items, including several land purchase proposals. ❖

#### **– September Program –**

**“HAWK-WATCHING AND IDENTIFICATION AT STONE MOUNTAIN”**  
Greg Grove, president of the State College Bird Club, will tell why the ridges of Pennsylvania are good places to see migrating hawks. Greg will describe the conditions that produce good days for hawk-watching. He also will briefly classify the major groups of hawks (buteos, etc.) and will mention some simple things to help identify the more common hawks likely to be seen in central Pennsylvania. Yes, Greg presented a similar program for the JVAS three years ago, but we all could use a refresher. And those who missed Greg the first time should not forego this opportunity to hear his excellent talk.

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

#### **– September Field Trip –**

**STONE MOUNTAIN HAWKWATCH.** At the Stone Mountain hawk-watch platform on this date in late September you may observe the following species of migrating raptors: Cooper's, sharp-shinned, kestrel, broad-winged, osprey, red-tailed, red-shouldered, northern harrier, merlin, and bald eagle. Meet trip leader Dave Kyler (phone 643-6030) outside McDonald's Restaurant on Rt. 22, Huntingdon at 9 A.M. Bring binoculars, lunch, and sturdy shoes

9 A.M., Saturday, Sept. 30

## The Gnatcatcher

VOL. 32, NO. 4 — SEPTEMBER 2000

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JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY  
Charlie Hoyer, Editor  
P.O. Box 32  
Tyrone, PA 16686-0032

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, 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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## From the Gnatcatcher's Nest

Greetings! I hope you had a great summer. Now that it's over, the JVAS will resume its program schedule. Three excellent programs on birds are on the calendar this fall:

- Sept. 19 "Hawk-watching and Identification at Stone Mountain" by Greg Grove, president of the State College Bird Club.
- Oct. 17 "Attu Birding" by JVASers Dave Kyler and Gene Zielinski.
- Nov. 21 "Rare Birds of Pennsylvania" by Jerry McWilliams, co-author of the brand-new book, *The Birds of Pennsylvania*.

Program meetings begin at 7 P.M. in the Visitor Center at Canoe Creek State Park. Bring a guest!

NOTE: If you'd like to join those who now receive timely e-mail notices and announcements relating to JVAS activities and objectives, send an e-mail message indicating such to:

charma@nb.net

Charlie

+ + +

If you're reading this newsletter but are not a member of the National Audubon Society, you're invited to join by mailing the coupon to:

Juniata Valley Audubon Society  
P.O. Box 32  
Tyrone, PA 16686-0032

You'll receive the bimonthly *Audubon* magazine, each one filled with superb nature photography and in-depth reporting on environmental issues. You'll also receive the JVAS's newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*, containing reports on local conservation topics and nature themes.

### NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY Membership Application

- YES, I want to join the Juniata Valley Audubon Society and the National Audubon Society at the special Introductory Rate of \$20.
- As a senior citizen or student, I'm eligible to join for only \$15.

My \$ \_\_\_\_\_ check, payable to the National Audubon Society, is enclosed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ PA \_\_\_\_\_

U03

**CONSERVATION**
**CORNER**
*By Sarah J. Miller*
**It Pays to Have Clean Air**

Now that summer is officially over, perhaps it's time to finally retire that old gas-powered lawn mower. If you do, you'll be doing your part to improve the air we all breathe. While most people don't realize it, lawn mowers and other garden equipment including chain saws, leaf blowers, and string trimmers are a significant source of air pollution — emitting high levels of carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter. All of these contribute to the formation of ground-level ozone, a key component of smog.

To reduce ozone-forming pollution and encourage residents to make "green" choices when buying lawn equipment, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has initiated a Clean Mower Rebate Program. Residents who turn in gas-powered lawn mowers receive a \$75 rebate coupon to be used toward the purchase of an electric mower. Likewise, a \$20 rebate coupon is issued for smaller gas-powered tools such as weed whackers or edgers. The mowers and tools are drained of their gasoline and oil, and then all of the materials are recycled.

In April and May of this year, Pennsylvania residents turned in nearly 700 gas-powered mowers and smaller lawn tools. It may not sound like much, but it's an important step toward protecting Pennsylvania's air. The DEP reports that replacing gas mowers with electric ones results in a ninety-nine percent reduction in carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides, and methane along with a thirty-eight percent reduction in carbon dioxide. Using cleaner-powered lawn equipment also helps to curb groundwater contamination from gasoline spillage and reduce levels of noise pollution in neighborhoods.

For more information on the Clean Mower Rebate Program, check out the DEP Web site at <http://www.dep.state.pa.us> and search under the keywords "clean mower rebate program." ❖

**Ravens Close-up**
*By Dr. Stan Kotala*

On an overcast Sunday morning in August I went for a short hike on the Sinking Valley side of State Game Lands 166. Coming down an overgrown trail from one of the benches on the western flank of the mountain, I saw several dark shapes about one hundred yards away near a spring seep in a forest clearing. Through my binoculars I saw that they were turkey vultures — eight of them milling about in a group of sedges.

They hadn't spotted me (full camouflage never hurts), so I crept slowly and quietly among the witch hazel, black birch, and laurel — getting ever closer. When I was twenty yards away I could see that they were feeding on a dead buck, already having torn open his abdominal and chest walls.

Suddenly I heard the croaking calls of a raven, getting closer and closer, flying up the valley along Sinking Run. The croaking became very loud as the jet-black bird landed in a cucumber magnolia directly above me. Because of the dense cover of leaves, I was invisible to him. A loud swishing overhead signaled the approach of another raven that landed in a large oak snag for a moment and then circled the scene several times before perching again.

The two ravens exchanged a repertoire of calls, ranging from short squawks and croaks to drawn-out purrs and squeals. Although I had heard these calls before, I never had the opportunity to witness the birds at such close range, giving so many calls in a short span of time.

The two ravens watched the turkey vultures for ten minutes, but did not join them at the feast. They flew away together, silently, disappearing over the ridge into Canoe Creek Valley. I crept away quietly, under cover, much richer for the experience of having watched and listened to one of our wariest birds at such close range.

Nature never disappoints! ❖

## Bird-banding Is Intricate, Frustrating, and Fun

By Shirley Wagoner, JVAS Education Chair

A bird in the hand...I never thought I would have a live, healthy bird in my hand. Until, that is, I took a course in bird banding from MAPS (an organization that studies avian productivity) right here at the Juniata College field station. Chuck Yohn, who teaches ornithology at Juniata, continues each summer to band birds and collect local data for MAPS. Usually he has student interns helping him, but has allowed a few adults to assist as well. I have been allowed to help when I have been available. Summers do get busy!

This year I have gone out to the field station four times so far. Duties have included unfurling the (permanently stationed) mist nets, checking the nets every half hour and extracting any birds caught in them, bringing the birds back to the banding station, processing and releasing them and furling the nets so that no birds will be trapped in them inadvertently.

The nets are set up along open places or paths in the woods near the field station where they are reasonably accessible but not too visible. They are low enough to be within reach, which unfortunately may limit the species of birds that are caught, but they are not set at ground level. The netting material is rather fine, but the openings are loose enough so that most birds flying into them are caught and fine enough that even a small bird is not likely to fly through an opening.

Nets are unfurled at 6 A.M. and checked every half hour. A bird left too long in a net may become so tangled that it can hardly be released; but if the nets are checked more often, it is easy to frighten away any birds that might head toward one.

Extracting a bird from the net is rarely easy. Assuming that the bird has flown headfirst into the net, the feet usually are freed first, then the body and wings, and last, the head. By that time it is usually already free. The feet can create enormous frustration, both for the bird and for the extractor, as they usually are curled up around the strands and

freed with difficulty. Then, releasing a wing, one finds the feet curled up in the strands again! And, of course, the bird must be held on to while releasing it from the net. Small, feisty birds such as hummingbirds or chickadees may seem impossible to release at first, but are extracted with patience.

The freed bird is placed in a small, cloth bag that is hung on a line or tree branch and awaits processing. First, the bird is banded with the appropriate size band, depending upon the species. Then we try to determine the age, sex, and physical condition of each bird, recording the information on a form. Some birds are fairly easy to age or sex, as when males and females have different plumage. Others are almost impossible to do. We record what can be determined and omit what cannot. Young eyes are very helpful; I find my reading glasses are not strong enough to see some things well and use an optical magnifier to enable me to see better close up.

After the initial processing is completed, we weigh the bird. (No, it is not expected to sit on a scale. It is placed in a very small bag and hung on a small scale. Finally, the bird is extracted from the bag and released, perhaps after a picture has been taken. It is a pleasure to see the bird fly strongly away toward nearby trees or bushes after undergoing such close inspection.

What birds have been banded? The field station is a very "birdy" place, so we capture and process many common birds such as black-capped chickadees, chipping sparrows, tufted titmice, and red-eyed vireos. Indigo buntings are abundant, but the brightly colored males are not caught often. We have banded wood thrushes, gray catbirds, field sparrows, cedar waxwings, song sparrows, a Baltimore oriole, and a Carolina wren. Several worm-eating warblers have been banded, an ovenbird, and even a yellow-billed cuckoo. One day we even netted a blue-gray gnatcatcher. This is a very small bird and was extracted from the net with consider-

able difficulty. He was somewhat stunned by the experience, so I held him fairly loosely as I processed him, keeping an eye on his condition. As I was about to weigh him, he managed to wriggle free and flew away. I cheered him on, knowing he would be O.K. You always band the bird first, in case it should escape. Yes, he had been banded.

What should you do if you find a bird — probably dead — with a band on one leg? Read the numbers on the band. There should be a phone number that you call to inform the researcher where the bird was found, as well as the band number. They will be able to tell you where the bird was banded. You might find that it had been banded hundreds of miles away! It is always exciting to discover how far a small bird may travel. ❖

### **Audubon Workshop**

#### **The Decision Tree:**

#### **Timber Harvesting for Plants and Wildlife Habitat in Pennsylvania**

Saturday, October 21

8 A.M. — 4 P.M.

Forest landowners, mark your calendar now for this workshop to be held in the Bedford area at a meeting site (indoor and outdoor sessions) yet to be determined. When forest landowners, timber harvesters, and natural resource professionals understand the impacts of their decisions, they can work together to meet both timber and wildlife management objectives. The Decision Tree helps accomplish this by predicting the effects of timber harvesting on plant and animal communities. For more information phone (814) 684-7376.

## THE AFTERNOON OF A FAWN

By Dave Bonta

*from its all-day bed in  
the drainage ditch where  
its mother drooped it before dawn*

*the fawn curled tight as  
a question mark  
keeps watch*

*for all the world a patch  
of wet leaves blotched in mold  
as if to prove*

*this newborn thing "unclean"  
unfit to feed a tree's  
green torch*

*eyelids flicker ribs  
swell & flatten  
in sync with the rippling thatch  
nostrils flutter as the brush  
might catch & crackle  
with unseen feet*

*by sunset there'll be one more  
shadow to reach across the lawn  
on awkward stilts*

*night will rear a spotted coat  
train its pitch-black muzzle on  
a trail of milk*

*the closed quotes  
of its hoofprints leave  
no scent*

**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.**

## What Reptile Lives at the California Quarries That Is Older Than Dinosaurs?

By JoAnn Gurekovich-Reese

It's the common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina serpentina*). Yep, the snapping turtle is older than the dinosaurs that roamed the earth millions of years ago.

Since I was a small child I had many opportunities to observe the huge snapper, both in the water and slowly making its way on land to the nearest water supply during dry seasons. I've seen it submerged in water looking up at me with its long neck and beady eyes. During floods I've seen large snappers making their way out of high, fast-moving streams and rivers (Elk Run and Little Juniata) heading toward calmer waters in the quarries.

However, the most exciting and unique experience I've had observing this magnificent aquatic reptile was in this past February. It was a cold, wintry day when I decided to take a walk to the "second quarry," as our family had named it when I was a small child. Each of the three water-filled quarries are nonpareil in regard to the kinds of wildlife and vegetation that live in and around the water. The uniqueness is even apparent in the smells. If your olfactory senses are sharp, you can tell when you're definitely at the second quarry. The quarry is twelve to fifteen feet deep and contains massive amounts of aquatic plants. There's a large population of bullfrogs, tadpoles, and different species of fish including bluegill, small- and large-mouth bass, carp, and catfish. Over the years the second quarry has been transformed — by Mother Nature — into a reptile, plant, bird, fish, and aquatic area that makes it an ideal habitat for skunks, raccoons, muskrats, and wading birds such as great blue heron. All of the foregoing makes it one of the best habitats for the snapping turtle.

Because snappers are omnivorous, the second quarry provides it with several sources of food. The underwater vegetation, the decaying matter in and around the water, the vast numbers of insects that inhabit the area, fish, bullfrogs and their eggs, and tadpoles are there to give it an excellent meal when

it decides to go hunting.

Muskrat holes provide the snapper with nest sites for laying eggs. Skunks and raccoons catch meals of fish or frogs, and the remains are left for the snapper to consume. Wading birds sometimes abandon their meals, and the turtles will clean up.

In the winter the snapping turtle enters a state of hibernation, but I soon learned that it also can become active at least six degrees Celsius. As I walked onto the ice on that cold February day, it was as if I was looking through a clear window into the depths of the quarry where I had never ventured before. I saw every rock and crevice on the bottom.

I was mesmerized when I saw a huge snapper with its large, dark shell frozen in the ice. It seemed to be floating in midair. Its neck was extended, eyes closed, with both front and back legs resting on the bottom of the quarry floor. It appeared to be sleeping as I stopped and stared! I pounded on the ice above its head thinking it might move; however, after a quick check I found the ice to be five to six inches deep.

I stayed and looked at this magnificent creature as long as I could. It was cold and darkness was not far behind me. I marked the spot where the turtle was lying with a rock and a tree branch in hope that when I returned the next morning I would capture this magnificent creature on camera. When I got home I told my husband Joe of my experience.

The next morning I grabbed my camera and husband and returned to the area that I had marked the night before. The weather had changed during the night and had warmed the ice. We both walked to the place where I had feverishly placed the rock and tree branch the night before. The snapper was gone! It had been released from the icy grip by the warmth of the sun and had vanished. I felt so sad to know this may have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to capture this glorious creature on film. A lesson was learned that day: Always carry a camera when you go exploring at the California Quarries! ❖

## Coyote Birthday

Turning sixty in July was not an event I looked forward to. But our son Dave promised me coyotes and he delivered in spades.

What I think of as my totem animal began howling on Sapsucker Ridge on the Fourth of July, harmonizing with the fireworks grand climax at Bland's Park. Three days later Dave reported hearing more coyote howling in the early morning.

Then while sitting on the veranda the following afternoon, my husband Bruce and I heard the beginning of a fire siren down in the valley that was suddenly drowned out by coyote howls, again on Sapsucker Ridge. Later, at 7:15 P.M., as we sat finishing our dinner on the front porch the coyotes howled even closer.

Both times Bruce and I were thrilled to hear the wondrously wild sound that sent chills of delight down our spines. Eastern coyotes don't howl as often as western coyotes, and though we had had several glimpses of single coyotes over the last four years and our trails have been liberally festooned with coyote scat, we never had heard howling. Dave, who tends to be wandering the mountain at night and very early in the morning, had heard howling a few times.

On July 10 I was out shortly after 8 A.M., picking blueberries on Laurel Ridge, when the coyotes howled again on Sapsucker Ridge — wild, ululating music that ebbed and flowed and then died as quickly as it had started. That afternoon Dave poked quietly around through the thick vegetation below Sapsucker Ridge and found two half-grown coyote pups.

"I'll give you coyotes for your birthday," he told me confidently.

The next morning I followed him up Big Tree Trail and down Sapsucker Ridge Trail in search of coyotes. Just as he was ready to drop down into the underbrush, I spotted three young coyotes ranging ahead of us on the trail.

"Happy birthday," he whispered and left me sitting on the trail, watching the youngsters through my binocular.

I wasn't certain they had seen me. They seemed to be heading purposefully over the ridgetop and disappeared quickly from view. But ten minutes later, a fourth pup emerged from the underbrush and followed the same trajectory its siblings had taken. All of them were beige-colored and lanky, about three-quarters grown, and reminded me of teenagers in search of adventure.

After giving them plenty of time, I continued along the trail, constantly on the lookout for them. But I found no more sign of them and went on to the Far Field and then back along the Far Field Road.

Suddenly I spotted another coyote ahead of me on the trail. Judging from its size, it was probably the mother of the pups because she was not much bigger than they, but

she was black and reddish-brown and her tail had a black tip. I watched her as she looked and sniffed and investigated along the trail, no doubt in search of food, and then she disappeared into the underbrush below the road.

What a treat! Not only had I seen four coyote pups, but I had watched their mother hunting for

By Marcia Bonta



—DOUG PIFER

food. Surely, this had been a memorable birthday.

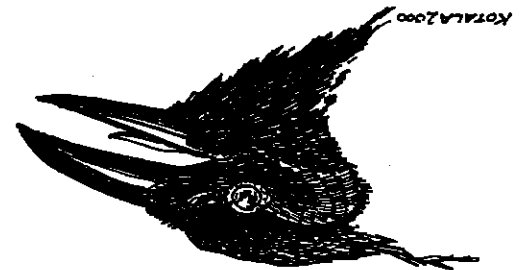
Then, when I reached the top of First Field, I stood, as I always do, and looked up and down the mown path through the field. There, just below the spruce grove, sat a white-bellied, beige pup on its haunches, scratching its belly with its front paws. Finally, it got up and wandered on up the hill.

That was the last we heard or saw the family. Apparently they had been using Sapsucker Ridge as a rendezvous site, as coyotes do, after they leave their natal den. According to *Eastern Coyote: The Story of Its Success*, by Gerry Parker, "Pups often often are left at rendezvous sites during the day while adults take a break and rest a short distance away. At such sites in mid-to-late summer most pup

activity consists of rest, play, and 'short' exploratory excursions. In early evening — near dusk — the adult female returns to the rendezvous site, often announcing her arrival to the pups with a brief howl. This creates a great commotion among the pups, and a chorus of howls, yips, yaps, and barks breaks up the evening solitude." Obviously, the coyote parents were returning on a different schedule than Parker described. And even though none of the coyotes I saw seemed to notice my presence, they probably did and moved on that night.

Still, I couldn't help feeling that they had outperformed themselves in honor of my birthday, and I gratefully accepted Nature's gift as a sign that turning sixty isn't so bad after all! ❖

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