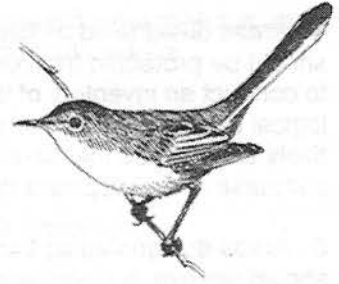


THE GNATCATCHER

Newsletter of Juniata Valley Audubon

Vol. 37 No. 4—July/Aug 2005

www.juniatavalleyaudubon.org



JVAS provides comments regarding the revision of the Blair County Comprehensive Plan

Members of Juniata Valley Audubon's board of directors recently met with representatives of the Blair County Planning Commission to discuss the ongoing revisions to the Blair County Comprehensive Plan. This plan is a guidance document which will aid municipalities in setting land use patterns for the future.

Juniata Valley Audubon strongly believes that **the Blair County Comprehensive Plan must reflect the principles of conservation biology**, that is, the recognition and protection of core natural areas (>10,000 acres) and corridors connecting these areas. During the public comment period, Blair County residents voiced a clear call for increased attention to conservation and preservation of the natural attributes that make the county unique.

"Quality of Life in Blair County: Citizens' Perspective," which resulted from a questionnaire mailed to Blair County residents, lists **management and control of development and preservation of natural areas as the top two concerns** of the county's residents. Environmental protection is listed among the top four concerns. Our comments regarding items that should be included in the comprehensive plan are listed below:

1. **Core natural areas** should be protected from development, including road construction. Core natural areas in Blair County include, from east to west, **Tussey Mountain, Canoe Mountain, Brush Mountain, Bald Eagle Mountain, Lock Mountain, Dunning Mountain, and the Allegheny Front**. Core natural areas serve as relatively undisturbed sites where natural processes occur with minimal human interference. These core areas consist almost entirely of unbroken forest and should be maintained as such. Tax incentives, the purchase of development rights, and outright acquisition are tools that can be used to preserve these areas.
2. **Corridors** connecting natural areas should be protected from development, including road construction. Corridors connecting Blair County's core natural areas include, from north to south, the **Bald Eagle Creek corridor, the Little Juniata River Corridor, and the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River corridor**. Corridors facilitate the dispersion of wildlife and plant populations between core natural areas. Tax incentives, the purchase of development rights, and outright acquisition are tools that can be used to preserve these areas.
3. **Wetlands, floodplains, and steep slopes** should be protected from development. Blair County has already lost a large percentage of its wetlands and cannot afford to lose more. Of the wetlands that remain in Blair County, the majority have been degraded by pollution from adjacent development. Wetlands should be connected to natural landscapes adjoining them and not cut off by roads, parking lots, and buildings. Wetlands and adjacent natural habitat act in synergy, not in isolation. Preserving wetlands in isolation from other natural habitats retains the flood-control function of wetlands but reduces their biological functions. Many organisms, such as spotted turtles, bog turtles, marbled salamanders, spotted salamanders, red-spotted newts, wood frogs, and spring peepers, require both wetland and upland habitats to complete their life cycles. Tax incentives, the purchase of conservation easements, outright acquisition, and regulation can be used to encourage conservation and preservation of areas adjacent to wetlands so that these areas may maintain their ecological functions.
The preservation of wetlands, floodplains, and steep slopes (>20% grade) will decrease the volume and velocity of flood waters. Wetlands act as sponges, absorbing water during rain events and releasing it slowly during dry periods. Floodplains allow flood waters to spread out unimpeded, thus reducing both the volume and velocity of water affecting downstream areas. By protecting steep slopes in their natural (forested) state, we not only provide an area for rainwater to soak in, but also reduce the velocity of runoff. Forests absorb hundreds of times more rainwater than do developed areas.

Development in wetland areas is regulated by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Development in floodplains and on steep slopes is regulated by local municipalities.

4. Areas designated as **Biological Diversity Areas (BDAs)** by the Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory should be protected from development. Blair County has contracted with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to conduct an inventory of the county and designate areas of exceptional significance. Areas designated as Biological Diversity Areas represent unique habitats that should be preserved in their natural state. BDAs are relatively small areas that serve as critical habitat for one or more species of special concern. Tax incentives, the purchase of development rights, and outright acquisition are tools that can be used to preserve these areas.
5. Areas designated as **Landscape Conservation Areas (LCAs)** by the Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory should receive a higher level of conservation priority, that is, only limited development. Development occurring in Landscape Conservation Areas should be held to a higher conservation standard; open space must be preserved, natural areas must be linked, and natural landscape features must be maintained. LCAs are relatively large areas that contain a variety of habitats and landscape features deserving a high level of protection. Tax incentives, the purchase of development rights, outright acquisition, and regulation are tools that can be used to conserve these areas.
6. Areas designated as **Important Bird Areas (IBAs)** and **Important Mammal Areas (IMAs)** by the Pennsylvania Biological Survey should receive a higher level of conservation priority. IBAs in Blair County are, from east to west, the **Tussey Mountain IBA**, the **Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River IBA**, the **Canoe Creek Watershed IBA** and the **Bald Eagle Ridge IBA**. The only IMA in Blair County is the **Canoe Creek IMA**. Specific IBA descriptions are on the Audubon Pennsylvania website (<http://pa.audubon.org/ibamain.htm>). Specific IMA descriptions are available from the Pennsylvania Wildlife Federation (<http://www.pawildlife.org/imap.htm>).
7. **Watersheds for the supply of drinking water for the Altoona City Authority (ACA), Hollidaysburg, and Tyrone** should be protected from development. Clean water is becoming a very valuable commodity. Once a watershed is damaged by development, it is very difficult and costly to correct the damage. New York City was faced with the need to improve its drinking water quality and found that it was far less expensive to purchase land and conservation easements on land in the watersheds of its reservoirs than to upgrade its treatment plants. The Altoona City Authority should purchase as much land as possible in the watersheds of its reservoirs. Other tools for protecting ACA watershed lands include the purchase of development rights, tax incentives, and regulation.
8. Tools for achieving the desired level of protection for the above-mentioned areas include **tax incentives, purchase of development rights (conservation easements), outright acquisition, and regulation**. The **Forest Legacy** program administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources provides funds for the purchase of development rights on forested lands. This program is similar to the very successful agricultural conservation easement program. Conservation easements also may be held by entities such as the **Southern Alleghenies Conservancy** (www.saconservancy.org) and the **Western Pennsylvania Conservancy** (www.wpconline.org).
9. **Development should be confined to designated areas in the narrow I-99 corridor**. Areas that should be protected from development, even within the narrow I-99 corridor, include wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes (>20% grade), Biological Diversity Areas designated by the Blair County Natural Heritage Inventory, Important Bird Areas and Important Mammal Areas designated by the Pennsylvania Biological Survey.
Examples of inappropriate land uses include the Logan Town Centre shopping complex (steep slope, wetlands, Important Bird Area), the Keystone Opportunity Zone on Brush Mountain at Frankstown Road (17th Street Business and Technology Park) (steep slope, Important Bird Area), and the Keystone Opportunity Zone on Brush Mountain at Pinecroft (steep slope, Important Bird Area).
10. **Environmental Advisory Councils should be formed in all municipalities**. An Environmental Advisory Council is a group of 3-7 community residents, appointed by local elected officials, that advises the local planning commission, park and recreation board and elected officials on the protection, conservation, management, promotion and use of natural resources within its territorial limits. Municipalities are authorized to establish EACs through Pennsylvania **Act 177** <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/local_gov/EACHandbook/Ntbook14.htm> of 1996, originally Act 148 of 1973. EAC members devote time and energy to assist elected and appointed officials in protecting the environment. They can act on a municipal or multi-municipal level. In accordance with **Act 177**, EACs are authorized to identify environmental problems and recommend plans and programs to protect and improve the quality of the environment; make recommendations about the use of open land; promote a community environmental program; keep an index of all open space areas to determine the proper use of such areas; review plans, conduct site visits, and prepare reports for municipal officials; and advise local government agencies about the acquisition of property.

While municipal officials have a high demand for their time and attention, EAC members can devote their full attention to environmental protection. EACs help municipal officials to make environmentally sound decisions.

EACs serve as liaisons to represent both the community and decision makers.

EACs are a focal point for funding and raise money for projects.

EACs engage residents, community volunteers, and the private sector in natural resource protection.

EACs work on a multi-municipal level to reflect natural rather than artificial municipal boundaries.

11. The Blair County Comprehensive Plan should recognize explicitly the value of nature's services.

Nature's services, or ecosystem services, which are provided to our communities free of charge by natural landscape features, include air purification, water purification, carbon sequestration to curb global warming, areas for family-friendly, low cost outdoor recreation, the provision of water for our wells and reservoirs, flood control, slow release of water during times of drought, wildlife habitat, the maintenance of biodiversity, and areas for hunting and fishing. The development of natural areas results in a lessening of nature's ability to provide these services.

During the public meetings regarding the revision of the Blair County Comprehensive Plan the citizens of Blair County voiced a clear call for the conservation and preservation of the natural attributes that make Blair County unique. Residents respect a sense of place that rapidly is being destroyed by unchecked and disorderly development. By implementing the suggestions enumerated above, Blair County will maintain a high quality of life that will be attractive to its youth and to emerging high-paying high-tech businesses.



Moorhen Marsh along the Little Juniata River north of the Easterly Wastewater Treatment Plant in Logan Township, Blair County, is home to Common Moorhens, Soras, and Virginia Rails, all species of special concern in Pennsylvania. Areas such as this deserve permanent protection from development.

Audubon Pennsylvania Executive Director tours JVAS Golden-winged Warbler Management Area in Canoe Creek State Park

Audubon Pennsylvania Executive Director Dr. Timothy Schaeffer and Director of Bird Conservation Stacy Small joined JVAS members at Canoe Creek State Park on June 21 to tour our Golden-winged Warbler Management Area on the southern slope of Moore's Hill. Having been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the Ornithological Technical Committee of the Pennsylvania Biological Survey in 2001, the 15,000 acre Canoe Creek Watershed IBA is of particular interest to Audubon's state headquarters in Harrisburg. With more than 220 documented species of birds using the watershed, and with 110 breeding species, the diversity of birdlife in the Canoe Creek Watershed IBA draws birders from far and wide and it has therefore been designated as part of the Susquehanna Birding and Wildlife Trail (www.pabirdingtrails.com).

The Golden-winged Warbler is a species of special concern in Pennsylvania. Dependent upon early successional habitat consisting of forest edge, shrubs, and herbaceous openings, the Golden-winged Warbler population is declining because of the loss of this habitat. Approximately five pairs of Golden-winged Warblers nested at Canoe Creek State Park in 2003 and 2004, down from about ten pairs a decade ago. This decline is attributed to the loss of shrubby and herbaceous old field habitat because of the overgrowth of Tree of Heaven and Russian Olive. Both of these alien invasive species crowd out native plants and are detrimental to natural ecosystems at the park.

Juniata Valley Audubon and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources are cooperating in the

removal of these exotic plants that are taking over the habitat of the Golden-winged Warbler in the park. By removing these alien invaders and replacing them with native shrubs such as hawthorn, red-osier dogwood, black haw, arrowwood, and flowering dogwood we intend to create a more desirable habitat for birds dependent upon early-successional ecosystems. **We expect to see an increase in the numbers of not only Golden-winged Warblers, but also Prairie Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats, Field Sparrows, Whip-poor-wills and American Woodcocks, all species of conservation concern in Pennsylvania.**

The Juniata Valley Audubon Golden-winged Warbler Management Plan at Canoe Creek State Park calls for the removal of these invasive exotic plants so that a 70 acre area of woods edge, shrubs, and herbaceous clearing can be maintained on Moore's Hill, between the Moore's Hill Trail and Canoe Lake. To accomplish this, **we are calling on volunteers to help us remove these alien plants from the Golden-winged Warbler Management Area in the park.** Large areas of autumn olive were cleared by school groups this spring. Several more educational programs and work days are planned for this year, the next being on Saturday, July 16. *If you are interested in helping with this project, or just want to learn more about the Golden-winged Warbler, please contact Canoe Creek State Park Environmental Education Specialist Heidi Boyle at (814) 696-6025 (hboyle@state.pa.us) or Juniata Valley Audubon Important Bird Area Coordinator Dr. Stan Kotala at (814) 946-8840 (ccwiba@keyconn.net).*



Audubon PA Executive Director and the Director of Bird Conservation join JVAS members on a tour of the Golden-winged Warbler management area in Canoe Creek State Park. Left to right: Pennsylvania Game Commission Regional Wildlife Diversity Biologist Dan Mummert, Audubon PA Director of Bird Conservation Stacy Small, Jenny Volgstadt, Steve Volgstadt (Canoe Creek State Park's new manager), Alice Kotala, *Gnatcatcher* Editor Helena Kotala, Duane Butler, Mike Jackson, CBC Coordinator Heidi Boyle, Audubon PA Executive Director Dr. Timothy Schaeffer, Elizabeth Kotala, JVAS Membership Chair Charlie Hoyer, Laura Jackson, Alice Fleischer, Dick Mock, JVAS Historian Terry Wentz, and JVAS Treasurer Warren Baker.

**THE FOLLOWING LETTER TO THE EDITOR BY JVAS PRESIDENT DR. STAN KOTALA
WAS PUBLISHED IN THE ALTOONA MIRROR ON TUESDAY, MAY 31, 2005:**

To the editor:

The recent rediscovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, a bird thought to be extinct in the U.S. for more than 60 years, highlights the importance of the Endangered Species Act for providing species and habitat protections. The Ivory-billed Woodpecker was one of the first species listed as endangered when the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973. Now that it is rediscovered, the Endangered Species Act will aid in the woodpecker's survival and recovery.

The Endangered Species Act is a safety net for our nation's natural heritage. Yet, some members of Congress want to weaken the Act's protections for species and habitat. A recent poll shows that 90% of voters recognize as important that the Endangered Species Act provides a safety net for wildlife, plants, and fish that are on the brink of extinction. Understanding the importance of habitat protection, fully 95% of voters agree that one of the most effective ways to protect species is to protect the places where they live. Voters view species protection as so important that they are nearly unanimous in their agreement that, when the science is uncertain, it is better to err on the side of caution, because once a species goes extinct, it is gone forever. They are also very moved by the view that people have a moral duty to prevent the extinction of species because, once they are gone, we cannot bring them back.

While 69% of voters believe that the federal government and government regulation are too intrusive in daily life, rather than supporting a roll back in the Endangered Species Act 86% favor expending additional resources on species and critical habitat protections. They believe strongly that allowing species to go extinct is simply not acceptable, and that we owe it to our children and grandchildren to be good stewards of the earth. Any perception that there is a ground swell of support for weakening the Endangered Species Act is clearly a misperception. Voters are strongly supportive of species protections in general and the Endangered Species Act in particular, including and especially with regard to protecting critical habitat.

Juniata Valley Audubon, a local conservation organization with more than 300 members in the Altoona area, asks that citizens who value our moral obligations as stewards of the earth should contact their members of Congress and ask them to support the Endangered Species Act and oppose any bills that would weaken protections for species or habitat.

We owe it to our children and grandchildren to be guardians of our natural heritage and to leave behind a legacy of protecting endangered species like the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and the special places they call home.

Sincerely,

Stan Kotala, M.D.

President, Juniata Valley Audubon

"When I hear of the destruction of a species, I feel just as if the works of some great writer had perished."

President Theodore Roosevelt

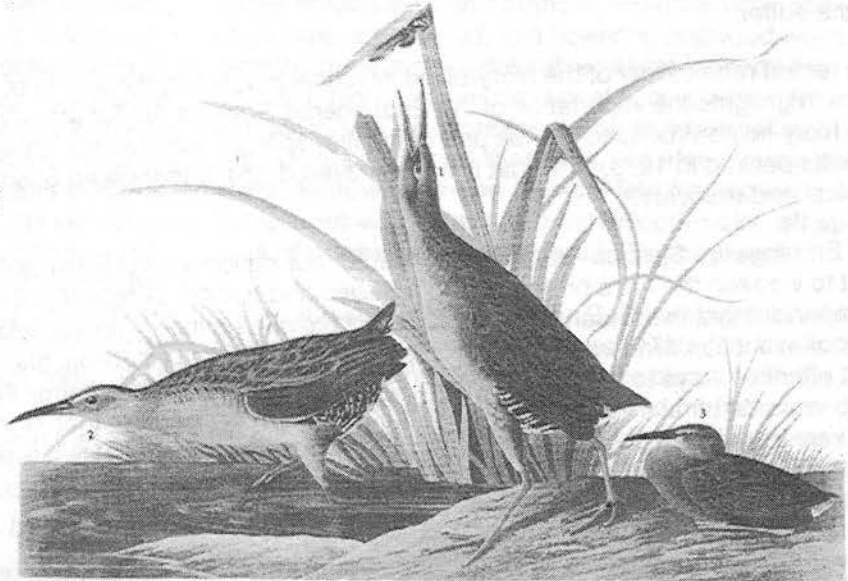
Marsh Crawlers and Shadow Walkers

By Heidi Boyle

In the muggy gray dawn I brushed away the no-see-ums hovering around my sweaty forehead and again scanned the cattails. I was sitting at the edge of a soft mat woven of stems and blades, trying to keep my boots from sinking into the muck while I searched the shadows for telltale movement.

From my hidden spot, I could see the skeletons of dead willows, the dark shapes of a few nests standing out in the dawn light. A long, greenish stub of a branch suddenly moved, and twig-like toes reached up to scratch, revealing the form of a juvenile green heron. It perched stiffly, moving in slow motion, yellow eyes glaring out at the dawn.

Suddenly, I snapped to attention. Over the alarm calls of the red winged blackbirds came the sharp punctuated call I had been waiting to hear, 'Tick-et, Tick-et, Tick-et, Tick-et.' I quickly scanned the base of the cattails, but could not spot its origin.



Virginia Rails by John James Audubon

I had come marsh crawling, secreting myself among shrubs and cattails to find the small and doubly secretive Virginia rail (*Rallus limicola*). After pushing my way through dew-covered grasses and low hanging branches of ash and willow I made my way to this narrow strip between two ponds in the marsh. Here was the best and closest view of the dense cattail stands *R. limicola* calls home.



Red-winged Blackbird eggs by
Helena Kotala

Virginia rails are chicken-like birds, living solitary lives deep in the cattails among dank roots and stems. The birds tiptoe through vegetation on long, slender toes, designed to keep from sinking into the muck. Rails are more often seen than heard, preferring to escape intruders by slipping through cattails, rather than flying.

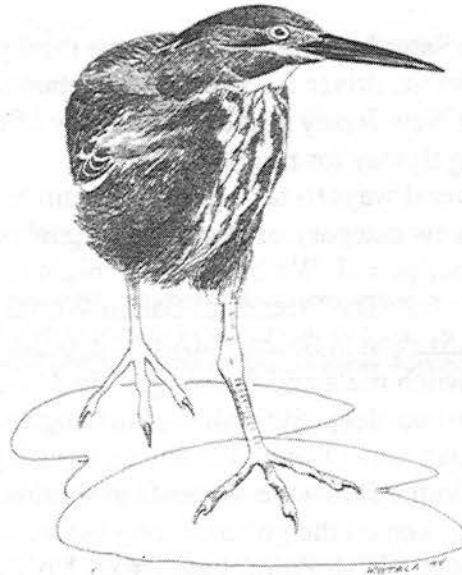
Rails are shy, narrow birds perfectly designed for the thin gateways and corridors of the marsh. Because of their preference for thick growth, rails primarily rely on their piercing cry, rather than visual communication. 'Tick-et, Tick-et, Tick-et, Tick-et' came clicking again across the marsh, but still no movement could be seen at the feet of the quivering ribbons of cattails.

Watching for rails is a test of patience and endurance for any birdwatcher, but well worth it. As I sat quietly, sightings included an American Bittern flying over, the young green heron, dragonflies landing on my wet boots, the acrobatics of tree and rough winged swallows, willow and least flycatchers and a determined Kingfisher searching for breakfast.

Despite these distractions, this particular morning luck held as one of the shadows at the base of the cattails trembled, and my quarry slipped into view. For a few moments a solitary Virginia rail bent to probe the mud for small crustaceans, aquatic insects and plants with its slightly decurved bill. Only 8 - 9" in length, the diminutive *R. limicola* is a study in camouflage with its reddish colored sides, gray cheeks and barred back and flanks.

As I sat peering through my binoculars, barely breathing, the shy bird cocked its head, its red eye visible for a brief second, and quietly retreated into the shadows. It vanished so quickly and completely I could not even glimpse its dark form moving away. Somewhere among the green and brown the rail was threading its way to its platform nest woven of cattail blades, draped with an overhanging canopy of stems. Here the rail and its mate will care for 6-12 mottled eggs, artfully concealed among the grasses. Within a week of hatching, the young will be able to forage independently among the cattails, still under the watchful eye of their wary parents.

Not believing my luck, I began threading my way back through waist-deep wet grass. I paused and listened as the little rail offered a final call, a descending series of grunts 'uurrp uurrp urrp urp urp' that seemed to fill the marsh with confirmation of its presence. This morning was one of the last times I would hear its breeding season call. I turned once more to look back at the marsh, the air already shuddering in the early heat of day. It was a rich morning of marsh crawling, made all the brighter with the sights and sounds of the shadow walker.

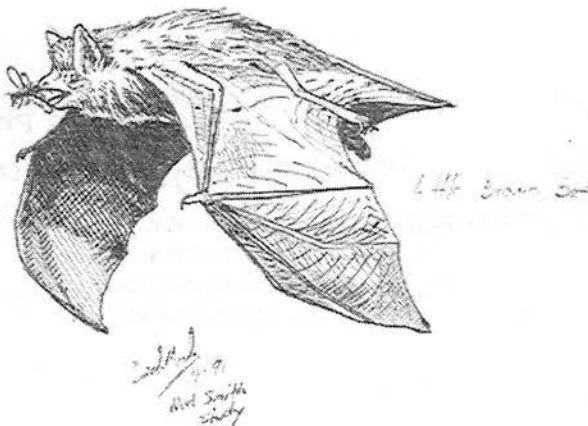


Green Heron by JVAS president
Dr. Stan Kotala

JVAS sponsors Nature Day

120 Kindergarten children learned basic ecological principles at Tyrone Elementary School's 3rd Annual "Nature Day", sponsored by JVAS. There were six stations: "Fred the Fish," Stream Critters, PA Wildlife, Food Web Game, Food Chain Game, and Enviroscope.

-Jody Wallace, JVAS Education Chair



Little Brown Bat by
JVAS member Dick
Mock

JVAS Member Participates in World Series of Birding

by Ken Lynch

It is the third Saturday in May and for the third year in a row, I'm sitting at an exit of I-80 in Northern New Jersey. I'm the driver for a team taking part in the 22nd Annual World Series of Birding. The WSB has been hosted by New Jersey Audubon as a way of demonstrating the natural diversity of New Jersey and its role as a Spring flyway for migrants.

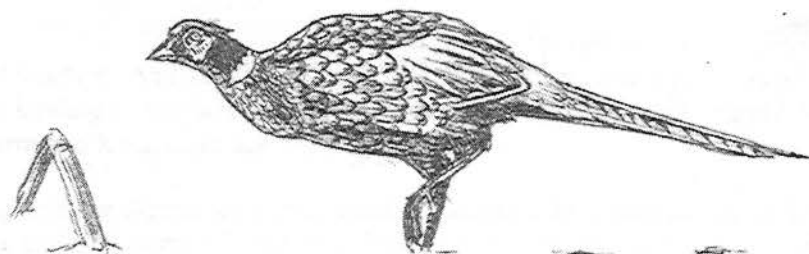
There are several ways to take part. Our team competes as a statewide team. There are also County only teams and the new category of Big Sit. The goal of each team is to identify as many species of birds as possible in a 24 hour period. We begin at midnight and end 24 hours later at the Cape May lighthouse.

I'm the driver for 'The Friends of Salem Woods – Wicked Witchities'. The Friends of Salem Woods is a nonprofit organization in Salem, MA that sponsors our team. The Wicked Witchities is a take off on Salem's famous witch trials and the song of the Common Yellowthroat. It's the kind of pun that is only funny after 24 hours of no sleep, 500 miles of driving and too much caffeine. As the driver, my job is to meet up with the team part way through the day as a fresh person behind the wheel. So that's why I'm now waiting at a truck stop in the Delaware Water Gap waiting for the team to roll in.

The team has been on the go since long before midnight and now it is 10 am. The team has been to Great Swamp, Stokes and High Point State Parks. Now we're getting ready to head South. Good teams leave the North with over 100 species. The top teams leave the North with over 140 species. We're leaving the North with 130 and feeling pretty good. There is now a long drive to the South and some time to rest and recap the morning. Things have really clicked and all of the birds we scouted were right where we knew they would be and were singing just like they should.

Once in the South, things still go well. There is more ground to cover and a lot to do before the sun sets. We hit all of the good birding spots and quickly start closing in on our team's all time record. We finally break our old record at Avalon where we pick up our Yellow Crowned Night Heron. After a stop at Brigantine we head out to Jake's Landing after dark to try for some rails. On the way to the finish line we hope to pick up a Chuck Will's Widow in Cape May behind the elementary school. The Chuck was a partial at our Brigantine stop, meaning not all of the team heard it call, now we get the Chuck and that brings our total up to 191 and we head off for the light house. We're tired, but pleased with our results. After we check in at the finish line, the 'what ifs' start. What if we had our Blue Grosbeak? What if we had gotten our Carolina Chickadee? What if, what if, what if... Well the next WSB is only 364 days away.

For the record, we tied for 9th place out of 58 Level I teams (more than half of which run the whole state), a respectable finish for our team. More information about the WSB can be found at the NJ Audubon web site (<http://www.njaudubon.org/wsb/index02.html>).



Ring-necked Pheasant
by JVAS member
Dick Mock

JOIN JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON!

Juniata Valley Audubon membership provides you with the following benefits:

- 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.
- Opportunity to aid in the preservation of the natural world.
- Opportunity to have fun in joining with fellow nature enthusiasts. **Make your check payable to JVAS.**

- Become a chapter-only member: ☐ Individual—\$15
☐ Family—\$20
☐ Supporting—\$35
☐ Friend of JVAS—\$50
☐ Corporate—\$100



Juniata Valley Audubon Life Membership provides you with all the benefits listed above along with special recognition in *The Gnatcatcher*. Become a primary supporter of the JVAS' mission of education and advocacy for a once-in-a-lifetime fee of \$500. Make your check payable to Juniata Valley Audubon.

Name _____

Address _____

Mail the completed form to JVAS Membership Chair Charlie Hoyer, P.O. Box 32, Tyrone, PA 16686

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 IBA Coordinator.....Dr. Stan Kotala (see above)
 CBC Coordinator.....Heidi Boyle 949-9302
 <hboyle@state.pa.us>
 NAMC Coordinator...Dr. Stan Kotala (see above)

NO PROGRAM MEETINGS UNTIL SEPTEMBER!

ABOUT JVAS PROGRAMS: Programs are presented on the third Tuesday of each month. They begin at 7 PM in the chapel at Alto-Reste Park on Plank Road, Altoona. Our programs are designed for a general audience, and are free and open to the public. There are no program meetings scheduled for July or August. Programs will resume in September.

JVAS Juniata Club River Trips take place according to weather and water levels. If you would like your name added to the Juniata Club roster, contact Helena Kotala at ccwiba@keyconn.net or 946-8840. She will notify you of upcoming trips by email or phone.

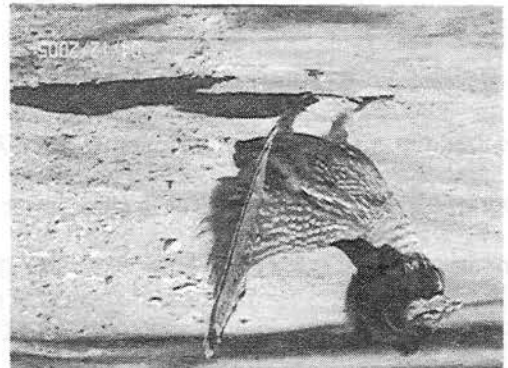
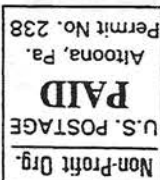
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Mike & Laura Jackson
8621 Black Valley Rd.
Everett, PA 15537-8526



Ruffed Grouse by JVAS member
Luis Moore

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Altoona, PA 16601