

# PSO Newsletter



*The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology*

April 1996

Volume 7, Number 2

## PSO ANNUAL MEETING

This year's annual meeting will be held at Slippery Rock University and is being cosponsored by the Bartramian Audubon Society and the Biology Department of Slippery Rock University. The theme of this year's meeting is Grasslands.

Registration is scheduled for 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. on Friday, May 17. The fun begins Friday evening with a social at 7:00 p.m., followed by the PSO Annual Business Meeting at 8:00 p.m. Following our business meeting, Gene Wilhelm will give us an overview of the weekend's field trips.

Field trips will target species including Sandhill Crane, Upland Sandpiper, Short-eared Owl, Sedge Wren, Marsh Wren, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Henslow's Sparrow. Vans will be provided for transportation. Destinations on Saturday include Celery Swamp, Pennsy Swamp, Volant area, Wolf Creek Narrows, the Miller Tract, Moraine State Park, and McConnells Mill State Park. Sunday will feature outings to Volant, Shenango, and the Barkeyville Grasslands. (See map on page 3.)

Afternoon sessions will include an update on PSO's first project, the Special Areas Project, by Doug Gross; Purple Martin Research by Jamie Hill; the Private Property Sanctuary Program by Sandy Swansiger; Tern Identification by Ed Kwater; and the Sandhill Crane in

Pennsylvania by Gene Wilhelm. Our banquet speaker is Dr. Peter Vickery who is employed by Massachusetts Audubon as an Avian Ecologist. He has been active in grassland songbird research in New England and heads a Grassland Birds Working Group as part of the Northeast Partners in Flight. He has published several key papers on grassland bird management. Be sure to plan now for this exciting meeting!

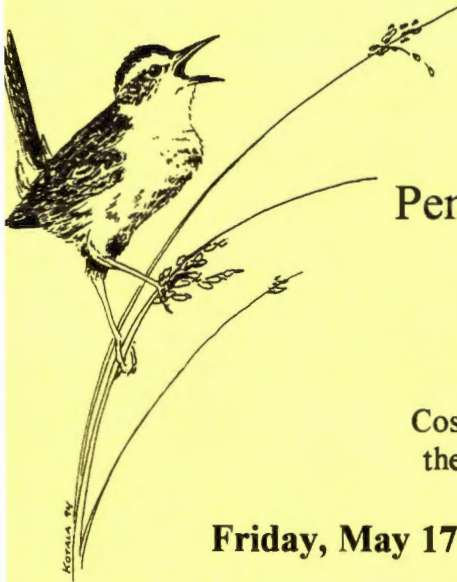
## NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT

The warblers are coming! The warblers are coming! And hopefully this year's North American Migration Count on May 11 (the second Saturday in May) will yield many individual warblers of many species.

This year's count will mark the fifth count in this all-volunteer program.

For further information, contact Alan Gregory, P.O. Box 571, Conyngham, PA 18219-0571.





Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology  
Seventh Annual Meeting  
17-19 May 1996  
Slippery Rock University  
Cosponsored by the Bartramian Audubon Society and  
the Biology Department of Slippery Rock University

**Friday, May 17:**

- |                |                                        |
|----------------|----------------------------------------|
| 5:00-9:00 p.m. | Registration                           |
| 7:00-8:00      | Social                                 |
| 8:00-8:45      | Business Meeting                       |
| 8:45-10:00     | Overview of Field Trips (Gene Wilhelm) |

**Saturday, May 18:**

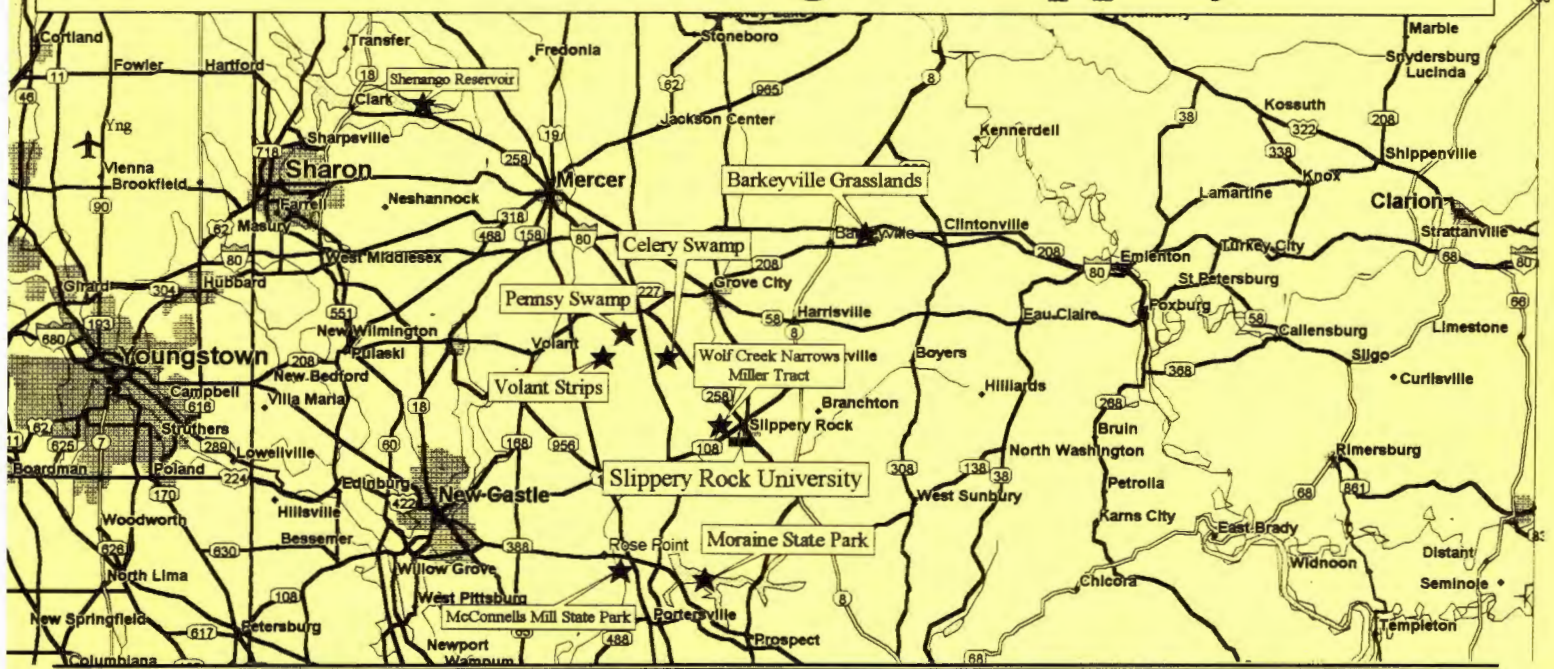
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|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6:00-6:30   | Breakfast                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 6:30-11:00  | Field Trips<br>Celery Swamp, Pennsy Swamp, Volant (G. Wilhelm,<br>Suzanne Butcher)<br>Wolf Creek Narrows, Miller Tract (Chuck Cornelius)<br>Moraine State Park, McConnell's Mills State Park (Mark<br>and Sandy Swansiger)                                                            |
| 11:30-12:30 | Lunch                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 1:00-5:00   | Programs (Exact schedule will be mailed with your registration<br>confirmation.)<br>SAP Report (Doug Gross)<br>Sandhill Cranes in PA (Gene Wilhelm)<br>Purple Martin Research (Jamie Hill)<br>Private Property Sanctuary Program (Sandy Swansiger)<br>Tern Identification (Ed Kwater) |
| 6:00-7:00   | Social                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 7:00-9:30   | Banquet<br>Speaker - Peter Vickery                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

**Sunday, May 19:**

- |            |                                                                                                                    |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6:00-6:30  | Breakfast                                                                                                          |
| 6:30-11:30 | Field Trips<br>Volant (Bob Walczak)<br>Shenango Reservoir (Shirley McCarl)<br>Barkeyville Grasslands (Russ States) |



# Annual PSO Meeting at Slippery Rock



## THE CONSERVATION PAGE

### 104th Congress Attacks Environment

In the last national election, many voters, disgusted with politics as usual, elected legislators who promised "change for the better." Voters wanted issues such as controlling the national debt, balancing the budget, and election controls analyzed and appropriate actions taken. What the voters did not want but received anyway was an unprecedented attack on environmental laws and regulations. Senators and Congressmen/women across the nation introduced proposal after proposal to weaken or destroy environmental programs. For example, the latest attack comes in the form of Senate bill 605, introduced by Senator Dole, which will force the government to pay off property owners when health, safety, and environmental regulations interfere with their ability to make a profit. If the government doesn't have the money, then the taxpayers must pay more or the regulations are not enforced--neither alternative is acceptable to responsible citizens.

Fortunately this November, the voters will get a chance to let the politicians know that they are dissatisfied with Congress' efforts to weaken environmental protections. In Pennsylvania, there are several Congressmen whose environmental records are dismal. The latest League of Conservation Voters scorecard lists all PA Congressmen and the ones with less than a 33% environmental voting record are Clinger (8%), Shuster (0%), McDade (0%), Walker (0%), Gekas (0%), Goodling (15%), and English (31%). I would urge PSO members who reside in these Congressmen's districts to let them know their records are unacceptable and to vote accordingly in November.

Conversely, there are PA Congressmen who deserve our support. In the same scorecard, PA Congressmen with an environmental voting record of greater than 66% are Foglietta (100%), Fattah (100%), Borski (92%), Greenwood (77%), Kanjorski (85%), Murtha (69%), Coyne (92%), and McHale (85%). Again, I would urge PSO members in these districts to thank their members of Congress and continue to support them.

The rest of the PA Congressional delegation falls in between 33% and 66% and they need to improve



their voting records. For interested PSO members, these Congressmen are Klink (62%), Holden (38%), Weldon (54%), Fox (54%), Doyle (38%), and Mascara (54%).

#### **Action Needed:**

Please call or write your Congressman/woman and either thank him or chastise him regarding his voting record. You can write your Congressman/woman at U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515. Vote accordingly this November.

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

## **Special Feature**

### **The SAP Wish List--Spring 1996**

Here are a few locations for which the SAP Coordinator wishes we had bird data. A few of these were intended as SAPs, but have not been started. Please let Doug Gross know if you would like to initiate a SAP at any location. *The Birders Guide to Pennsylvania* by Paula Ford and *Outbound Journeys in Pennsylvania* by Marcia Bonta were helpful in making this list.

1. **Nockamixon State Park**, *Bucks*--State Parks asked us for data on this popular birding spot.
2. **Raccoon Creek State Park**, *Beaver*--One of the largest state parks near a metropolitan area.
3. **Moraine State Park**, *Butler*--Lake Arthur, wetlands, and potential for endangered species.
4. **Long Pond**, *Monroe*--One of the jewels of the Poconos gets little attention from birders.
5. **Two Mile Run**, *Monroe*--PSO helped Nature Conservancy obtain this Poconos boreal swamp.
6. **Erie National Wildlife Refuge**, *Crawford*--Key migrant stopover with potential for endangered species.

7. **State Game Lands 314** (David M. Roderick Reserve), *Erie*--A birders' hot spot waiting for discovery?
8. **State Game Lands 213** (Conneaut Marsh), *Crawford*--One of our most important wetlands.
9. **State Game Lands 180** (Shohola Falls), *Pike*--A key waterfowl area in the upper Delaware region.
10. **Black Moshannon State Park**, *Centre*--Big state park with a lake and boreal bog.
11. **French Creek State Park**, *Berks*--An island of bird habitat just off the interstate.
12. **Snyder Middleswarth Natural Area**, *Snyder*--famous virgin hemlocks in Seven Mountains area.
13. **Middle Creek Waterfowl Management Lake**, *Lancaster*--A mecca for birders without a SAP.
14. **Oil Creek State Park**, *Venango*--A large park with lots of hiking trails, but few bird reports.
15. **Leonard Harrison State Park**, *Tioga*--Grand Canyon area; Red Crossbills nested here once.
16. **Ridley Creek State Park**, *Delaware*--Since Frank Haas left has anyone reported on its birds?
17. **Fairmont Park**, *Philadelphia*--The largest city park is famous as a birding hot spot.
18. **Point State Park**, *Allegheny*--An urban park with great potential for strays and rare breeders.
19. **Bald Eagle State Park**, *Centre*--A great birder's hot spot without a SAP.
20. **Octorora Lake**, *Lancaster*--Another famous hot spot for migrants without a SAP.
21. **State Game Lands 106**, *Schuylkill/Berks*--This game lands next to Hawk Mountain has many trails.
22. **R. B. Winter State Park**, *Union*--Near the center of the state and almost unknown to birders.
23. **Pymatuning State Park**, *Crawford*--The possibilities are great, but the documentation poor.
24. **State Game Lands 252** (White Deer), *Union*--One of Central Pennsylvania's best birding areas.
25. **Heart's Content Natural Area**, *Warren*--A famous section of our only national forest.
26. **Ole Bull State Park**, *Potter*--A famous park in God's Country with its share of good tales.
27. **Conejehola Flats**, *Lancaster*--A premier water bird migration and a hot spot for Bald Eagles.
28. **Linn Run State Park**, *Westmoreland*--A beautiful glen on the west side of Laurel Hill.



29. **State Game Lands 312** (Lehigh Pond), *Wayne*--A gem of boreal habitat in the Poconos.
30. **Hammond Lake**, *Tioga*--Ospreys nest here, what else?
31. **Ravensburg State Park**, *Clinton*--After all, I am the Raven Reporter.
32. **The Piney Tract**, *Clarion*--Grasslands that are home to many rare birds.
33. **Rosecrans Bog**, *Clinton*--A remote boreal swamp with no bird inventory.
34. **Laurel Hill State Park**, *Westmoreland*--One of our highest parks on a beautiful mountain.
35. **Tyler State Park**, *Bucks*--An island of bird habitat in the Philadelphia suburbs.
36. **Kettle Creek State Park**, *Clinton*--A park in one of our most forested counties.
37. **Bruce Lake Natural Area**, Delaware State Forest, *Wayne*--Boreal conifer swamps galore!

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## News of the Special Areas Projects

### SAP Organization Sponsorship

The PSO no longer requires financial sponsorship by organizations. All we require is your time and commitment to have fun birding on SAP field trips. Your energy and interest are the most important

contributions you can make to make PSO's project very special indeed.

The Special Areas Project has enjoyed the support of many Pennsylvania birders and organizations. When PSO started SAP as its first project, it needed some income to finance the forms, instructions, and conducted field trips. The contributions of Audubon Societies and bird clubs helped pay for those expenses. Any contributions to this fund are still appreciated but not necessary for participation. SAP is a very inclusive project, and we welcome new participants.

### Springtime is Owl Time

Few groups of birds are more appealing than owls. Yet, owls are some of the hardest birds to observe and document. There is an old joke that the problem with owls is not that they are active at night, but that they are so darned inactive during the day. At least most owls. The big owls, Great Horned and Barred, will hoot sometimes in the daytime, especially when it is overcast.

Short-eared Owls sometimes cruise open fields and meadows during the day but more often near dawn and dusk. This most graceful of the owls is one of the state's rarest breeding species, a Pennsylvania Endangered species. Unlike our other owls, it is an open country bird that is most likely to nest in a large wetland or a grassy abandoned strip mine. Courtship displays have stunning acrobatics with stuttering descents and wing claps. As they sashay and dance, short-ears 'bark' in mid-air acrobatics.

Barn Owls can sometimes be seen perched in the opening of a barn or silo. Old water towers, church steeples, and abandoned outbuildings are favorite spots, too. Although you might catch sight of one sleeping during the day, you are more likely to encounter a Barn Owl screaming its blood-curdling cries as it glides overhead during one of its evening hunts. Rats attracted to grain bins are favorite targets. Barn Owls are somewhat adaptable in choice of nest locations but can be loyal to favorable locations. I have heard of Barn Owls occupying a large hollowed sycamore for more than a decade. It is good to know a farmer with Barn Owls.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are elusive, but surprisingly common in many areas. Saw-whets are



usually found near water where there is some conifer cover and lots of underbrush. They usually call when spring peepers do and often in the same places. Generally this owl is found at higher elevations in our state, the sort of place you expect Hermit Thrushes. Saw-whets readily respond to imitations of their 'toot' song. This tiny owl hunts near the ground, so it is advantageous to position yourself low to spot its silhouette as it flies around.

Long-eared Owls are the most elusive of Pennsylvania's owls. This woodland owl is often associated with conifers. In Columbia County, I have found them in large Eastern White Pines or ridgetop Virginia Pine woods. They often hunt in nearby fields or meadows. Listen for their deep hoots near dusk and dawn. Friends of mine call this the "whoop" owl because of the sounds pairs make during the nesting season. Pairs will often take over an old crow's nest in a pine tree. Hunting this phantom is rewarding. Few breeding Long-eared Owls are found each year in Pennsylvania. Every discovery is an historic occasion.

Alertness and persistence are essential for finding owls. If you are on your toes, you can find owls in many different circumstances. Once, I found Barn Owls with young that a fisherman told me about. They were living in a big tree along the river near a favorite fishing hole. While quietly reading a book late at night, I heard two Long-eared Owls calling back and forth in town, not the likeliest place for forest birds. Owls of all types can be found by camping in out-of-the-way places.

Owls can sometimes find you. Young Barred Owls branching out on their own can be fairly noisy and curious. I have had young Barred Owls follow me through the woods for more than a hundred feet. Sometimes screech-owls and saw-whets will fly in to take a peek at you and flit off without making a sound.

Like most nocturnal birds, owls depend on vocalizations to find each other. Birders can use this to their advantage. Members of a pair call back and forth and also to their young. It is a good idea to study these calls. Most are not mentioned in the standard field guides. For example, female saw-whets "whirldle" in reply to their mates. Young owls have identifiable calls that are helpful to confirm nesting by finding fuzzy owlets.

Here are the "safe dates" for the breeding season of Pennsylvania's owls. If you observe these species during the given safe dates, indicate they are breeding with at least an "X" code in the breeding column. They are given only as a rough indicator of the breeding seasons of these species. Some pairs begin nesting before the dates listed below.

### Safe Dates for Pennsylvania Breeding Owl Species

	<u>Start</u>	<u>End</u>
Barn Owl	5/01	9/30
Eastern Screech-Owl	4/01	8/15
Great Horned Owl	12/20	8/30
Barred Owl	1/15	8/30
Long-eared Owl	5/01	9/30
Short-eared Owl	5/01	9/30
Northern Saw-whet Owl	5/05	9/10

### The Birdwatcher's Apprentice

Where are our next birdwatchers coming from? In the upcoming years, who will run the BBS routes and survey blocks for the next Atlas? Who will be leading bird walks and talking to school groups about birds and conservation? Who will be the county coordinators and Christmas Count coordinators? There is a good chance we know many of these people. Right now they may be beginning birdwatchers who are just learning about the nuances of bird identification. They might not be confident enough to join the local club.

It is vital that we make potential field ornithologists and conservation leaders welcome in our company. We should make it our business that these beginners keep their interest in birds, and we should help them advance their skills.

For decades, experienced birdwatchers have taken apprentices into the woods, fields, and marshes to show them birds and how to identify them. Hundreds of accomplished birdwatchers benefited from a relationship with a mentor.



With home computers, cable television, and a million other diversions, it is hard to get newcomers out in the field to watch birds. The new bird CD Roms and videos are nice, but there is nothing like real life experience with real live birds to help learn the nuances of identification. It is very tempting to take the easy way to learning bird identification by plugging into these electronic tools, but the immediate experiences bring it all home.

The Special Areas Project provides a framework for mentoring. It gives many opportunities for experienced birdwatchers to share their skills with others. Novices are attracted to the project, because it involves field experiences and a worthy cause. Some SAP coordinators are recruiting beginners to join field trips. On SAP trips there are plenty of chances for learning together. One SAP coordinator, John Fedak, took along a whole school class on a SAP trip. Perhaps one of those students will run a BBS route through Clarion County in the future.

Before the Atlas, few in Pennsylvania knew what "X" or "NE" meant--at least in the context of bird behavior. Now some of us cannot get these codes out of our minds. Breeding bird behavior was not commonly studied by Pennsylvania's birders before those atlas days. Watching bird antics and interpreting behavior can be very challenging. By bringing along new birders, another group of people can learn these skills and continue to study breeding bird populations.

SAP is an ideal situation to involve birdwatchers in data management and leadership roles. Transferring Daily Field Trip data to Seasonal Forms is easier with two people. Some relatively inexperienced up-and-coming birders are coordinating SAPs. In some cases, more experienced birders are helping out by looking over the local SAP data before it is sent into SAP Central. Data quality control is an easily overlooked process in any bird field project. A well-informed set of eyes can catch the odd mistake and help keep the high level of integrity that SAP aims for.

Mentoring is alive and well in the Special Areas Project. Long may it prosper.

#### Working with State Park Employees

Most Special Areas are state parks. It has

always been the policy and intent of the SAP to involve park employees in SAPs. It is a good policy for SAP volunteers to inform the park office if they are going to inventory birds in the park. Some park employees might be interested going along on a field trip. This is particularly true of the environmental educators. Please invite them along. You both might learn something and have fun together in the park.

The information that SAP volunteers gather can be shared with park employees, too. Since many parks do not have a birdwatcher on staff, they might be very interested in the bird data you obtain to strengthen their educational programs. Some of the park staff are seasonal employees so they do not get to visit the park all year around. Your notes on birds taken throughout the year can supplement their personal observations. Any staff member might also be able to give you information about birds in the park that you might otherwise not get. It is always good to get a few extra sightings.

#### The A.O.U. Checklist Changes

The American Ornithologists Union is the keeper of the official list of birds in the United States (or, at least, one of them). P.O.R.C. and SAP recognize the AOU Checklist as a reference for taxonomic decisions. Here are a few changes that might affect SAP reports.

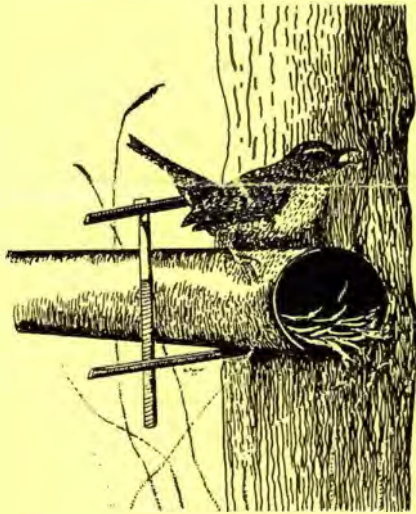
*Northern Oriole*: The Northern Oriole has been split between the eastern Baltimore Oriole and the western Bullock's Oriole. Many of us remember them before they were lumped a few years ago. Use the "Northern Oriole" spaces on SAP forms for Baltimore Oriole and add any Bullock's Oriole sightings to the end of the report. Of course, any report of Bullock's Oriole would need special documentation and be accepted by PORC to count as a SAP sighting.

*Gray-cheeked Thrush*: The Bicknell's Thrush was split from Gray-cheeked Thrush as another species. The Bicknell's Thrush breeds in the mountains of New York and New England as well as parts of northeastern Canada (the Maritimes). The Gray-cheeked Thrush nests across Canada from Newfoundland west to Alaska and even in eastern Siberia. At present, the ranges of each of these species are unknown in Pennsylvania.



They are only known as migrants. Bicknell's Thrush nests within 50 miles of the Pennsylvania border. SAP observers can help study the distribution of these species in the state by making careful observations.

Birdwatchers should be very careful in their identifications of Gray-cheeked and Bicknell's thrushes. Recent articles in *Birding*, *Birder's World*, and *Living Bird* should be helpful. The most reliable field characteristics are perhaps the vocalizations. The song of the Bicknell's Thrush has been referred to as sounding like a Veery with laryngitis. Most notably, the Bicknell's song goes up at the end. The closing phrase of the Bicknell's is a thin, upward note while the last phrase of the Gray-cheeked goes somewhat downward and is louder. Since neither species has ever been observed nesting in the state, birders are unlikely to hear them sing. Call notes are more likely to be experienced by state birders. This includes birds calling while flying overhead at night when these birds migrate. The call notes of the two are distinctly different but take a little practice to learn. These differences require a practiced ear, and I advise listening to tapes of their songs and calls to learn them. I also advise taping the call notes



or songs in the field to confirm identification. This might be necessary for field identification of Bicknell's Thrush to be accepted by PORC in the foreseeable future.

Visually, the Bicknell's Thrush is generally "warmer" in appearance than gray-cheeked. Most Bicknell's Thrushes have a chestnut-colored tail which contrasts somewhat with a brownish olive back. Gray-cheeked Thrushes do not have a chestnut-colored tail. Bicknell's Thrush is smaller than Gray-cheeked and has extensive yellow coloration on its lower mandible. Many Bicknell's Thrushes will show contrast between its tail and back, but southern-bound adult birds might have worn plumage without much plumage contrast. Observers should also be aware of similarities with Swainson's Thrush, one of our state's rarest breeders. The young of all nightingale-thrushes (*Catharus*) may be confused with each other. Care is strongly advised. Good photographs taken in good light might be necessary for proper documentation.

Thus far, we have only received eight Gray-cheeked Thrush reports among the thousands of SAP bird observations. Finding either thrush species is a relatively uncommon event in the state. Good luck!

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