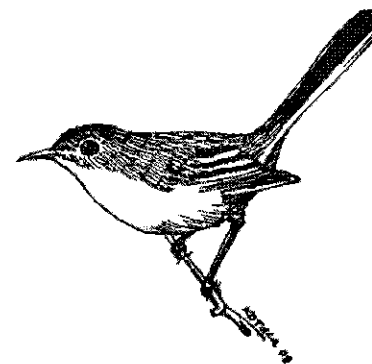


The Gnatcatcher

Newsletter of Juniata Valley Audubon



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JVAS Chapter-only Memberships due

Juniata Valley Audubon has about 600 members. Close to 150 of you have opted to be **chapter-only members**, that is, members only of the JVAS and not the National Audubon Society. Chapter-only membership costs only \$15 per year for individuals, and family as well as other levels of membership are considerably less than National membership. Switching to a JVAS chapter-only membership offers a considerable savings in these difficult economic times.

Chapter-only membership in the JVAS confers all the benefits of National Audubon membership with the exception of Audubon magazine. However, all chapter-only dues stay with the JVAS and are used locally here in the Juniata Valley for conservation education and advocacy in Blair, Huntingdon, Centre, Bedford, and Mifflin Counties.

Chapter-only membership is on a calendar-year basis, thus chapter-only members' dues for 2012 are due now. If you're a chapter-only member or would like to become one, then please fill out the membership form below.

Juniata Valley Audubon membership

provides you with the following benefits:

- Notification of Juniata Valley Audubon's exciting activities including nature programs, field trips and other events
- Subscription to the bimonthly chapter newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*
- Opportunities to participate in conservation projects and environmental advocacy, and *have fun!*

Become a chapter-only member: _____ **Individual:** \$15 _____ **Family:** \$20 _____ **Supporting:** \$35

_____ **Friend of JVAS:** \$50 _____ **Corporate:** \$100

_____ **Life Membership:** \$500— JVAS Life Membership provides you with all the benefits listed above for a once-in-a-lifetime fee of \$500.

Name _____

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City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Juniata Valley Audubon

P.O. Box 42

Tyrone, PA 16686

Protection Sought for Unique Cave Creature Threatened by Proposed Blair County Quarry

Juniata Valley Audubon Society and the Center for Biological Diversity have filed a petition seeking Endangered Species Act protection for Pennsylvania's Heller Cave springtail, a tiny cave-dwelling arthropod. Discovered in 1997, the springtail is only found in the Heller Caves in Catharine Township, Blair County, where it is threatened by a proposed limestone quarry. The quarry also threatens an imperiled bat species, the eastern small-footed bat; streams and wetlands; and a beloved hiking trail.

"The Heller Cave quarry threatens the survival of a species found nowhere else on Earth," said Mollie Matteson, a conservation advocate with the northeast field office of the Center. *"It also will damage important fish and wildlife habitat and the quality of life in central Pennsylvania."*

The quarry is proposed by Gulf Trading and Transport and was granted a permit for operation last year by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. It threatens a tract of land recognized by the state, as well as local and national conservation groups, as both a "Biological Diversity Area" and an "Important Bird Area," because of its high ecological values, including the Heller Caves. Both the state Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission have expressed concern about the project's effects on wildlife, a tributary of the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River, and wetlands. The Game Commission designated a TOTAL AVOIDANCE AREA around the caves, to protect the threatened eastern small-footed bat. However, the DEP ignored this and the DEP's permit allows mining activity within the TOTAL AVOIDANCE AREA.

"Once people found out about the mining project, we readily organized a broad coalition of nearby landowners, birdwatchers, recreationists, and other local and state conservation groups to oppose it," said Stan Kotala, spokesman for the Juniata Valley Audubon Society. *"The quarry is bad for bats, for birds, for the hundreds of people that use the Lower Trail right next to the*

site, and for the neighbors that will have to put up with 90 heavy trucks rumbling by on local roads each day."

Juniata Valley Audubon Society, the Center, and a concerned citizen who regularly recreates in the area appealed the permit last summer. The case will go to trial in Harrisburg early this year.

The Heller Cave springtail, which is a little over an eighth of an inch in length, belongs to a group of arthropods that live in various underground environments. Like other springtail species, it has a special appendage on the underside of its body that allows it to jump many times its body length. Cave-dwelling springtails are highly dependent on the stable temperatures and high humidity found in caves, and the Heller Cave springtail would likely not survive long if exposed to outside surface conditions.

Cave springtails feed on decaying organic matter, such as fallen leaves that have blown into a cave or are carried in on an underground stream. Some springtails eat bat guano, although it is unknown whether the Heller Cave springtail depends on guano as food. Among other springtails of its type, the Heller Cave springtail is a geographic outlier; no other similar springtail species is found as far north and east in North America.

The Center for Biological Diversity has also spearheaded an effort to gain greater protections for the eastern small-footed bat, which is declining due to habitat loss and a newly emergent fungal disease called white-nose syndrome that afflicts hibernating bats. In early 2010, the Center petitioned the federal government to list the species under the Endangered Species Act. Earlier last summer, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted an initial positive finding for listing of the small-footed bat; a final decision is expected this year.

L to R: JVAS member Dave Hunter, Center for Biological Diversity Conservation Advocate Mollie Matteson, JVAS Conservation Chair Dr. Stan Kotala, JVAS Field Trip Chair Deb Tencer, JVAS Vice President Laura Jackson, JVAS President Dave Bonta, and Sally in foreground. This photo was taken during a visit to the Lower Trail in the Heller Caves Biological Diversity Area last summer.



JVAS Lawsuit against DEP to save Threatened Species scheduled for Trial next Month

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's failure to protect a hibernation site and associated habitat supporting the small-footed bat, a threatened and protected species under the Pennsylvania Game and Wildlife Code, has forced Juniata Valley Audubon and the Center for Biological Diversity to sue the DEP.

While not plaintiffs in this case, 16 other organizations support the fight to save this habitat.

The Heller Caves Biological Diversity Area in Catharine Township, Blair County, includes a hibernaculum for eastern small-footed bats. This Blair County Natural Heritage Area is within the boundaries of the proposed Gulf Group limestone mine.

According to the *Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory* done under the direction of the Blair County Planning Commission from 2001-2006, the Heller Caves BDA hibernacula can be destroyed by adjacent blasting or other earth-moving activities that disrupt bedrock. In addition, the *Inventory* states that a reduction of forest cover would reduce habitat area for roosting and feeding needed by these bats. According to the Pennsylvania Game Commission *"forested areas with caves, mines, rock outcrops or talus provide key summer habitat"* for small-footed bats.

The *Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory* goes on to state: *"Blasting and other activities that will affect the bedrock should be avoided within this area so as not to damage the cave being used as a hibernation site"* and *"maintaining and cultivating forest cover will increase the amount of available habitat for bats."*

The BDA and its defined supporting landscape are part of the proposed mine. The *Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory* map for Catharine Township clearly indicates that an area circumscribed by a ¼-mile radius from Heller Caves #4 and #5 is Core Habitat for the Heller Caves BDA. Impacts will include forest removal; noise, air, and water pollution; heavy truck and bulldozer traffic; wash-

outs of the trail from runoff from the new heavy-duty roadway; removal of talus that serves as critical habitat for the small-footed bat, and forest fragmentation.

Significantly, the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) provided the DEP with maps indicating a TOTAL AVOIDANCE

AREA surrounding Heller Caves 4 and 5 and extending to the Lower Trail and further to the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River. The DEP, however, issued the mining permit for an area within this TOTAL AVOIDANCE AREA.



The DEP failed to protect the PA threatened small-footed bat despite the DEP being aware of the importance of the Heller Caves as a hibernaculum for this species and despite the PGC's designation of a TOTAL AVOIDANCE AREA between Heller Caves #4 and #5 and the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River. **The DEP acted arbitrarily and capriciously in issuing the small non-coal mining permit in light of the threat (clearly identified by the Pennsylvania Game Commission) to the threatened species and failed to follow the PGC's recommendations concerning protecting those species.**

The DEP should have taken a precautionary approach, and denied the permit for mining in any part of the TOTAL AVOIDANCE AREA, especially in light of the fact that all the bat species using the hibernacula in the project area are under stress from White Nose Syndrome. Furthermore, Heller Caves 1,2,3,7, 8 and 9 were not surveyed for hibernating bats, and rock rubble at the cliff base and crevices in the cliff face were not surveyed for hibernating bats. In all at least 100,000 square feet of suitable hibernating areas were not surveyed for hibernating bats.

All other options for addressing this problem have failed, and, as a result, Juniata Valley Audubon and the Center for Biological Diversity have been forced to take this step of suing the DEP to protect a Pennsylvania threatened species and its habitat. This case is scheduled for trial in late February in Harrisburg.

Any JVAS member interested in attending the trial should contact JVAS Conservation Chair Dr. Stan Kotala at ccwiba@keyconn.net or 814-946-8840 for more details.

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Protects 1,600 acres on Evitts Mountain in Bedford County

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) has acquired more than 1,600 acres on Evitts Mountain in Bedford County, Pa. to permanently conserve a major expanse of mountainside forest over a key tributary to the Potomac River.

"This property, called Hardwood Trails, is one of the most magnificent properties we have acquired and protected for several years," said Tom Saunders, president and CEO of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. "We've protected nine other properties over the past year, but this is one of our most exciting ones. This is a key conservation property, a huge mountainside parcel in Bedford County, and for the first time it creates one large linkage of protected lands from Rocky Gap State Park in Maryland up into Pennsylvania's Buchanan State Forest."

The acquisition helps to protect Evitts Creek and the lakes formed by the creek, Lake Koon and Lake Gordon, which are just below it. The lakes supply drinking water for the City of Cumberland, Md. The hillsides above them are important to protect, both for their own conservation values and for the benefit of the drinking water.

WPC will transfer the Hardwood Trails property to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (DCNR) Bureau of Forestry to become a new addition to Buchanan State Forest. As part of the state forest system, the property will be managed according to the highest standards of forest stewardship and will be permanently open to the public for outdoor recreation.

The property's remote setting on the forested slopes of Evitts Mountain provides vital habitat for diverse plant and wildlife species. It has rocky outcrops, both gentle and steep slopes, extensive forestland and old logging roads that can be used for hikes into the property. There are also several seasonal pools on

the property, which provide uncommon habitat for amphibians and host several rare plants.

Also, because of its large size and location, and its mountain ridge character, the property serves as a breeding ground for a variety of birds and as a stopover site for raptors and songbirds migrating through the Appalachian Mountains. Bedford County is an important place for land protection for the Conservancy. The area is remote and has natural and historic character. It is a part of Pennsylvania's ridge and valley area, and has a different natural character than places farther west.

"On the ridgetops of Hardwood Trails, you can hike to the steepest parts near the top and look west over as many as four mountain ridges, with farming valleys between each one," said Michael Knoop, WPC's land protection specialist. "As you drive from Bedford south toward Maryland on U.S. Route 220, the view you see off to the west will be protected forever."

"It often involves a combination of lots of generous donors and partners to complete ambitious projects like these," Saunders said. "DCNR was both generous with its funds and very helpful with many technical issues on this acquisition. The Simon family made a generous gift or we would never have been able to get this done, and another individual donor's bequest helped complete the funding."

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has conserved more than 232,000 acres of natural lands in Western Pennsylvania, more than 3,500 acres of which are in Bedford County.

"The Conservancy has protected quite a number of properties around Bedford County over the years, but never one as large as this 1,600-acre tract," said Knoop.

Lancaster City creates Green Infrastructure Plan

Pennsylvania's Lancaster County Commissioners have adopted a sweeping plan that emphasizes preserving the county's remaining woodlands and open spaces and creating a network of "greenway" trails.

Lancaster City now wants to create its own "green infrastructure" plan which would identify ways that the city could reduce air and water pollution, such as planting more trees and paving with porous surfaces that would reduce rainwater run-off. The new plan calls for preserving existing wooded and herbaceous cover while maintaining any natural drainage ways.

Previously, Lancaster's long-term control plan had envisioned large storage tanks or deep underground tunnels or gray infra-

structure to be constructed to manage stormwater by holding and eventually treating the polluted stormwater at the city's regional advanced wastewater treatment plant. Not only was this approach an expensive capital venture to the tune of some \$300 million but also would require ongoing operational costs to treat this polluted stormwater at the plant. The city then began embracing green infrastructure as a more cost effective solution to gray infrastructure. The result of these efforts is the city's first-ever Green Infrastructure Plan.

"It will fundamentally change the look and the feel of the city itself," said Danene Sorace, executive director of LIVE Green Lancaster. The nonprofit urban greening project has been working with city public works officials to draft the plans.

Some Good News about Bats!

"It's been a disease where there's been one negative thing after another," said Greg Turner, a wildlife biologist for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, who is helping monitor an abandoned coal mine in Luzerne County, where an estimated 2,000 bats survive and appear to be healthy. "It's finally nice to see some glimmer of hope." Before White Nose Syndrome found the site, the mine held between 50,000 and 80,000 bats in the winter.

White Nose Syndrome, caused by a fungus that prompts bats to wake from their winter hibernation and die when they fly into the frigid, insect-less winter landscape, was first detected near Albany, New York in 2006 and since then it has been spreading across North America. It's believed to have killed at least a million bats.

The fungus that causes the disease likely came from Europe where it has been found on bats, but it does not have the mortality it does in North America, said Ann Froschauer, the lead spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's investigation.

There's no reliable estimate about what the total bat population was before the arrival of white nose, but in some caves and abandoned mines where bats live, up to 99 percent have died, Turner said.

Even if the mortality were to end now it could be hundreds of years before populations of the slow-reproducing bats could rebound to where they were before white nose, Froschauer said.

The species known as little brown bats were once the most common in the northeast, and they were responsible for eating count-

less insects every year. Other bat species, such as the big brown bat, while still affected by white nose, aren't as hard hit.

"What we are trying to do is chip away at the (causes) of this disease," Turner said. "If there are individuals that are surviving, is there anything we can learn about why?"

In New York, biologists have found that some bats at Fort Drum exposed to white nose are healthy and reproducing.

"While it's still too early to make any long-term conclusions from the recent Fort Drum study, the Department of Environmental Conservation is encouraged over the finding that some bats can survive and reproduce despite exposure to the syndrome during winter hibernation over two consecutive years," said DEC spokesman Rick Georgeson.

In Vermont, biologists have identified 15 colonies in the western part of the state where the numbers of little brown bats, while still far fewer than before white nose appeared, are surviving, said Vermont Fish and Wildlife Biologist Scott Darling.

"We visited each and every one of those colonies and to some degree, much to our surprise, they seem to be healthy," Darling said. "It begged the question, 'Why are you the lucky ones?'"

Darling said there are three basic hypotheses about the survivors that will be studied: Are the bats behaving in ways that keep them from getting infected? Are they from areas that haven't been infected? Could they have some genetic resistance to white nose that is just beginning to appear?

JVAS THANKS ITS CORPORATE SPONSOR

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January/February JVAS Programs

January 17 — Members' Night: JVAS members are encouraged to bring any nature-related items that they wish to share: music, photographs, video, poetry, artwork, etc. Please contact Programs Committee Chair Laura Jackson to let her know what you plan to contribute to the program. Videos and slide programs should be limited to 15 minutes.

February 21 — Plant Lover's Paradise: Images from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew: Founded in 1759, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in London, contain the largest collection of living plants in the world; with more than 30,000 species, in addition to an arboretum, an aerial walkway, a pair of historic Victorian greenhouses, and many other attractions. Kew also is a leading conservation and research institution, but this slide presentation by JVAS President Dave Bonta emphasizes appreciation rather than education. That's because Dave, during his May 2011 visit to the Kew Gardens, was too busy snapping photos to jot down the names of everything that caught his eye, from cycads to cactuses to orchids and strangler figs — a riot of forms and colors that will make you gasp and leave you with a renewed appreciation for the beauty and diversity of this green planet.

January/February JVAS Field Trips

February 12, Sunday — CABIN FEVER HIKE ABOVE HORSESHOE CURVE: Break up your cabin fever and explore the state game lands and Altoona Water Authority property in a winter setting. The hike will take about 2 hours. Please wear your boots! Meet at Horseshoe Curve at 11 a.m. For more info, contact Deb Tencer at naturehikergal@gmail.com.

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