



October, 1992

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK....

Procrastination! I didn't have any firm information to provide on the 1993 annual meeting, so I delayed writing this article. However, while recently reading the morning paper, *The Buffalo News*, I was motivated into action.

Being employed as a District Forester, the article, "Plan to Allow Clear-cut Logging in Chautauqua County Stirs Controversy," caught my eye immediately. The New York Department of Environmental Conservation plans to harvest timber on 111 acres of the Boutwell State Forest, 50 acres being clear-cut.

John Fitzgerald of the Lake Shore Bird Club who opposes the harvest said, "The bird and conservation club is not opposed to logging in general. It's fine to log but not to clear-cut." Wayne Cooper, DEC's Regional Forestry Manager, said, "We have very poor trees on this site due to insect damage. I see two options--let the trees die and fall down, or harvest and use the timber. A thinning ten years ago provided good regeneration. By clear-cutting these patches, we've created more diversity in our forest types."

I am certain to read more about this controversy in the next few weeks. Too bad no quotes were made concerning a bird inventory in that area. Doug Gross' article "Witnessing Biodiversity" in this newsletter points out what we can do as PSO members to provide better information for managers and increase our understanding of biodiversity.

The PA Bureau of Forestry has biodiversity guidelines for clear-cutting. We retain an average basal area between 10-20 square feet over the entire treatment area and a minimum of 5 trees per acre in the dominant, codominant, and/or intermediate classes on each acre. We retain a variety of tree species such that the residual trees represent existing species. Efforts should be made to not reduce species diversity in the stand. All crown classes should be represented. Spacing should be maintained that will not represent a grid-like pattern, and small groups should be left as they naturally occur. Selection of reserve trees should be based on the following values: genetic diversity, species diversity, and structural diversity. Dead trees should be retained.

Our goal is to provide a variety of habitats on state forest land. When the impact of deer can be overcome, clear-cuts provide a temporary brush stage forest beneficial for many wildlife species. Without these cuts, I could not find a Mourning Warbler in Cameron County which is 98% forested.

Deer are a serious problem for the forests of Pennsylvania. If you want to read about the impact of deer, read "Must We Shoot Deer to Save Nature?" on page 2 of the August issue of *Natural History*. PSO through SAP (Special Area Projects) can help provide valuable data to document biodiversity concerns in Pennsylvania. Let's all do our share!

--Bob Martin, President



The Raven Reporter

Wild Prediction: A Big Year for Cone Birds

Making predictions is risky business. People have lost fortunes and leaped out of buildings because they misread the financial crystal ball on Wall Street. It might be even riskier to gamble on what Mother Nature might do. Just ask any farmer or bird trip leader. Or, should I say, any ex-farmer or ex-trip leader. Yet, it's fun to predict as long as your life doesn't depend on it. We birders love to try our hand at prognosticating now and then. So, here goes. Your Raven Reporter is going to step out on a limb and make a whopping prediction that you could bet the farmette on. Is your pen ready? Here it is....

Starting now, it will be the Year of the Cone Birds. That's right. Cone Birds.

By this I mean northern finches and some other cone-lovers. Red-breasted Nuthatches, for instance. They hang onto cones for dear life and pry apart the scales until they can extricate every energy-packed morsel found within. They don't care if the tree is big or small, native or cultivated. They just want to eat those little seeds and "yank-yank" all day long. They're coming, if they aren't in your neighborhood or your Special Area already. And, once they are around they may stay through the nastiness of December, through March, and nest right where there's lots of food for a pair of cone birds

to eat.

I also predict goldfinches, lots of them, and maybe siskins, redpolls, both grosbeaks, chickadees, and maybe more. It might take the Canadian birds a little longer, depending on the weather and the food up north. And, the pinaceous prognosticator is predicting....

Crossbills. Both types, at least. Look for them. Don't wait for the winter snows to blow and make driving difficult to your favorite spruce plantings. Go now, and look and listen carefully. And, if you don't get them, don't give up. Check back in a few weeks until you find them, because they're coming. I'm sure of it. They might be there already. Remember, you read it here first.

The Crossbill Connection

Actually, I am cheating a bit on my predictions. I have what is called "inside information." (I've heard that this happens on Wall Street a little, too). I have actually seen some Red Crossbills in Pennsylvania in recent weeks. And, I have already witnessed an influx of Red-breasted Nuthatches.

Seven or more Red Crossbills have been hanging out on some private property in a northern county since mid-August. It is an area packed with planted and native conifers, and lots of those "No Trespassing" signs, too. There are almost more bright yellow "Private Property" signs than there are trees to put them on. For that reason, the local birders familiar with the situation are hoping that this particular location does not become a birding hot-spot with ugly scenes between trespassing, but well-meaning, birders and irate property owners. It is also a big hunting area and hunting season is already upon us. That means people will be extra-sensitive about strang-

ers on their turf. And, for good reason. Nobody likes people wandering on their property, especially when there is hunting activity. But, I diverge into birding ethics (that's another column).

The real point is that if crossbills are visiting one remote and obscure place, they could very well be at other locations where there is an abundance of seed cones. You don't need to drive a zillion miles to check crossbills off your list. They might be coming to a spruce tree near you very soon. Have you really looked lately for crossbills? Don't count them out.

If you want evidence of the possibilities, just go outside in the daylight and look around. The Norway Spruces on your block are loaded with cones, as are the White Spruces, the Red Spruces, the Blue Spruces, the Eastern Hemlocks, and just about everything else. It is a big year for cones. Last summer was dry (did you notice?), a condition which often triggers cone-production the following year--the shock treatment. And, this summer was wet, a condition conducive to seed production.

So, think about it. Where have you seen lots of cone-bearing trees? In state parks, near reservoirs, in state forests, in state game lands. That's right. In your Special Area there is bound to be a conifer planting. It has been a common practice to plant conifers for soil erosion control, wind breaks, landscaping, and for wildlife habitat enhancement on public lands.

Crossbills eat lots of cone seeds. Red Crossbills tend to eat pine seeds while the smaller-beaked White-winged Crossbills tend to eat seeds from smaller cones, generally spruces, larches, and hemlocks. Red Crossbills come in various sizes and types, though. Some are smaller than

others (small ones are about the size of a House Sparrow), and, therefore, forage on smaller cones. I have observed this with Pennsylvania's current crop of Red Crossbills. They have concentrated their foraging on small-coned spruces and hemlocks. There are lots of both in our state.

Tips on what to look and listen for. First of all, crossbills are often very quiet, especially when they are eating. They often just pry and crunch away without calling loudly like they do on the Peterson record. The little devils are sometimes pretty tough to find high in a dense spruce. The saving grace is that they also will perch right out in the open (especially the males), and have a penchant for sitting near the very top of a tree or on a wire in ridiculously plain view. They also love road salt and grit, regularly visiting road surfaces for this treat. Second, they have a larger repertoire of calls and songs than some field guides let you know about. The Red Crossbills that I have watched use a variety of "jip" notes, often in pairs (not just in threes) and at a variety of pitches. They also will trill (a call amazingly similar to trills given by Carolina Wrens) and sing very complicated finchy warbling songs that will remind many birders of the songs of Purple Finches or American Goldfinches. Thirdly, most Red Crossbills are often more dully colored than the field guides show. Males are brighter red on their rump than their front, but not as brilliantly brick red as some illustrators have portrayed them, particularly the National Geographic guide. Some references claim that it may take three years for male Red Crossbills to acquire their full red color. Tame as heck, some crossbills may allow you to get pretty good pictures of them. So, take plenty of them.

To summarize, keep your mind open

and chase down birds that make calls you don't know (a good rule of thumb for any birding endeavor). Take good notes and a few pictures if you can. And, if you can record the calls of the crossbills, it might help us identify what population of Red Crossbill it might be (listers beware, there is a good chance that our "Red Crossbill" is a complex of similar-looking crossbill species that are best told apart by their call notes).

If you do find Red Crossbills in your Special Area, please let me know about it with a phone call or a note. I would like to follow the progress of the invasion, if it occurs. My meager knowledge of Red Crossbills has benefitted from a discussion with Jeffrey Groth, the real crossbill expert who has studied this mysterious bird for several years.

And, How About Those Vole-hunters?

It has been a very wet summer, (my Nikes will never be the same) and this is very good for rodents because rain is really good for growing grass (anyone else break their lawnmower a few times this summer?). Yes, rodents have to eat, too. They like to eat seeds, and when the conditions are good, grasses and other field plants generate lots of seeds. That means that there could be lots of fat and happy meadow voles out there. Pennsylvania's most plentiful mammal (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) could be especially abundant after such a rainy summer. This may be good news to birders.

Vole-hunters. Mouse-eaters.
Rodent-raptors. Call them what you want.

The Raven Reporter is making another wild prognostication. It could be a big fall and winter for Short-eared Owls, Long-eared Owls, Northern Harriers, and Rough-legged

Hawks. Maybe more. Again, you read it here first. It doesn't hurt too much to go out and look for them, especially at dawn and dusk. If they come down, sit back and enjoy the show. There's nothing quite like watching a Short-ear bank and flutter its way across a field and pick up a mouse. It's worth a try.

-- Douglas A. Gross, PSO Special Areas Project, R. R. 1, Box 147, Orangeville, PA 17859 or C/O Ecology III, R. R. 1, Berwick, PA 18603. Phone 717-542-2191 (day), or 717-458-4564 (night).

WITNESSING BIODIVERSITY

A Call to Arms for the Special Areas Project

Now is the time for birdwatchers to bear witness to Pennsylvania's natural diversity. We must seize our binoculars and rush into battle. We know that there are many great places to see birds and that native habitats are vital to the survival of native wildlife. Now we need to document these facts and demonstrate the value of public lands to us.

Biodiversity has become a catchword for conservation and environmental politics. What does it mean? How does it relate to birdwatching?

Biological diversity is expressed in many ways. Basically, it can be defined as the variety of living organisms in a given space. Biodiversity is enhanced by a larger number of species and a balance in the numbers between these species, a concept known as species richness. A large number of species creates a larger and more complex web of interrelationships between organisms. It means that there is a variety in the sizes, shapes, and functions of the life forms. This means that it is important that we document not only how many species can be found some-

where, but also how many there are of each species at various times.

Public Lands Provide Biodiversity. Parks, forestlands, and gamelands enhance biodiversity by providing habitats for birds and other wildlife. Generally speaking, the more habitats, the more birds. In some cases, a single park can contain many habitats--our birding "hot spots." Birders go there to generate long daily bird lists, especially during migration. We enjoy being able to find Pileated Woodpeckers, Common Loons, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Northern Harriers within a few minutes of each other.

Parks with a large diversity of habitats often feature a lake or reservoir. PSO members are now conducting successful Special Areas Projects in several parks which feature reservoirs or other extensive wetlands. Not only is the open water a great place to view migrant waterfowl and to scope for rare vagrants, but the associated marshes, mudflats, and riparian woods provide great bird habitats. American Bitterns, Short-billed Dowitchers, and Prothonotary Warblers need wetlands, too.

Some species need a combination of habitats in order to survive. For instance, the Great Blue Heron feeds in various wetlands, but nests in large trees sometimes far away from water. Local populations of such species can be reduced or eliminated when either habitat is significantly degraded.

Many Birds Need Mature, Undisturbed Habitat. Some public lands are isolated islands of natural bird habitat in a rising sea of residential and agricultural development. By providing this habitat, they enhance regional biodiversity. Natural Areas which preserve groves of "virgin forest" are good examples of habitat islands. Most Natural

Areas are couched in a State Forest that is covered with trees, but is subject to a timber cutting that is not allowed in Natural Areas. Therefore, even Natural Areas surrounded by forests may act as population reserves for species which require or are more productive in mature forests.

Birders may not be able to easily find a hundred bird species in a Natural Area, but they can find some really good ones. Here we can catch a fiery glimpse of a Blackburnian Warbler or hear the ethereal song of a Hermit Thrush, not just in migration, but all during the breeding season.

Many birds need fairly expansive areas relatively undisturbed by human activity. This is particularly true of large species such as Northern Goshawk and Pileated Woodpecker, as well as the Bald Eagle. Regular human disturbance can also be deadly to rare wetlands species such as the Black Tern and American Bittern. Without a large enough area of habitat, populations of these rarities cannot be viable. That is, they cannot continue to replace themselves from generation to generation in large enough numbers to survive as a population.

Many Forces Diminish Biodiversity. Habitat destruction and degradation are the principal villains. Our vast mature forests have been replaced by younger woods, often dissected into small patches. These smaller woods lack both size and the variety of microhabitats to preserve a wide variety of birds. All kinds of vegetation suffer when land is developed without regard to natural communities. The saplings, shrubs, wildflowers, and ferns can be as important to biodiversity as the trees towering high above them. Wetlands have been drained, plowed, and paved into cornfields, towns, and shopping

malls. In some valleys, a complex mosaic of different wetlands has been replaced by a big fish pond with few birds.

Habitat fragmentation also harms species which require larger tracts of forest or wetlands for continued survival. Area-sensitive forest species (forest interior species) such as Wood Thrush and Scarlet Tanager seem to require large tracts of forest for continued population viability. Small islands of habitat allow more nest predators and parasites (cowbirds) to affect bird populations. A local population of a species can become extirpated due to only one or two years of poor breeding conditions (abnormal weather or insect populations). Habitat fragmentation problems also pertain to wetlands birds such as Least Bitterns and Short-eared Owls which need large expanses of specific types of wetlands to survive.

Biodiversity Lacks Public Awareness and Financial Support. Pennsylvania's "Do Something Wild" tax check-off plan suffers in competition with more glamorous charities, such as the Olympics. Americans spend more than 100 times more on movie tickets than on preserving biodiversity. Even the "charismatic macrovertebrates" such as Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons do not get much support compared to other budget items. Obscure, unglamorous birds like Loggerhead Shrike and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher get even less support.

A significant portion of biodiversity funding goes to basic research of rare or diminishing species. The basic natural history and resource needs of many rare species are poorly known. Research and conservation take money just like anything else. Accurate information

is vital to biodiversity, because bad land use policies and wildlife management decisions can be based on a poor database. Ignorance can be as dangerous to birds as bulldozers and saws.

What Can Birdwatchers Do? There are many ways to fight the war against habitat destruction and species extirpation. One very positive way to conserve birds is to provide information to conservation professionals that they can use to maximize biodiversity on public lands. Our collected bird data will also enhance environmental education when it is used to generate checklists, pamphlets, and many other avenues of providing information to the public. State Park naturalists and rangers can use the information found in Special Areas Projects to lead better nature walks and enhance their programs for both adults and children. After all, future generations need to know the value of maintaining biodiversity.

The simple act of watching birds and recording notes supports biodiversity and declares how valuable public lands are to the wide variety of birds that use them and to birdwatchers and naturalists who visit for this reason. Public lands are under a great deal of pressure and their use is contested by many. The use of public lands by birders and naturalists is often underestimated because we do not make an obvious financial contribution to their purchase and management. And, we birders tend to use the land unobtrusively. By visiting public lands regularly, we demonstrate their importance to the growing legion of nonconsumptive wildlife enthusiasts.

Our life lists and Christmas Count data demonstrate how much we value biodiversity, even when we do

not always call it by that name. The publication of the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania incontrovertibly declares the ability of amateur birdwatchers to gather important information about birds. Atlas data will provide important tools for conservation for decades to come. Now with the Special Areas Project we can focus on specific pieces of our state and broaden our emphasis to all four seasons that birds use them.

We know that public lands are important for birds and wildlife in general. Our personal experiences tell us why. Now we must get out in an organized effort to document why they are important to birds, and also to all of us. It is a personal quest for each one of us who has become familiar with certain parks and public lands and has grown to regard them as our own special places to witness nature's diversity. The Special Areas Project gives us all the opportunity to make permanent contributions to Pennsylvania's biodiversity and to the public's knowledge of Pennsylvania's wildlife.

-- Douglas A. Gross

1993 ANNUAL MEETING

Plans are being made for the 1993 annual meeting to be held in southeastern Pennsylvania in early May. As we did this past year, we hope to combine good birding, interesting discussions, and social activities into the meeting agenda. The board will finalize plans in early November. If you have any ideas or suggestions, please contact a member of the board of directors.

MINUTES OF THE 1992 ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING OF THE PSO HELD AT PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK ON MAY 16, 1992

The first order of business was to

tabulate the group's bird list for the day. (This listing was provided in the last newsletter.)

Details of the agreement between PSO and PA Birds was discussed. Membership category expansion was explained.

Dan Brauning updated the membership on the publication of the Atlas.

After an open discussion on a site for the 1993 annual meeting, it was agreed that the meeting will be held in the spring in southeastern PA. An attempt will be made to have centralized accommodations for the meeting.

Elections were held for directors and officers. Margaret Brittingham, Roy Ickes, and Gene Zielinski were reelected as directors. Margaret Higbee declined renomination for the Board, and Bob Ross was elected. All officers were reelected for another year.

Doug Gross gave a report on the Special Areas Project; it was stated that Doug is presently receiving data from 40 areas.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Balance 4/1/91	\$ 1066.00
Income	
Dues	2198.00
General Mem. Meetings	3779.50
Special Area Projects	<u>610.10</u>
TOTAL INCOME	6587.60
Expenses	
Newsletter	1131.69
General Membership Meetings	2654.88
Service Charges on Bank Account	<u>42.00</u>
TOTAL EXPENSES	3828.57
Balance 8/31/92	\$3650.03

--Gene Zielinski, Treasurer

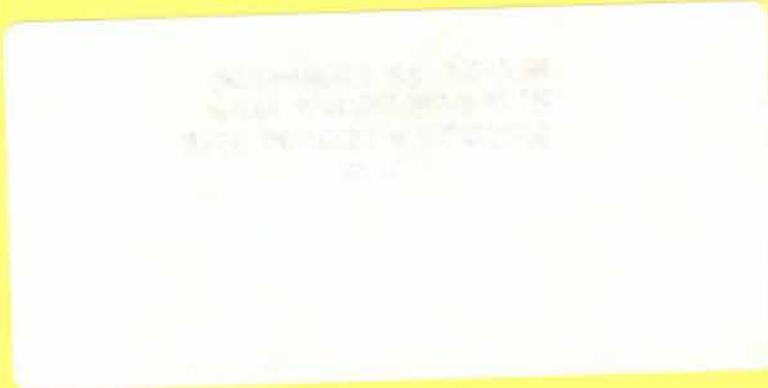
**BREEDING BIRD ATLAS SOON TO BE
PUBLISHED...REALLY!!!**

The long-awaited publication of the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania is around the corner. Yes, you've heard that before, but this time it's for real. Barring any printing catastrophe, the publisher has assured me that the Atlas will be shipped some time in December. When you finally see it, I trust you'll agree with me that it was worth the wait. With a full color cover of nesting Chestnut-sided Warblers, your data on two-color maps, and nearly 500 pages, you won't want to do without it.

How do you get a copy? Atlas volunteers will receive a direct mailing with an order form at a special discounted, pre-publication price of \$25 plus \$3 shipping. If you have moved during the past two

years or for whatever reason you do not receive that order form by November 10, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Dan Brauning, R.R. 2, Box 484, Montgomery, PA 17752, for a discount order form.

If you didn't work on the project, you may order as follows: Request the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania, D.W. Brauning, Editor. Cost is \$34.95 plus \$3.00 shipping (\$.50 per book for each additional book), payable by check, American Express, VISA, or MasterCard. Include your card number, expiration date, and your signature. Make checks payable to "CUP Services." Mail orders to: University of Pittsburgh Press, c/o CUP Services, Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851. Include your mailing address on the order. Or you may call 1-800-666-2211 for credit card orders. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.



Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology
c/o Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association
R.R. 2, Box 191
Kempston, PA 19529