

The Gnatcatcher

Newsletter of Juniata Valley Audubon

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as a benefit for members of the

JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY



President's Message by John Carter

Dear JVAS Community,

As the winter months settle in with frigid air, snow-covered lawns and ominous skies, we start to hibernate in our cozy flannel shirt or sweater, with a cup of hot cocoa and take in our favorite backyard birds. Some of you may even document or journal your sightings and compare to years' past.

While watching your dearest feeder friends, have you ever thought about or even given a special meaning to a particular bird species? I know I have. Birds can symbolize freedom because they have the ability and the independence to roam the earth and fly in the skies. I can remember while growing up, family would tell me when a Northern Cardinal shows up at your feeder, it meant that a loved one that passed is sending their love and is watching over you.

There is a lot of literature from mythologies and folklores that suggest birds have different meanings and interpretations. Some of hope and courage, others of a darker nature. The "*hummingbird means that we can make changes in our lives when needed, the hummingbird can change direction, fly backward, meaning it can get accustomed to life change.*"¹

Shortly after Thanksgiving, I was ready to select a Christmas tree. I picked this Douglas Fir out at JB Tree Farm in Huntingdon County in a little bit of rain. I didn't spend too much time pondering around as I felt I found one that had the qualities of a decent tree, (and I didn't want to get soaked); it had a bold fragrance, vibrant green color, and was a dense tree to hold many ornaments with softish needles that hold strong. I left the tree in the garage for a day to dry off before I brought into the house. As I unraveled the netting, the branches slowly stretched filling out the gaps. I was pleasantly surprised and rewarded with a bird nest tucked close to the trunk, thus confirming this was the tree for me.



Interestingly, I was reading that bird nests are good-luck symbols. Legend has it that prosperity will come to any home that finds a bird's nest nestled among the branches of the Christmas tree.

I wish a prosperous and healthy 2021 to all of you, and that you can enjoy the beauty of the birds around you.

1. Alois, R. (n.d.). Bird Symbolism. <https://www.richardalois.com/symbolism/bird-symbolism>

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Juniata Valley Audubon Society Zoom Programs

Juniata Valley Audubon Society (JVAS) is a chapter of the National Audubon Society and is dedicated to the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the Earth's biological diversity.

Juniata Valley Audubon accomplishes its mission through advocacy, science, land stewardship, and education – working directly with Audubon Mid-Atlantic, the district office of the National Audubon Society.

The JVAS is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit, educational organization as described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Gifts are deductible for income tax purposes (Tax ID # 25-1533496).

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The JVAS Board has decided that we want all of our members to stay safe during these Covid-19 uncertain times. Because we care about your health and safety, and because we want our members to feel connected, we are offering virtual meetings this winter and spring via **Zoom**.

Before joining a Zoom meeting on a computer or mobile device, you can download the **FREE** Zoom app from **the Download Center** (<https://zoom.us/download>). Otherwise, you will be prompted to download and install Zoom when you click a join link.

**To join either one of these meetings, follow these instructions:
Try to log in about 5 – 10 minutes before 7 pm.**

- To join by computer, use this link:

<https://psu.zoom.us/j/97418229426>

-Use this passcode: 123456

- To join from the Zoom app on a smartphone: enter this meeting ID:
974 1822 9426

- To join by phone, call this number: +1 301 715 8592 (US Toll)
Enter the meeting ID followed by the pound sign.
974 1822 9426#

Zoom Program: Tuesday, January 19 @ 7pm

“Saving Monarchs One Yard at a Time” by Laura Jackson

Zoom Program: Tuesday, February 16 @ 7pm

**“Encouraging Habitat Regeneration for Native Birds and Pollinators on Rights-of-way in Pennsylvania”
by Dr. Carolyn Mahan**

Zoom Program: Tuesday, March 16 @ 7pm

“The Bird Way” by Jennifer Ackerman

Zoom Program: Tuesday, April 20 @ 7pm

**“A Pictorial Tour of South African Fauna: Critically Endangered and Hanging on by Claw and Talon”
by Don Bryant**

Zoom Program: Tuesday, May 18 @ 7pm

**“What Can We Learn from Studying Diet in the American Kestrel?”
by Dr. Allison Cornell**



Chapter Membership is free in 2021, but donations are welcome:
JVAS P.O. Box 1013 Altoona, PA 16603



JVAS Zoom Programs for January and February

See Zoom link and password on previous page

Zoom Program: Tuesday, January 19, 2021 @ 7pm

“Saving Monarchs One Yard at a Time” by Laura Jackson



In January 2019, a small group of travelers, led by Mark and Paola Bonta, visited Mexico to experience one of the greatest wonders on Earth: overwintering Monarch butterflies. The group also explored some of the wonderful areas of Mexico’s Sierra Gorda – a biological melting pot unmatched in North America for its biodiversity – where they found endangered Military Macaws. As a result of visiting several Monarch sanctuaries in Mexico, Laura and Mike Jackson are even more committed to helping Monarchs on their property in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. Learn about their trip, the mysteries of Monarch migration, and how we can work together to help Monarchs in our backyards.

Laura taught high school biology and environmental science in Bedford, PA. Her favorite hobbies are gardening with native plants, birdwatching, and nature photography. She is the Vice-President of JVAS, President of Save Our Allegheny Ridges, Treasurer of the Woodland Owners of the Southern Alleghenies, and Secretary for the Bedford County Bird and Nature Club. She also serves on the advisory group for Pennsylvania Forest Stewards and the Center for Private Forests at Penn State. She has been a Pennsylvania Forest Steward since 2000. Laura and her husband, Mike, have donated a conservation easement to Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to preserve the wildlife and forest on their property.

Zoom Program: Tuesday, February 16, 2021 @ 7pm

“Encouraging Habitat Regeneration for Native Birds and Pollinators on Rights-of-way in Pennsylvania” by Dr. Carolyn Mahan



Dr. Mahan will share her research on birds and pollinators that are found in a transmission right-of-way (ROW) where various treatments are conducted to control vegetation growing under the transmission line.

Carolyn Mahan is a Biology professor at Penn State Altoona. Her research interests include the study of biodiversity in threatened ecosystems, the effects of human-modified landscapes on wildlife, and behavioral ecology of sciurids (squirrels). Dr. Mahan teaches introductory biology, environmental studies, field ecology, and evolution at Penn State Altoona.

Dr. Mahan’s students found a variety of bird species nesting in ROWs. L: field sparrow eggs R: Indigo Bunting young





We will email the Zoom links before each meeting if we have your email address.

If you aren't getting emails from JVAS, please send us your email address so we can communicate with you more effectively. We will not share your email.

Email: jvas771@gmail.com

JVAS Field Trips

All JVAS field trips have been cancelled due to Covid-19 concerns. We encourage you to get outside as much as you can, but please follow social distance guidelines, and wear a mask. Enjoy nature by yourself or with your family.

Or, you could participate in virtual field trips! There are 11 virtual trips recorded on the Audubon PA website: <https://pa.audubon.org/chapters-centers/virtual-field-trips>

Three of the trips were presented by JVAS members Laura Jackson, Debra Grim, and Sam Dietze.

We hope to resume field trips in the spring of 2021, so stay tuned.

We hope **YOU** will consider volunteering to be the new JVAS Field Trip Chair. The new chair will oversee the planning of field trips, starting in the spring of 2021, if Covid-19 conditions allow. The JVAS officers and directors will be glad to help plan trips. We already have one planned for late summer, 2021. Plus, there are traditional places we like to visit every year, so you don't have reinvent the field trip list. **Please contact President John Carter if you'd like to lead us in new and familiar directions in 2021.**

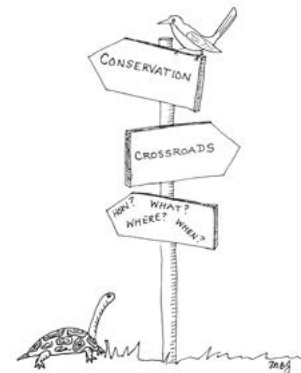


Debra Grim

Debra has served as the JVAS Membership Chair for the past 3 years. Her duties as Membership Chair sound pretty simple, but her responsibilities were critical to effective communication with members.

As Debra describes it, being Membership Chair “involves entering the new information into the Google Sheets membership file and giving the payment to George Mahon, JVAS treasurer. Sometimes reminders are sent via email or by postcard.” Simple, but critically important. We wish Debra success as she has moved closer to family in Arkansas. Enjoy your birds, Debra!

CONSERVATION CROSSROADS is a section of *The Gnatcatcher* that features environmental issues across a spectrum of local, national, and global concerns. Contact JVAS Vice-President Laura Jackson, if you know of an issue that deserves our attention and subsequent action. More information on these concerns is found at www.JVAS.org Click on the Conservation tab.



1. Industrial Wind Project Proposed for Dunning/Evitt's Mountain in Bedford

County: CPV Kettle Wind Project. Attorney Susan Bucknum presented an updated and revised wind turbine ordinance to Bedford Township officials on Thursday, December 10, asking for protection of Dunning/Evitt's Mountain in Dutch Corner, the largest historic agricultural district in Pennsylvania and an area designated as a natural heritage area of global significance.

Read more: www.jvas.org/category/conservation-news/wind-energy-development/

2. Pumped Hydro Storage Projects: It looks like these proposed projects might be history in 2021!!

Background: A **pumped hydro storage project** is designed with two reservoirs – upper and lower. Like every other **hydroelectric** plant, a **pumped-storage** plant generates electricity by allowing water to fall through a turbine generator during the day. Daytime-produced electricity is then sold to the grid at a higher cost than what is used to pump the water to the upper reservoir at night. Consequently, these projects make a profit, although more electricity is used than produced. Pumped hydro storage projects are sometimes described as a “liquid battery.” While these projects are a type of renewable energy, they destroy wild habitats, farmlands, and use more electricity than they produce.

Good News: Merchant Hydro Developers, LLC failed to complete the necessary research to warrant preliminary permit approval for two of three projects on the Allegheny Front. The **Bacon Ridge** and **Allegheny** projects in Blair County are no longer listed on the FERC website, while the **Snoosh Mountain** preliminary permit application in Bedford Co. expired on November 30, 2020.

3. Proposed Rutter's Gas/Convenience Store upslope from Old Crow Wetlands near Huntingdon, Pa.

JVAS members have expressed their concerns and opposition to the Smithfield Township supervisors. The supervisors are still waiting to hear from PennDOT, which is currently reviewing the traffic changes proposed by Rutter's. The supervisors meet on the first Tuesday of each month, at 7:00 pm. The location is the township building in Smithfield, on the corner of 13th Street and Mt. Vernon Avenue, or 2 blocks south of Rt 26 (Pennsylvania Ave.). Please try to attend the township meetings.

4. Forest Service Removes Roadless Protections from Tongass National Forest, Alaska

Over a year ago, JVAS sent comments opposing the proposed changes for the Tongass. In 2011, Laura and Mike Jackson hiked and kayaked in a small part of this temperate rainforest sublimely dripping with moss and lichens on every tree. The experience left an unforgettable experience of what true wilderness really means. JVAS and the Jacksons were among 1.5 million Americans who submitted comments during the rulemaking process. Sadly, the entire process was done without consultation with local Tribes who rely on and have stewarded this land for time immemorial.” Pushing roads through the Tongass will create significant forest fragmentation, which puts fish, birds, and other wildlife at risk....not to mention the venerable trees and other flora.

For more lands that could be protected under the new administration, see:

<https://www.audubon.org/news/these-5-threatened-places-could-be-spared-under-biden>

COUNTERS CELEBRATE the 52ND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT in CULP CIRCLE

Held on Saturday December 19, 2020

Co-compilers: Laura Jackson and John Carter

John Carter's photos and FB entry: What a spectacular day for the 2020 Culp Christmas Bird Count. Woke up at 4am to start Owling and brew some coffee, with temps starting at 14 degrees. I listened to a pair of Great Horned Owls duet with each other, and then I called an Eastern Screech Owl in only 20 yards away. What a way to begin the day.

Dawson and I marched out the door, we had our itinerary of the different areas to cover in our sector, binoculars, camera, and snacks at the ready.



Dawson and John Carter



During our adventure on the Bells Gap Trail, the snow measured about 7in with a slightly worn path. As I was putting the camera on a Yellow-bellied sapsucker, I noticed Dawson start to get that bird-dog edge. His nose to the ground and picking up a scent. Only a few yards ahead were the remains of a gray squirrel. I looked closer and I could see the imprint of a larger hawk wings on the snow. At that moment, over my shoulder, a Red-tailed Hawk let out a fierce scream and took off from its perch. Our eyes lit up and were happy to add this bird to the list.

It was fun staying in touch via a group text thread with other Culp participants and hearing about the Avian friends we were documenting. One was fortunate to get pictures of an uncommon Peregrine Falcon, and rare Lapland Longspurs!

We realized that none of us were able to find an American Kestrel yet. Darkness was setting in, so I set my GPS unit to an area with power lines and where I had success in the past. As I passed a tree along the road, I thought I had a glimpse of a Kestrel silhouette. I turned the truck around, and sure enough a male Kestrel tallied my bird species to 47 for the day.

I looked over at my passenger buddy, and I could tell his day was well spent.

Laura Jackson: Our Zoom Tally on Dec. 22, while not as enjoyable as our traditional Tally Dinner, was still a lot of fun. We totaled birds seen and commiserated over birds not seen (hardly any waterfowl since so many lakes and ponds were frozen), while comparing this count to other years when we had to brave constant rain or gusty winds. This year's count was actually great for birds and people. The heavy snow cover did limit foot travel and the only waterfowl were 38 Canada Geese, 3 American Black Ducks, 82 Mallards, and 2 Ruddy Ducks, but birds were very active in the cold, calm day where temperatures ranged from a morning low of 3°F in Sinking Valley to an afternoon high of 38°F in Altoona.

2020 Christmas Bird Count, continued

Red-tailed Hawks led the count for raptors: 35, while Cooper's Hawks came in a distant second with 6 sightings. The same two groups of observers saw a total of 5 Bald Eagles and 3 Northern Harriers, while just one group saw 2 Sharp-shinned Hawks. Rough-legged Hawks eluded us on count day, but one was seen prior to Saturday, so it will be recorded for count week. A Peregrine Falcon was not only seen, but photographed by Carl Engstrom, who also recorded 5 Lapland Longspurs in mixed company with 145 Horned Larks.



L: Lapland Longspur R: Peregrine Falcon photos by Carl Engstrom

Four species of owls were seen or heard: one Eastern Screech Owl, two Great-Horned Owls, one Barred Owl, and one Short-eared Owl (in Sinking Valley) – first time ever on Count Day! Observers recorded the full suite of woodpeckers, except for the elusive Red-Headed Woodpeckers: 56 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, 5 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, 50 Downy Woodpeckers, 12 Hairy Woodpeckers, only 2 Northern (yellow-shafted) Flickers, and 13 Pileated Woodpeckers.

Birds flocked to feeders, active throughout the day due to the snow and cold. A few highlights of our common winter birds included: 159 Blue Jays, 127 Black-capped Chickadees, 6 Brown Creepers, 5 Winter Wrens, 45 Carolina Wrens, and 173 Northern Cardinals.



Carolina Wren photo by Laura Jackson.

Respectable numbers of these birds provided ooh and ahh moments: 17 Hermit Thrush; 1,013 Dark-eyed Juncos; 39 White-crowned Sparrows; 352 White-throated Sparrows; 38 American Tree Sparrows; 49 Song Sparrows; and 5 Swamp Sparrows.

Other surprises for the day? One Field Sparrow at a feeder, one Killdeer, only one Cedar Waxwing, and 4 Red-winged Blackbirds.



Hermit Thrush feeding on Barberry photo by Mark Nale.

Many, many thanks to all who make this year's CBC a success:

Mark Bonta, Bruce Bonta, Marcia Bonta, John Carter, Linder Carter, Carl Engstrom, Kurt Engstrom, Allen Gibboney, Bobbie Gibboney, Phil Hall, Allison Hutchison, Paul Hutchison, Laura Jackson, Mike Jackson, John Loncher, George Mahon, Bob Mullan, Debbie Mullan, Mark Nale, John Orr, Eric Skrivseth, and Margaret Skrivseth.

A complete report for the Culp Circle can be found at:

<https://netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/CurrentYear/ResultsByCount.aspx>

The Count Code is **PACU**

2020 Culp CBC Stats:

22 counters, **63 species**, 24.25 hours on foot, 1.5 hours on cross-country skis, 23.25 miles on foot, 2 miles on cross-country skis, 180.5 miles by car, 3.3 hours owling.

High Count Records for this CBC: 5 Bald Eagles, 280 Mourning Doves, 1 Short-eared Owl, 56 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, 1 Peregrine Falcon (tied with 2 other years), 45 Carolina Wren, 17 Hermit Thrush, 5 Fox Sparrow, 1013 Dark-eyed Junco, 39 White-crowned Sparrow, 352 White-throated Sparrow, and 5 Swamp Sparrow. What a day!



House Finch photo by Mark Nale

What are Nocturnal Flight Calls and how do I Listen to Them? By Mark Bonta

Just because the sun goes down doesn't mean that the birds stop calling. While we are all familiar with the sounds of night birds like owls, it's generally a matter of luck to step outside in the middle of the night at just the right moment to hear the call of a Greater Yellowlegs or a flock of Tundra Swans going over. If you go out on the right night, you might hear a "tseep" or some similar brief, high-pitched sound, if your ears are good enough. This could be the call of a migrating warbler or sparrow, or something else. In the hours before dawn, perhaps you could note the call of a migrating Hermit Thrush descending to a daytime resting and foraging spot, or a flock of Pine Siskins or Evening Grosbeaks on the move. That is, if you are very, very patient, very lucky, and have a good ear.

But there's a shortcut. If you really want to know what's out there for half of the day, you can listen in with a specialized microphone trained at the sky. Except in the depths of winter, you can pick up dozens to hundreds or more individual birds and flocks and identify many of them with the aid of spectrograms—visual representations of their calls. You can make a nocturnal flight call (NFC) microphone yourself or purchase one for a few hundred bucks. Mount it on your roof or a similar high place and connect it with a cable to an audio recorder, or directly to your computer, where you can run a free program like Raven or Audacity that will allow you to go back through and find all the sounds of the night. There are various online guides to help you identify NFCs and other sounds to species, or at least to species groups. Not all birds vocalize at night, of course, and not all night calls are NFCs or even come from the sky. You also have to be able to distinguish calls of amphibians, mammals, human-made sounds, insects, and so forth. There is specialized software that analyzes your audio files for you to look for bird-like sounds, but the truth is, I vastly enjoy the couple of hours of every day in the NFC season where I scroll manually through eight or more hours of the spectrum, because the thrill of discovery is considerable. Sometimes it's a false alarm—a distant dog barking might sound like a rare owl, or a lonely Northern Mockingbird combined with a lost kitten and some trees rubbing together could sound very much like exotic waterfowl—but there are also constant pleasant surprises on all but the rainiest and katydid-est nights.



I rigged my NFC microphone, which I purchased from the best in the business¹, onto the side of a power pole. Optimally, it would have gone on top of the barn roof, but that was too dangerous. The pole sits in the field on the top of Brush Mountain, a major migratory ridge, so it's far enough away from ground vegetation to mitigate somewhat the calls of crickets. In 2020, my first season, I ran the mic almost every night from mid-October to mid-November, then I went through the recordings and snipped out the spectrograms that looked promising, gradually managing to ID some of the common ones. I am "phoning a friend" for the more cryptic ones, and there are many of those. For example, Joe Gyekis, an NFC expert out of State College, helped me ID a pair of Evening Grosbeaks flying over at 10 PM one night, a rather unusual find.

The night spectrum shifts in quality and quantity of calls depending on the weather. With a wind from the north in late October, one could expect tons of White-throated Sparrows throughout the night, with a scattering of late warblers, other sparrows, and the descent of various groups of Hermit Thrushes. Identifiable, scarce species included late thrushes such as the Swainson's. Unfortunately, the north and west winds also bring the roar of a local quarry, trains along the nearby tracks—about 50 a night—and traffic on I-99. Winds from the south and east stopped the migrant flow but brought up a plethora of new, farm-related sounds from Sinking Valley, while muting the traffic and trains. Fortunately, most non-bird sounds are down below 3 kilohertz, and rarely completely cover over even the bird sounds that are that low, such as thrushes and owls. Many of the warblers and sparrows are up about 5 to 9 Khz, not interfered with by anything but the loudest of train whistles. Not so for the creaking of trees, the pitter-patter of raindrops, and insect noise. Too much wind or a warm night with crickets can mean a very poor NFC showing on next morning's NFC spectrum search—the spectrum becomes a dense, dark mass of sounds completely obscuring the chirps and tseeps of NFC Twitter.

Part of my interest in doing this was to pick up new species for the Plummer's Hollow eBird Hotspot. After 50 years, our species list was stuck at 188 species, with little chance of visual reports of the numerous water and open field species that have no habitat available to land on. Almost all of these that we *have* reported over the years are fly-overs or an extremely occasional landing in the weedy field. American Pipit, for example: a flock in the field once, a single day-time flyover; Horned Lark—never. In my first NFC season, I recorded Horned Lark and American Pipit, the latter regularly, and added a smattering of Savannah Sparrows—never recorded in the hotspot—a couple Snow Buntings (ditto), and a Greater Yellowlegs, as well as several other species new to the hotspot. This was a resounding success, and in Spring 2020, I hope to pick up more new ones such as Bobolink, Virginia Rail, and other species that move through the area.

In November, the spectrum became quieter, except for the snorts and crunching/crashing of white-tailed deer, ever a bother. Owls came and went, and finches picked up. We almost never see House Finches in the day, but at night, flocks of these passed over consistently. Most other finches aren't known to be nocturnal migrants, but they do all start moving a couple hours before dawn, so their calls are frequent, along with those of Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Cedar Waxwing, American Robin, and others.

What exactly ARE nocturnal flight calls? Like diurnal flight calls, they appear to facilitate contact between individuals in a flock, but they are often distinct from what you can hear in the daytime. In the case of Tundra Swans, night calls appear identical to the day, but many passerines, particularly warblers,

have calls only made at night. You might be wondering how people have figured this out, given that it is mostly impossible to visually ID anything passing over in the dark, to heights of a couple thousand feet from the antenna. The reality is that, despite decades of NFC documentation, many calls are still unknown or “putative.” Nevertheless, enough is known that it is possible to gain valuable insight into migratory patterns through a network of NFC stations reporting on databases such as eBird.

In the next issue: an up-close view of the spectrum.

1. <http://www.oldbird.org/21c.htm>

FIGURES

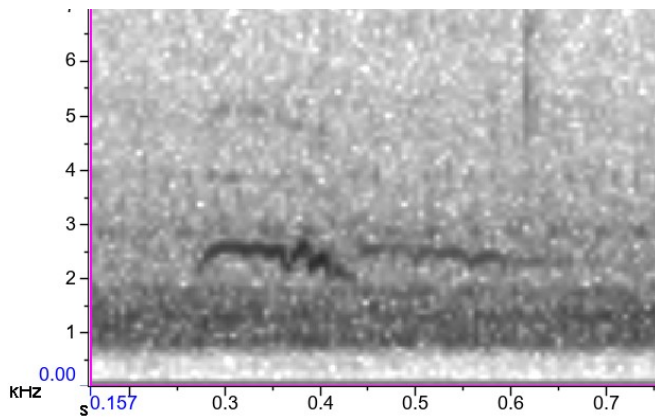


Fig. 1. Two putative Evening Grosbeak calls from a pair flying at around 10 PM on Oct 6 2020. The, darker, first call starts slightly above 2 KHz, ascends, then descends to 2 KHz over the course of .25 seconds (250 milliseconds). Frequency, length of call, and shape of call are all aids in identification.

Fig. 2. A single, late October Hermit Thrush at around 3 KHz gives two descending NFCs lasting around 200 milliseconds each, spaced about 5 seconds apart.

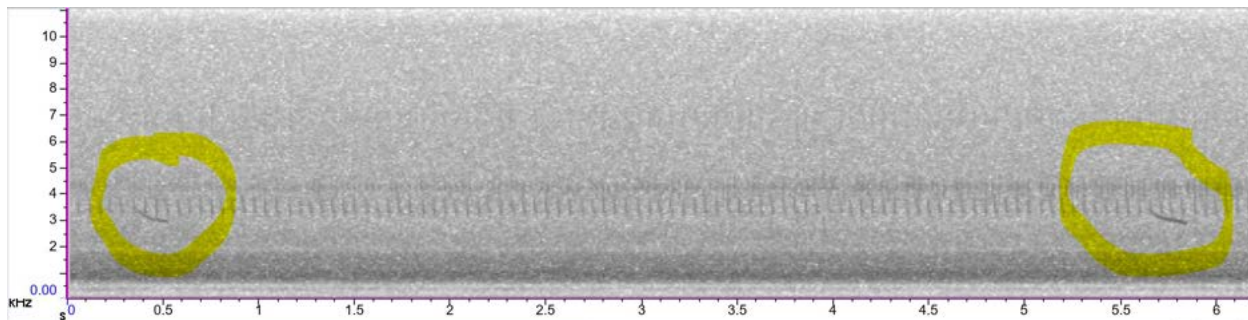


Fig.3. Putative White-throated Sparrows give NFCs of around 150 milliseconds in duration and mostly above 7 KHz. Blurriness may indicate that they are not calling from the sky but rather from the edge of the field (vegetation blurs sound), where at the time of recording, hundreds of migrant WTSPs could be found in the daytime in dense thickets.

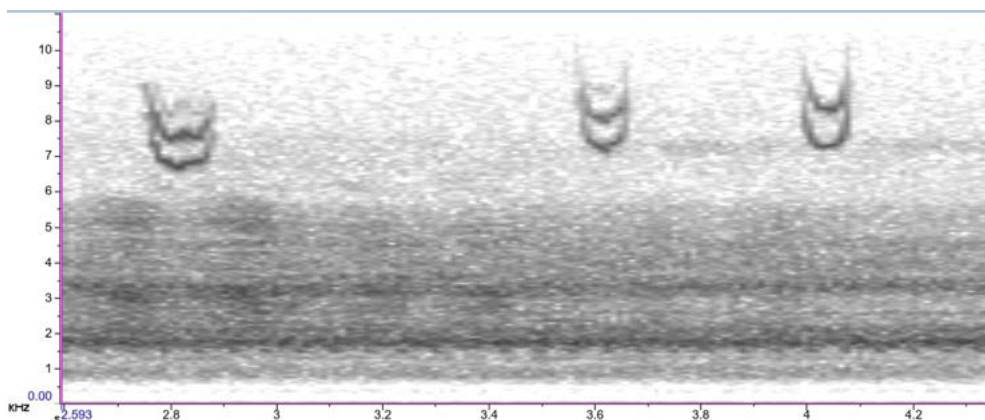


Fig. 4. Tundra Swans call on an otherwise quiet night in November.

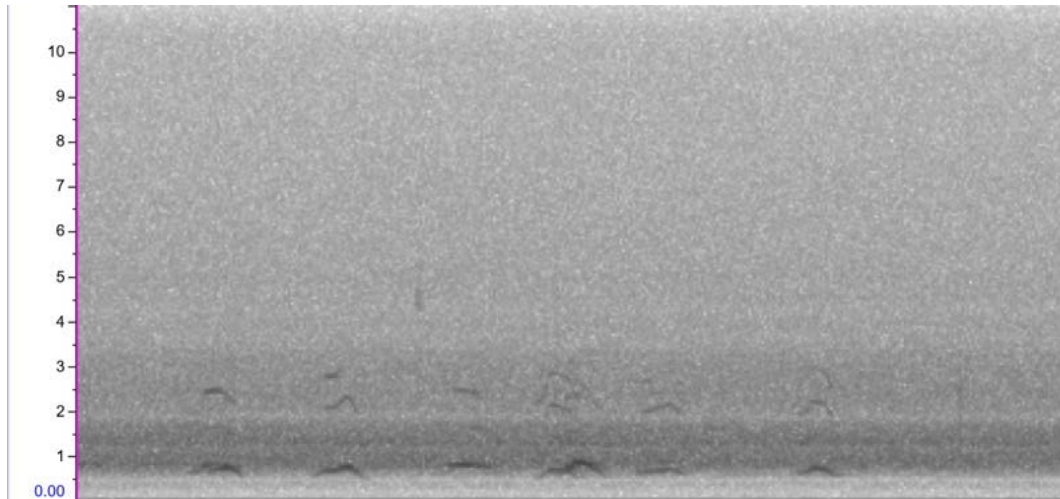


Fig. 5. A deer snorts loudly in the nearby field, against a background of insect noise on a warm Nov.night.

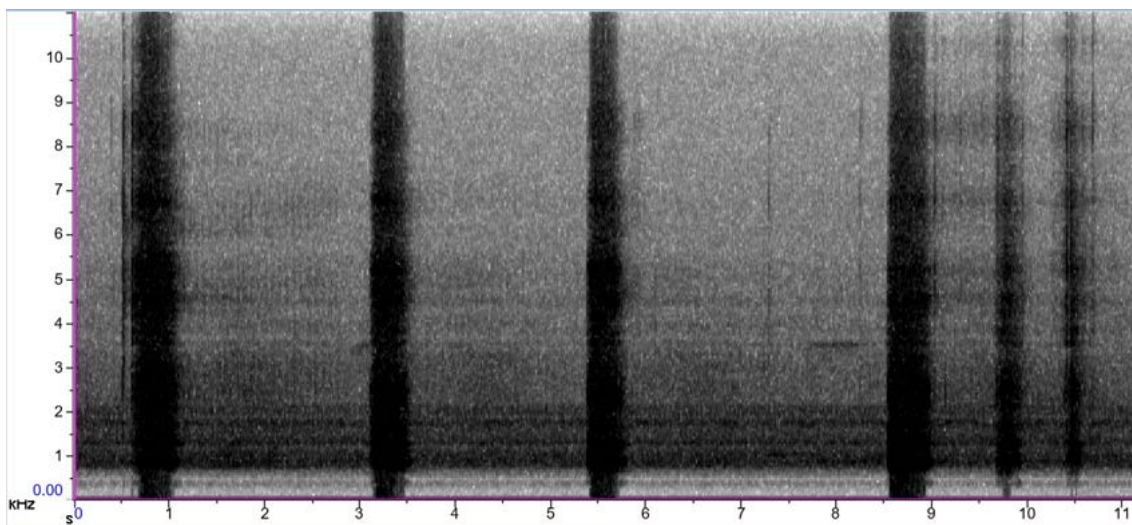
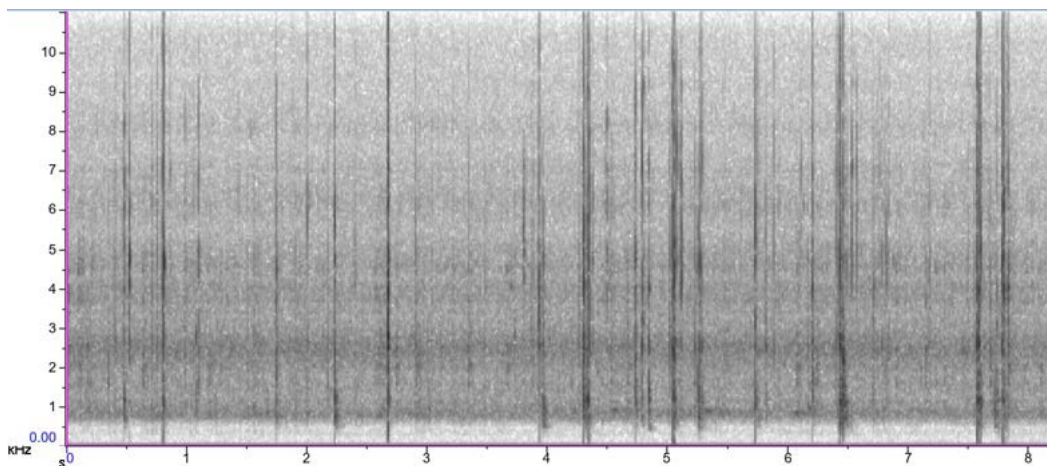


Fig. 6. Raindrops keep falling on my mic...



JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON

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ALTOONA, PA 16603

Address Service Requested



Honduran Coffee for sale on-line

Emilio Garcia, our partner who produces shade-grown coffee in Honduras, has expanded his coffee sales to include sustainably harvested, shade-grown coffee from other countries. You can order freshly roasted coffee (ground or whole bean) from **Lenca Coffee Roasters**: <https://lencacoffeeroasters.com>

Fair Trade shade-grown **decaf coffee** from Colombia is also available.

Emilio sells his green coffee beans through <https://lencafarms.com>

Remember, shade-grown coffee is good for you and good for our birds!

