



January, 1995

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK...

We have gotten behind schedule with newsletters, but we expect to be back on schedule shortly. At the November board meeting, we took some steps to remind everyone involved of deadlines and our proposed publication schedule. Therefore, you should be receiving future newsletters on a more regular and timely basis.

Also at the board meeting, it was brought to our attention that the Pennsylvania Chapter of the Nature Conservancy was soliciting funds in order to purchase a tract of land known as Two-mile Run in Monroe County. The 1500-acre parcel, known as the Yamulla tract, has been offered to the Conservancy at a bargain price; but their purchase option runs out on February 14, 1995. The Two-mile Run watershed is one of the largest and least disturbed peatlands in Pennsylvania. It is a mosaic of boreal conifer swamps, shrub ferns, acidic seepage swamps, and an open grassy fen. This site supports the largest and healthiest spruce forest in the Commonwealth. Because of the importance of wetlands preservation and the urgency of the request, the board voted unanimously to donate \$500 towards the purchase. We urge PSO members to make individual donations, and we fervently hope that the funding drive is successful so that this valuable ecosystem can be preserved for future generations.

Another topic of discussion at the meeting was the status of permit requests from owners of fish hatcheries for predator control. The primary target in this case is night-herons, but other fish-eating birds can become targets as well. Currently, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is not approving any permits for this purpose, but pressure is building from the fish

hatchery business to do so. We agree that aquaculture is certainly less damaging to our wildlife than the harvesting of wild stocks, but this must be weighed against damage that may be done to birdlife in pursuit of this goal. In Pennsylvania, night-herons are not abundant, and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons are listed as Threatened. The difficulty of separating immature night-herons makes it likely that both species would suffer if permits were granted even for just Black-crowned Night-Herons. We encourage fish hatchery managers to explore non-lethal methods of predator control so as to have the least damaging impact on our fish-eating birds. This will become a much larger issue as the number of hatcheries continues to grow. We will have more on this matter in the near future.

MEMBER RECEIVES AWARD

PSO member Dr. Thomas Dick, a veterinarian and founder of the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Chapter in Johnstown, has been awarded a National Wetlands Award in the Land Stewardship and Development category. This award, cosponsored by the Environmental Law Institute and the Environmental Protection Agency, comes after four years of planning, restoration, and work on his 170-acre farm in south-central Pennsylvania.

In 1987 Dr. Dick purchased the property, wetlands that had been ditched and drained for agriculture, intending to restore, create, and manage habitat for species such as frogs, shorebirds, turtles, and salamanders. The effort began in 1991 when Partners for Wildlife, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program that offers assistance to private landowners restoring wetlands, blocked off drainage ditches and built two dikes. That maneuver quickly

restored almost twenty acres of wetland habitat. A year later, the agency constructed several small potholes and three more dikes, restoring an additional 60 acres. Volunteers from the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society have assisted Dick with the planting of 60,000 trees, shrubs, and other plants.

The birds seen on the property have been documented by Audubon members. In 1990, 122 species had been sighted; the current list now stands at 200. Notable visitors include Sedge Wren, Common Snipe, and Pied-billed Grebe, all species of special concern in Pennsylvania.

Each year, as many as 5,000 people, including school, government agency, and conservation groups, tour the wetlands. Dr. Dick led a field trip to this site during the 1994 PSO Annual Meeting.

THE CONSERVATION PAGE

FISH-EATING BIRDS VS. FISH IN A "BATHTUB"

This past summer, a controversy arose over applications for permits to shoot fish-eating birds at fish hatcheries. The applicants were the PA Fish and Boat Commission and private aquaculturists and the birds involved were Black-crowned Night-Herons and Great Blue Herons.

The problem, at least from the perspective of the fish culturists, is that the two species of herons were consuming large quantities of fish at their hatcheries resulting in an excessive economic loss. To control this excessive loss, applicants requested permits from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to destroy a limited number of herons.

When I first learned of the applications, I was under the impression that it was only the PA Fish and Boat Commission and was

disturbed that the Commission, supposedly a leader in conservation, was applying for a permit to shoot wild, indigenous birds in order to protect non-wild, hatchery fish being raised in a glorified "bathtub." Readers should know that I am not only an avid birder but an avid fisherman. However, I can't justify the shooting of wild, migratory birds by a conservation organization in order to protect hatchery-raised fish. It seems to me that the Fish and Boat Commission should take the lead on this issue and promote nonlethal means of controlling the herons.

Further, the issuing of such a permit to a state conservation agency could set a precedent that can be used by private aquaculturists to obtain permits resulting in even more herons being destroyed. This is not the kind of precedent a conservation organization should set.

For those whose livelihood comes from raising fish, I tend to be more sympathetic. They are trying to make a living, and fish depredation is a loss that can have serious impact. However, the killing of migratory piscivorous birds is at best a short term 'bandaid' approach, and it is NOT a long term solution. If aquaculturists are losing as much money as claimed, tens of thousands of dollars, they would be wise to invest the money now to protect their investment and save those thousands of dollars. Some have, but continued investment on the part of aquaculturists will be needed to protect their product while eliminating the need to destroy herons.

As noted, long term, nonlethal solutions are needed, and there are options available now such as screening the raceways and increasing depth of ponds. There is a need though to continue to search for new and better ways, and we as members of PSO can encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, and private industry (aquaculturists) to continue to look for new and innovative nonlethal control methods and to fund research in this area of agriculture.

ACTION NEEDED:

Write the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and express your concern with the destruction of herons at fish hatcheries. Recognize that in certain circumstances it may be necessary, but emphasize that you consider this to be a short-term measure and that a permit should be issued only after all other nonlethal measures have been implemented. Further, insist that a long-term, nonlethal control plan be developed and implemented by each applicant. Write Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley, MA 01035-9589.

If you would like to comment or offer suggestions, please contact Mark Henry, PSO Conservation Editor, P.O. Box 873, State College, PA 16804.



Raven Reporter

News of the Special Areas Project

Winter Wonderland?

All of us have heard a great deal of speculation about the severity of the upcoming (or, "it's here already") winter. Measuring wooly bear bands and reading Old Farmer's Almanacs are back in vogue. Based on the Law of Averages, I think the winter of 1994-95 should not be too bad. After last year's return to the Pleistocene, just about any winter has to be easy by comparison. So, call me optimistic, but I think this will be a winter for walking in

the woods and fields, especially with a pair of binoculars.

Christmas Counts and feeder watching are the main winter activities for most Pennsylvania birders. Perhaps this explains the relatively poor coverage of most Special Areas during the colder months. I personally love to walk in wintertime. My wife and I have made it an annual tradition to go for a walk or a ski on New Year's Day. It clears the head and gets the blood circulating. We think it starts each year on the right track. I even get to see a few birds sometimes.

So, may I suggest dressing in layers, putting on a warm hat, and finding warm boots and gloves. Perhaps snowshoes or cross country skis would help. A winter walk is much more invigorating than watching somebody else play football. Many state parks have trails for skiing or walking in winter. Give them a try.

In fact, I issue to you a challenge. I think it would be terrific to have TWENTY Special Areas covered on New Year's Day. Will you meet my challenge? Let me know how you did.

Cones At Last!?

At the risk of sounding redundant, it could be a fine year for cones. In my various travels to remote and not so remote woods, I have noticed very fine crops of hemlock and red spruce cones. This portends of finches. Keep a look-out. At least they have a good reason to fly to Pennsylvania. Redpolls, siskins, crossbills, and grosbeaks. You heard it here first.

And, speaking of hearing, please remember to listen for those Red Crossbills. If you do get Red Crossbills in your area, try to tape their call notes. Even small hand-held tape recorders have a small microphone capable of picking up call notes. Send me your tape and I will try to get the crossbills identified to "type." There are at least eight types or subspecies in North America. (The A.O.U. might decide that they are species. Just think of the possibilities). I am trying to document which ones visit Pennsylvania (and occasionally nest).

Evening Grosbeak: Not Just a Visitor!

1994 will go down as a very interest-

ing year for Pennsylvania additions. Many of you already have read about the Herring Gulls nesting on an Allegheny River channel marker at Pittsburgh (see Ted Floyd's *Pennsylvania Birds* article). Pennsylvania birders did not stop there with interesting additions to the state's list of documented breeding birds.

Skip Conant (SAP volunteer) confirmed nesting of Evening Grosbeaks this year. His report will be published in *Pennsylvania Birds* very soon, so I will not steal much of his thunder by letting you know this amazing development. The grosbeaks settled into an area where elm spanworms were abundant. The grosbeaks gobbled up the caterpillars and then made hogs of themselves crunching up those white spanworm moths. There is some evidence that Evening Grosbeaks nested in other parts of the state in years past, so this may not be a fluke.

North Branch Bird Club members observed young grosbeaks in two Special Areas: State Game Lands 57 and SGL 13. Evening Grosbeaks are exciting in January, but they are even more exciting in August. Keep an eye and an ear out for grosbeaks. You never know what will turn up if you keep looking around.

Those Rare Bird Reports

Speaking of *Pennsylvania Birds*, I would like to direct SA volunteers' attention to Ed Kwater's recent articles in the state's bird journal. Ed does us all a great service by publishing the article, "Documenting Rare Birds in Pennsylvania: What the Records Committee Looks For, Part 1," in the April-June 1994 issue. May I remind you that the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee (P.O.R.C.) is in effect the records committee for the Special Areas Project. All records of really rare birds observed on SA Project trips should be able to pass P.O.R.C. standards. Ed's article explains why we have records committees and why it is so important to document rare bird sightings. His pointers about taking notes on plumage are particularly helpful. One of the most important illustrations in bird guides is the topography of the bird. Just try starting

from the beak and work your way back to the tip of the tail. Please take the time to read his article on the subject.

It should be noted that some SA Project rare bird reports have been reviewed by P.O.R.C. The most famous of these was the Ross's Gull at Lake Marburg, Codorus State Park. This report was the first documented Ross's Gull for Pennsylvania. Karen Lippy did a fine job of documenting this event on videotape. The tape was an amazing thing to see: a gull acting much more like a tern or a swallow than a "proper" gull. I know because I saw the tape. Lippy sent the tape to me because of my position as SA Project Coordinator. I reviewed the tape as much out of curiosity as for any reason. I had an opinion about the identity of the bird, but kept this to myself. Checking the evidence was the appropriate role for P.O.R.C., not the SA Project Coordinator. So, I sent the videotape to Barb Haas, the Secretary for P.O.R.C., as documentation of the observation. The rest, as they say, is history.

So, some of the lessons of the Ross's Gull observation could apply to your next rare bird sighting. First, get other birders involved with the observations as soon as possible. You might want to start with the PA Birds county editor or Atlas Coordinator. This is particularly important for non-breeding species. It is often very hard to get confirming observations of an unusual bird by yourself. Vagrants often do not stay around very long, so it is a good idea to involve others to help identify and document a rarity as soon as possible. It is, of course, important to be careful about breeding birds and private land situations. Too many people can spoil the pot, so be cautious about exposing nesting birds to much human traffic.

Other observers can be helpful in obtaining equipment. If you do not have a scope, camera, tape recorder, or video-camera, maybe somebody else in the area does. Pencil and paper are important tools, too, so do not be afraid to use them.

Independent observations are also very helpful for the veracity of the account. We can prejudice each other while

we try to figure out the odd bird, so splitting up into parties can be helpful. The verbal account of the Ross's Gull observations were interesting and helpful in this fashion for the identification. And, be creative in your documentation. The videotape was a wonderful way to observe this gull, even if the bird was often distant and the tape a little grainy. It is not very often you see a gull dropping down to the surface of the water to pick insects with such buoyancy of flight.

Good work, Karen, and good luck to all of you in finding such a rarity in your Special Area.

Remember to send rare bird reports to Barb Haas, the P.O.R.C. Secretary. I would not mind getting copies of rare bird reports for SA Projects, but this is not absolutely necessary.

Submit That Data to the Special Areas Project!

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology applied for a grant to manage the Special Areas Project data. Fortunately, the Wild Resource Conservation Fund has graciously decided to help us out by providing funds to make the Special Areas Project a bit more professional in its approach to data management. As of January, the data will be input into a computer in order to make it more accessible to everyone. The data will be checked for accuracy and sent back to Special Areas Local Coordinators for checking. We will then begin to share our data with others, including the Bureau of State Parks, the Bureau of Forestry, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and the National Audubon Society. The Special Areas Project will serve not only to help state agencies and sponsoring groups to document birds in the state, but also help the Audubon Society's project on Important Bird Areas. More about this cooperative effort in a future column. Meanwhile, dust off your data sheets and get them to the Post Office soon.

Send your wonderful Special Areas Project data to:

Douglas A. Gross
PSO Special Areas Project
Susquehanna SES Environmental Laboratory
R. R. 1, Box 1795
Berwick, PA 18603

1995 PSO ANNUAL MEETING

May 19-21, 1995

Hazleton Campus

Penn State
University

Luzerne County

(Details will follow in next newsletter and in *Pennsylvania Birds*.)

CONJUNCTIVITIS REPORTED IN HOUSE FINCHES

A recent outbreak of a respiratory infection among House Finches, believed to be caused by a bacterium, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, has recently been reported in several ornithological journals and other magazines. This disease is normally found in poultry, poses no known risks to humans, and has not been found in any other wild bird other than House Finch.

Conjunctivitis, eye infection, is the most visible symptom of this disease. House Finches with symptoms of conjunctivitis have been noted in several mid-Atlantic

states with scattered reports from Pennsylvania. These House Finches exhibit swollen faces with red, swollen, runny or crusted eyes. Infected birds may be weak and blind and spend much time on the ground searching for food.

Concern has been expressed that feeding birds may contribute to the spread of the disease among wild bird populations. Those who feed birds are reminded to keep feeders clean of waste food and bird droppings. In addition, feeders should be moved to different locations at regular intervals. Because crowding at feeders may be a key factor, adding an additional feeder or two may help alleviate congestion.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission is requesting anyone who sees evidence of this disease to report their sightings to the regional office.

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