



The Gnatcatcher

Newsletter of the
Juniata Valley Audubon Society

P.O. Box 32, Tyrone, PA 16686

<www.juniatavalleyaudubon.org>

Vol. 35, No. 1 — Jan/Feb 2003

Make Yourself Heard!

... At the Public Hearing on the Proposed Logan Town Centre Project

On February 6, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) will hold a public hearing on the Logan Town Centre shopping complex proposed to be constructed by Morris Management on the western side of Brush Mountain upslope of the 17th St. exit of Interstate 99, Altoona. When completed, the "regional power center shopping mall" will obliterate more than 300 acres of Brush Mountain almost to the ridge top.

Constructing only the mall portion of this project — not including the proposed business park — would result in:

- Paving more than 100 acres of mountainside forest along with 60-foot-deep cuts and terraces on the side of the mountain to accommodate roads and buildings;
- Destroying several acres of wetlands; and
- Obliterating nearly a mile of streams.

The project is highly controversial and has been the subject of numerous letters in the local newspaper, the *Altoona Mirror*. For every letter promoting the mall there have been two opposing it.

The public hearing will be held at the Jaffa Mosque, Broad Ave. and 22nd St., Altoona on Thursday, February 6, at 6:30 P.M. **You are strongly urged to attend the public hearing — and speak out!**

If you would like to make a statement at the hearing, you *must* register by Feb. 4 by contacting Karen Sitler, of the DEP's Southcentral Regional Office, in Harrisburg at (717) 705-4904.

According to the DEP, "Those who want to testify at the hearing are asked to make their point with a five to ten minute presentation. Speakers also are asked to provide written copies of their comments." ❄

— January Program —

"THE IMPORTANT MAMMAL AREAS PROJECT." Alana Hartman, coordinator for the Important Mammal Areas Project in Pennsylvania, will explain how IMAP works, the categories for site nomination, and an update of its progress. She will discuss Pennsylvania's great mammal diversity and highlight the habitat needs of several species — from shrews and moles to fishers and elk. This effort is the first of its kind in the U.S.
7 P.M., Tuesday, Jan. 21, at Alto Reste Chapel (see page 2).

— January Field Trip —

SINKING VALLEY MANURE CHASE. Join us for a "manure chase" in lower Sinking Valley in search of horned larks, snow buntings, and maybe even a Lapland longspur. Other sighting possibilities include a rough-legged hawk and American pipits. Meet at the Sinking Valley Grange, in Skelp, at 8 A.M. and dress warmly.

Saturday, Jan. 18 [SNOW DATE — SUNDAY, JAN. 19]

— February Program —

"BUTTERFLIES OF PENNSYLVANIA." Jerry McWilliams, known mainly as the senior author of the book, *The Birds of Pennsylvania*, will give a slide presentation on the butterfly diversity of Pennsylvania. The program will describe their habitats, tell where to look for each species in the state, and give tips on identifying them. Several very rare and habitat-restricted butterfly species also will be shown.

7 P.M., Tuesday, Feb. 18, at Alto Reste Chapel (see page 2).

— February Field Trip —

WINTER BIRDS OF HUNTINGDON COUNTY. Meet at McDonald's in Huntingdon at 9 A.M. for a morning birding adventure in northern Huntingdon County. We'll be looking for northern visitors, but may see red-shouldered hawks and bald eagles.

Saturday, Feb. 8 [SNOW DATE — SUNDAY, FEB. 9]

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VOL. 35, NO. 1 — JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2003

Published bimonthly as a benefit for members by

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

Juniata Valley Audubon is a chapter of the National Audubon Society, serving members in all of Blair and Bedford Counties, and portions of Cambria, Centre, Clearfield, Fulton, and Huntingdon Counties. The membership comprises National Members along with Chapter-only Members.

Evening program meetings are held in the chapel at Alto-Reste Park, Plank Road, Altoona (directly across from Wal-Mart) on the third Tuesday of the month in January, February, March, May, and September through November at 7 P.M. The public is invited to attend.

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From the Gnatcatcher's Nest

Happy New Year!!!

Give a hard read of the accompanying *JVAS Spring 2003 Programs and Field Trips* brochure. You'll see that we have a superb lineup of quality programs and field trips for you. If you're one of those who can't seem to find the time to take advantage of them, a perfect New Year's resolution would be for you to do so!

The JVAS Web site <www.juniatavalleyaudubon.org> is back on the 'Net. Initially constructed in 2000 by JVAS Wetlands Chair Sarah Miller (before the arrival of her son, Jakey), I've taken a stab at basic HTML and have updated the information and added a few features. Take a look. You may want to bookmark the "Related Links" page. Suggestions for additions to the Web site are welcome.

Past JVAS President and past Field Trips Chair, Dave Kyler, is again serving as Field Trips Chair. He replaces Janet Huber, who is super-busy with her travel agency.



Join National/Juniata Valley Audubon

- Option 1 — National Membership** provides you with the following benefits:
- Subscription to the quarterly *Audubon* magazine, each one filled with superb nature photography and in-depth reporting on environmental issues.
 - Notification of Juniata Valley Audubon's exciting activities including monthly nature programs, field trips, and other events.
 - Subscription to the bimonthly chapter newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*.
 - Opportunity to participate in local advocacy efforts to help make a real difference.
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CONSERVATION
ORNER
By Mark Henry
Alarming Impact of West Nile Virus

Most JVAS members are aware of the West Nile virus, and I thought members would be interested in information about the impacts of the virus on wildlife. The Washington Post recently published an article on the alarming impact of the West Nile virus on wildlife. The virus spread rapidly westward this year and is predicted to reach the West Coast this summer. Although the impact of the virus on corvids and raptors has been reported in the news media, the overall impact only recently has been studied and the news is not good.

Nearly 200 species of birds, mammals, and reptiles became ill from the virus in 2002, including rabbits, reindeer, pelicans, bats, and alligators. Even exotic species in zoos were not spared as wildlife such as cockatiels, emus, seals, and penguins became ill and some died. Robert McLean, of the National Wildlife Research Center, in Colorado, stated that he has never seen a mosquito-borne virus spread so quickly.

The full impact of the virus on wildlife still is not completely known, but scientists studying the disease are very concerned. The general belief is that the impacts on wildlife — especially birds — will be significant and include far more species than originally thought. Already, there has been an impact on raptors as seen in raptor centers across the country as well as the many corvids that have died.

The impact on songbirds is harder to gauge because they are more inconspicuous and, after dying, are quickly removed by predators/scavengers. Still, in 2002, more than 140 bird species were found infected with the virus, including chickadees, doves, grackles, gulls, kingfishers, sparrows, turkeys, warblers, woodpeckers, and wrens. Although many of these species probably will survive as resistant individuals pass on their antiviral genes, others will not be so fortunate.

Scientists are particularly concerned with rare

and endangered species. A significant increase in the death rate among endangered species could have serious impact so serious that veterinarians have developed a vaccine to be administered to captive endangered species. Specifically, an experimental vaccine was given to captive condors and preliminary results have been positive.

Recent research on the virus has added to the scientists concern. It was found that the virus can be transmitted not only via mosquito bites but from bird to bird. Raptors were found to acquire the virus from eating infected prey and there is evidence that the virus can be spread via droppings.

Another finding was that the virus can be transmitted from the female mosquito to her eggs and the virus can persevere through the winter. At least 36 species of mosquitoes were found to carry the virus an unusual situation for pathogenic viruses. And if this wasn't enough, some scientists suspect that the West Nile virus might be capable of mixing its genetic material with that of a closely related virus, the St. Louis encephalitis virus. This possibly could create an entirely new virus that might cause further sickness and death even in humans. This all adds up to bad news.

In the coming year, biologists, along with public health officials, will be monitoring the West Nile virus closely and will continue efforts to mitigate the impact of the virus on humans and wildlife. As birders, the one area that we may be able to help is in the monitoring of populations. Many of us are already monitoring birds via breeding bird routes, IBAs, etc.; this data may be helpful in determining long-range trends of bird populations.

We need to remember, however, that humans develop the disease as well and we need to take appropriate precautions when we do field work. So as we prepare for the coming spring migration and breeding season, let's do our population counts while remembering to protect ourselves.

Information on personal protection against mosquito bites can be found on the PA Department of Health's Web site, <www.health.state.pa.us>. Click on "Health Topics A to Z" and then on "West Nile Virus." ❖

Results of 2002 Christmas Bird Count

Nineteen participants braved the wind on December 21, 2002 for the annual JVAS Christmas Bird Count (centered on Culp, in Sinking Valley). A total of 62.25 hours were spent: In the field (49.25), at feeders (11), and owling (2). More than 237 miles were covered.

The day was very windy with gusts of up to 30 mph, which explains the low numbers. The day ended at the Hoyers' residence, on Brush Mountain, where everyone enjoyed a pot-luck dinner and fellowship.

Species counts: Great Blue Heron (blue form), 8; Black Vulture, 2 (*unusual species*); Canada Goose, 2; Mallard, 55; Hooded Merganser, 1; Northern Harrier, 3; Cooper's Hawk, 2; Red-tailed Hawk, 11; American Kestrel, 10; Merlin, 1; Ring-necked Pheasant, 8; Ruffed Grouse, 13; Wild Turkey, 17; Rock Dove, 292; Mourning Dove, 47; Eastern Screech-owl, 7; Great Horned Owl, 5; Belted Kingfisher, 4; Red-bellied Woodpecker, 20; Downy Woodpecker, 24; Hairy Woodpecker, 7; Northern Flicker, 4; Pileated Woodpecker, 8; Blue Jay, 63; American Crow, 137; Fish Crow, 1 (*unusual species*); Common Raven, 5; Black-capped Chickadee,

46; Tufted Titmouse, 60; Red-breasted Nuthatch, 1; White-breasted Nuthatch, 28; Brown Creeper, 2; Carolina Wren, 21; Winter Wren, 1; Golden-crowned Kinglet, 7; Eastern Bluebird, 45; Hermit Thrush, 3; American Robin, 13; Northern Mockingbird, 6; European Starling, 607; Cedar Waxwing, 93; Yellow-rumped Warbler, 8; Eastern Towhee, 1; American Tree Sparrow, 41; Song Sparrow, 8; White-throated Sparrow, 26; White-crowned Sparrow, 2; Dark-eyed Junco, 152; Northern Cardinal, 57; House Finch, 64; American Goldfinch, 56; and House Sparrow, 82.

Total number of birds reported: 2187

Number of species reported: 52

Participants: Marcia Bonta, Heidi Boyle, Roy Boyle, Janet DeMuth, Alice Goodlin, Charlie Hoyer, Helena Kotala, Stan Kotala, David Kyler, Gary Miller, Cindy Moore, Luis Moore, Jesse Perry, John Salvetti, Beryl Sternagle, Shirley Waggoner, Debbie Wentz (compiler), and Terry Wentz. ☼

— Debbie Wentz
JVAS CBC Coordinator

Raining on the Wood Thrush's Parade

Across much of the eastern United States, wood thrushes are fairly common summer birds, even nesting in many suburban backyards. Their numbers have been going down in recent decades though, and the species has declined by about forty percent since 1980.

Habitat loss generally is blamed for the declines, but a new study suggests that there may be another factor — acid rain. The conclusion was reached when analyses of areas where acid rain is most frequent showed that the same areas had the highest declines in wood thrushes. The area hardest hit is along the center of the Appalachian Mountains.

Acid rain can affect birds both by killing key plants and by reducing populations of insects and other invertebrates that the birds feed on. The study originally was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* and was reported in *Wings Over Dutchess*, newsletter of the Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club, Salt Point, N.Y. ☼

— *Bird Watcher's Digest*
January/February 2003

Juniata Valley Audubon wishes to thank
ALTO-RESTE PARK CEMETERY ASS'N
Alto-Reste Blvd., off Plank Rd., Altoona
for graciously providing its chapel as a meeting room
for monthly Audubon program meetings.

Second Pennsylvania Wildlands Conference Set for February 1

In January 2001, more than 150 people attended the first Pennsylvania Wildlands Conference, which was organized completely on a grassroots level. The excitement and energy generated by that event spurred the creation of the Pennsylvania Wildlands Recovery Project (PWRP), a new 501(c)3 educational and scientific organization dedicated to the development of a comprehensive conservation network plan. The Project's premise is that only by linking Pennsylvania wildlands with one other, and with lands in other states, is there any hope for preserving the full complement of ecological communities, species, and genotypes.

Conservation biologists and supporters in other regions of North America, including Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y), the Sky Islands Plan in the Southwest, and the Maine Wildlands Network have already developed similar plans. Growing arrays of state-based and regional groups like the PWRP are springing up across the continent and work closely with The Wildlands Project office in Vermont.

The PWRP's first year and a half of life has been a story of slow, steady emergence. Three committees have been established including: Science; Outreach and Media; and Finance. In late September 2002, the PWRP attained official tax-exempt status. Although not a membership organization, the PWRP welcomes participation from nonboard members in the activities of its committees. Both financial support and expertise — of whatever type or level — are actively solicited. A Web site at <www.wildpennsylvania.org> and a listserv at <PWRP@yahoogroups.com> were set up to help spread the organization's message. By summer 2002, the PWRP began planning a second Pennsylvania Wildlands Conference as part of an outreach effort to biologists, ecologists, conservancy members, and conservationists interested in helping to shape a wilder Pennsylvania.

The second conference of the Pennsylvania Wildlands Recovery Project, "Pennsylvania Wildlands 2003: Prospects for Recovery and Rewilding,"

will be held on Saturday, February 1 at the Penn Stater Conference Center, in State College. Dave Foreman, publisher of *Wild Earth* journal and chairman of the Wildlands Project, will give the keynote address, "Crafting a Regional Wildlands Plan: Lessons from the Sky Islands." Other speakers include Conrad Reining, northeastern coordinator for The Wildlands Project; Chris Bolgiano, vice president of the Eastern Cougar Foundation; Susan Hagood, wildlife specialist for the Humane Society and an expert on the construction of highway overpasses and underpasses for wildlife; and Steve Hoffman, bird conservation director for Audubon Pennsylvania. Clare Billet (The Natural Lands Trust), Bob DeGroot (Maryland Alliance for Greenway Improvement and Conservation), and Robert Lonsdorf (Brandywine Conservancy) will discuss specific strategies for wildlands recovery. Ed Perry, recently retired supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pennsylvania field office, will close the conference with a rousing call to action.

The conference registration fee is \$30 if registered before February 1 or \$35 if registering on the day of the conference. A student/low income rate is available for \$15. If interested in an exhibit space, contact Jennifer Chesworth at (814) 466-7264 or <cafesombra@aol.com> to reserve a table. Registration will begin and a continental-style breakfast served at 7:15 A.M. The day's event will end at 4:45 P.M. To register, make check or money order payable to Pennswoods Wildland Recovery and mail it to PA Wildlands Recovery Project, P.O. Box 972, State College, PA 16804-0972. Please include your name, affiliation (for name tag), and mailing address. For more information, contact Tonya Boston-Sagar at <t.bostonsagar@worldnet.att.net> or PWRP President Alan Gregory at (570) 788-1425 or at <meg5@psu.edu>. ☼

— From *Watershed Weekly*, Dec. 20, 2002
Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Organization
For Watersheds and Rivers (POWR)

Waterbirds Galore!

On the last weekend in November of last year, thirteen JVASers and friends took to the wintry weather elements and enjoyed viewing migrating waterbirds at Presque Isle State Park, near Erie. Jerry McWilliams, local resident and co-author of the book, *The Birds of Pennsylvania*, served as our guide on Sunday morning.

Our expert guide led us to view thousands of red-breasted mergansers and hundreds of ring-billed gulls. Other waterbird species found in good numbers were common merganser, bufflehead, lesser scaup, common goldeneye, canvasback, horned grebe, common loon, mallard, black duck, and Canada goose.

Other waterbird species observed were red-throated loon, horned grebe, eared grebe, redhead, ring-necked duck, long-tailed duck, greater scaup,

black scoter, surf scoter, white-winged scoter, great black-backed gull, and lesser black-backed gull.

The California gull, which Jerry had seen in a large flock of ring-billed gulls for several days, was not spotted during our visit due to the flock's long distance from shore.

The highlight of the morning occurred while we were huddled on the lee side of the lighthouse. A bird suddenly flew up from the water to the edge of the pier about thirty feet from the base of the lighthouse. For a moment, we had super looks at the purple sandpiper that Jerry had seen on some of breakwaters during the previous week or so.

This spring, on the May 17-18 weekend, JVAS Field Trips Chair Dave Kyler has scheduled another overnight trip to Presque Isle State Park. Why don't you plan to join us?! ☼



Braving the cold winds at Presque Isle State Park, JVAS birders view migrating waterfowl on Lake Erie. Manning the optics are (from left) Heidi Boyle, Dave Kyler, Elizabeth Kotala, Marge Hoyer, Shirley Waggoner, Charlie Hoyer, and Trudy Kyler.

Tracking Bear

As I re-hung the bird feeders before dawn on the first day of December, I saw BIG tracks in the dusting of snow on the back porch. Bear tracks! And to think I had almost told Bruce not to bring the feeders in the previous evening. I had assumed that no self-respecting bear would be out in the bitter, cold weather. But it was!

Bruce went out for a walk right after breakfast and reported that the bear had come along Greenbrier Trail, directly through our former neighbor's yard and across First Field. It had poked around the guesthouse and then followed Dave's trail up to our house.

I took up the trail at 9 A.M. and saw where it had gone in and out of the garage, as if checking out Bruce's machinery, like any male would. (It was almost certainly a male since females go into hibernation first.) He then circled behind the garage, across the old garden, and into the small patch of woods between it and the power-line right-of-way. From there he had proceeded to the old bear scratchings on the power-line pole.

Because the snow was patchy and thin, I often had a difficult time finding his tracks, and I frequently stopped to backtrack in an effort to pick up his trail again. Mostly he had followed an old deer trail that wound between the woods and First Field, but after several hundred feet, he had moved over on to the summer trail Bruce had cut through First Field and had taken it up to the spruce grove. His tracks were bigger than my open, gloved hand and I hesitated a few seconds before plunging into the dark, quiet, lower end of the spruce grove where I feared he might be resting.

But there was no snow in the grove and no bear, so I skirted the edge of the spruces until I picked up his trail emerging from the far side of the evergreens and heading down to the Far Field Road. Instead of following the road, he had climbed down into the sheltered, warm, and fast-melting Roseberry Hollow. I expected to be stopped by our neighbor's posted land, but the bear paralleled the

Far Field Road only a hundred feet or so below, and I often lost and then re-found his tracks in the melting snow. While the route may have been easy for him, walking on a hillside and climbing under, around, and over fallen trees was no easy task for me. In several places I found the melted, brown circles where deer had slept and then leaped to their feet and run off, presumably frightened by the approaching bear.

I was glad I had taken my walking stick to help me move up and down the slope. I also used it to dig into the hillside as I climbed back up to the Far Field Road near Coyote Bench, still following the bear's tracks. From there he more or less stayed on the road to the Far Field, stopping only once below some grapevines to dig in the snow.

Much of the Far Field was melted; but by then I had had experience picking up his faint tracks and followed them as they crossed the field and headed straight for the old red fox den. I momentarily was hopeful that he might have wriggled down into the entrance hole, but, of course, it was too small although it looked as if some creature had entered it. Instead, the bear tracks continued up to Pennyroyal Trail and into the woods beyond the Far Field. Then they reached the Second Thicket, which was almost totally snow-free from the warm sun of late morning. Just as I reached our property line, the tracks disappeared in the brown expanse of dead, hay-scented ferns.

Reluctant to give up, I circled and finally picked them up in another trace of snow for a few more feet until I reached a much larger melted area. Even though I again circled, I could not find them. By then I had been up, down, and around in pursuit for two hours without a rest. After probing under an uprooted tree with a hole beneath that looked like a perfect place for a bear to hibernate, I gave up the chase. Even though I hadn't found my quarry, tracking the bear had given me a good workout and a little insight into how a bear moves over the landscape. ☉

By Marcia Bonta

Great Backyard Bird Count — 2003

Mark your calendar! Enjoy Presidents' Weekend, St. Valentine's Day, and the 6th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count on February 14-17.

The Great Backyard Bird Count or GBBC, available at < www.birdsource.org/gbbc >, will be six years old this February 14-17. Submitted entirely on-line, the approximately 50,000 checklists from every state and province provide a winter snapshot of the status of our birds on that count weekend. A monitoring project that is designed to allow beginners and experts alike to participate, the GBBC aims to engage and educate families and individuals in the hopes that they will continue their involvement through other bird monitoring projects. As with other projects, GBBC data become more and more valuable with each year that the information is compiled.

On the Web at the URL referenced above, explore the results from any state or province or a region or all of the North American continent.

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