

## A NOVEL WAY TO PROTECT OUR BIRDS

By Gary Metzger

I guess I've always had a thing for birds. My Mom would carry on whistled "conversations" with cardinals on her Sunday afternoon walks around our farm with my brother and me. My wife, Joan, and I eventually had a farm of our own up the grand Loyalsock Creek in northern Lycoming County. We fed our birds, tried to protect the feeders from bears and such—we were quite literally surrounded by all manner of wild birds all seasons of the year.

At some point we got hooked up with a bunch of really serious bird people with the local Lycoming Audubon Society. Joan and I eventually became leaders in Audubon and we were immersed even more in the wonder of birds, and the many issues surrounding the health and well-being of avian populations, both locally and across the globe. We helped with citizen science projects, such as Christmas Bird Counts, spring migration counts, and woodcock breeding surveys for the PA Game Commission. The results of that local bird census work were not always comforting. We were seeing fewer birds, that much was clear... In 2019 the Cornell Lab of Ornithology published the results of a study indicating that North American bird populations, in aggregate, had declined by a staggering 30% since 1970. Almost 3 billion birds lost in just 50 years!

A couple of years back Joan and I moved to a retirement community in State College, bringing our binoculars and our quest to find, learn about and enjoy birds in this new ridge and valley region of the state. We settled into our new home and soon were back to our wonderful mornings of forest bathing and bird watching. The summer of 2023, though, brought days and weeks of no birding due to incredibly poor air quality from the drought-enabled wildfires consuming tens of millions of acres of Canadian boreal forest. These forests provide summer homes and nesting areas for many of the birds we enjoy as they pass through Pennsylvania. The boreal forest is critical habitat for many of our most eye-catching warblers, such as the Cape May, Blackpoll and Palm warblers.

This February we birded, unable not to worry about the ongoing massive wildfires in Chile (hot, dry summer down in South America), and the recent reports of tornados touching down in the state of Wisconsin—first time in recorded history! Back in 2014 the National Audubon Society had published the results of their own study of trends in bird populations, declaring that our changing climate posed an existential threat to many of our North American bird species. In 2024 the impacts of changing climate are all around us. We and the birds are in trouble!

In our new home we pondered what we, what anyone, could do personally to make any impact on this massive global problem—for ourselves, our children, our beloved birds. We stumbled across one little thing, available to all residents of our Commonwealth, that **could** make difference—something we can all do! Electric power generation using fossil fuels releases massive amounts of air pollution, including globally significant amounts of greenhouse gases. Lighting and heating our homes with fossil fuels worsens climate change. If we could switch to power generated by renewal sources like wind, solar or hydro, we could do a tiny bit to make a difference. If lots of our friends and neighbors switched, that difference could grow.

The PA Public Utility Commission has an on-line power shopping site to facilitate Pennsylvanians, anywhere in the state, to switch to renewables. You keep your same monthly utility bill, but with a renewable company's generation charges listed. You can lower your total monthly bill, while no longer generating greenhouse gases. For many companies, the rate is guaranteed for a year, or more or less—you choose on the site. Many also offer no sign-up fees, no cancellation fees. If you switch and then decide you aren't satisfied, then you can switch back to your "home" utility, or switch to a better renewable. As I write this article the second week of February, there are 20 offerings on [pawpowerswitch.com](http://pawpowerswitch.com) for the State College area with 100%

renewable energy, rate and term fixed. No risk, no surprises. Twelve of those offers are for a rate less than the rate folks are paying West Penn Power right now. Across the state similar opportunities exist.

Check out [papowerswitch.com](http://papowerswitch.com)! Switch to renewables, save a few bucks a month on your electric bills, help save some birds! We can all help make our children's futures better.

Photo Credits:

1. Cape May Warbler: Sheen Watkins, APA 2021
2. Blackpoll Warbler: Kevin Sim, APA 2021
3. Palm Warbler: Adrian Azar, APA 2015

