

PSO Newsletter

The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

November 1997

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK . . .

Computers and the accompanying technology (software, internet etc.) are changing our lives in many ways, even those of birders and the birding community. Not long ago the president of PSO routinely communicated with board members via printed letters and the U.S. mail or by telephone. While those mediums are still available and at times utilized, I have the option of communicating with PSO board members via the internet (e-mail). Almost invariably I now choose the internet (e-mail) because nearly all of us have an e-mail address or access to one; people are seldom found at their "normal" telephone addresses anyway. Due to the ability to send the same message to so many people simultaneously, without going through a secretary for typing, communication has been greatly facilitated by the internet.

For those of us who also have subscribed to one or more of the "bird nets," the impact of this medium on our interests and our work is immediately realized. If you haven't done so, please consider it. I subscribe (free of charge) to the "pabirds" network owned by Don Henise, but this network often receives messages from other lists as well. Typically several messages are received by subscribers each day, dealing with many different bird or birding issues. I find the information on trends in bird populations or migrations to be of most interest. For example, someone (perhaps it was first Dan Brauning of the Pennsylvania Game Commission) noted that few if any observations of nighthawks (*Chordeiles minor*) were reported in the past year or so and inquired whether this void was real or spurious. Whether it was the fortuitous timing of the question (at about the time of migration through Pennsylvania) or a true reflection of population trends,

the response on the birdnet was remarkable. Nighthawks on the move were reported from nearly every region of the state, in some cases in large migratory groups. This response gave almost an immediate picture of the species' population in the state, though not necessarily of breeding numbers. Information of this sort may or may not come out in our state ornithological journal, *Pennsylvania Birds*, months later.

The point to all this can be summarized in a question. How can we, the state ornithological society, capture some of the energy generated by this technological revolution in communication to further our goals? And related to that, how can we interest the many talented bird enthusiasts who communicate via the internet/birdnets in our organization. They ought to be a part of us and vice versa. I don't mean to sound as if there is no current association or overlap between the two groups because there is. It's a matter of degree or extent of association, however.

If you have ideas, opinions, or suggestions regarding this issue, please let me or other directors of the Society know. Change is inevitable. Let's make it work for us!

--Bob Ross, President

1998 Annual Meeting
Hosted by Tiadaghton Audubon Society

May 15-17, 1998

Mansfield University
Mansfield, PA

Birds Behaving Badly

by Mary Jane Seipler

I like to think I've successfully turned my backyard into a wildlife sanctuary. I like to think my attempts to offer food, water, and shelter are greatly appreciated. I like to think of my yard as a mini-paradise where every creature gets along with the next, and everyone (especially me) is happy. I enjoy sitting on the deck early in the morning or late in the afternoon watching the gentle interplay of bird, squirrel, chipmunk, groundhog, deer, and butterfly. I love the idyllic setting I have created for myself, er, I mean, for the wildlife. I overlook the Sharp-shinned Hawk's snatching an inattentive starling. I don't think about the insects who are the regular diet of Chimney Swifts, flycatchers, and bats. I fail to acknowledge the earthworms routinely taken by American Robins. All is well as long as I look the other way when predation occurs, but there are times when a different type of unpleasantness rears its ugly head. This is a story about one of those occasions.

It was a beautiful morning in mid-June. I casually looked out of the kitchen window to see what was happening at the feeders. I noticed a small group of turkeys standing in the yard. They had formed a ring around two turkeys who were engaged in what appeared to be a fight. One of the turkeys had gripped the other by the back of the neck, and the "victim" was slowly moving in a circle with its head pointed to the sky. The one maintaining the grip was determined not to let go, and the one in the grip was determined not to show its pain. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. What were these turkeys doing and why? They were beardless so they had to be females or young. Would females be engaged in such fighting when they had just finished raising young? I didn't think so. The only sensible explanation was they were birds of the year engaged in a pecking order dispute. It was hard to believe young turkeys could be so mean to each other. My sensibilities were further shocked when I realized the other turkeys standing at the sidelines were "egging" them on like a crowd of lowlifes at a cockfight! I was sickened to know my wonderful little turkeys acted this way when I wasn't looking. I watched in horror until my patience wore out. I ran onto the deck screaming, "Bad turkey, bad turkey!", the same way one would yell "bad dog" at shameful behavior in a normally well-mannered pet.

The turkeys stopped their battle and reluctantly walked away like a bunch of unruly teens caught in a brush with the law. They departed mumbling expletives under their breath with Beavis and Butthead hissing the loudest. I knew without a doubt they would resume their hoodlum behavior the minute they were out of my sight. I returned to the house upset and unable to stop thinking about the altercation. Everyone knew who was at the bottom of the pecking order except the bird who was assigned the honor. The designee wasn't sure it wanted that dubious distinction and would need serious convincing. I wondered how far they would go to send the message and how long it would take for the message to be accepted.

I remembered a conversation with my grandmother from many years ago. She told me nothing surprised her because she had lived long enough to see just about everything. But she was not a student of nature. The naturalist can observe for a long, long time and still have things to learn. Thoreau said if you want to see something new take the same path you took yesterday. The familiar creature never fails to behave in a way not before seen, renewing feelings of awe and a sense of wonder about nature's mysteries. That type of revelation occurs daily in my own private wildlife sanctuary, my backyard.

Now if only someone would explain why that gray squirrel I usually consider cute is gnawing on my newly stained deck!

The Conservation Corner

Conejohela Flats--Flats or Flood Water?

PA Society of Ornithology members and other PA birders living in the south central part of the state are aware of the importance of the Conejohela Flats for migrating shorebirds, waterfowl, and other wildlife. These mudflats have been and continue to be important feeding grounds for migrating birds. In fact, a study by Acres International estimated that over 12,000 migratory shorebirds used the mudflats in 1996. This kind of habitat is important to protect, and we must be ready to defend such areas from destruction. Such is the case involving a request by Safe Harbor Water Power Corporation to amend their

hydroelectric license.

Safe Harbor Water Power Corporation has recently applied to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to amend their hydroelectric license issued for Safe Harbor Dam. If granted, the amended license would allow the maximum elevation of Lake Clarke (name of water backed up by Safe Harbor Dam) from 227.2 feet to 228.0 feet. While this may not seem like much of an increase, it would be enough to flood the mudflats on which the migrating birds depend.

While the Power Corp. initially proposes to only raise the level from October 15 to April 15 of the following year so that the mudflats are exposed during spring and fall migration, they eventually hope to keep the level at 228.0 feet and mitigate for the loss of habitat. Mitigation proposals include access restrictions and the placement of sand bags to trap sediments which will hopefully create new "flats." However, the sand bag proposal to create new "flats" is unproven and problematical. Further, the change in pool elevation will only result in an increase in power generation by 2.1% (communication from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

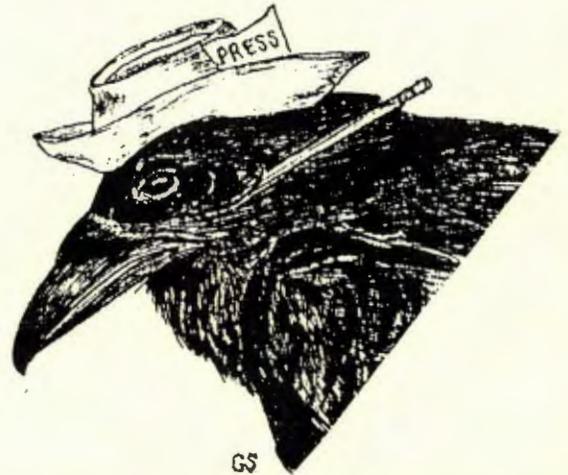
And finally, because mitigation is unproven and problematical, an existing use of the river could be eliminated. If an existing use is eliminated, then the action would violate the PA Department of Environmental Protection's antidegradation policy under Section 401 of the Clean Water Act, and the Department would need to be willing to enforce their policy.

In my opinion, because the loss of an important birding area is a real possibility and the benefit of raising the water level is minimal, I would urge that FERC not grant an amendment to the license and that DEP indicate that they will enforce Section 401 if an existing use is eliminated. The Conejohela Flats are too important to lose, and now is the time to express opinions to the appropriate authorities.

Members of PSO who wish to express their opinion on this issue can do so by writing the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Lois Cashell, Acting Secretary, 888 First St., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20426 and Secretary James Seif, PA Department of

Environmental Protection, P.O. Box 2063, Harrisburg, PA 17105.

If you would like to comment or offer suggestions, contact Mark Henry, PSO Conservation Editor, P.O. Box 410, Pine Grove Mills, PA 16868.



Raven Reporter

News of the Special Areas Project

Spring 1997 SAP Reports: Good Coverage

By unofficial count, volunteers submitted 233 field trips conducted in spring 1997 from 21 locations. This is one of the best seasonal efforts in the history of the Special Areas Project. And, we probably have not received all the spring data yet.

The overall distribution of the SAP data is the best experienced by the project. SAP Central received data from places as geographically disparate as Tyler State Park in Bucks County, Promised Land State Park in the Poconos, Game Lands 213 near Conneaut Lake, and Ohiopyle State Park near the West Virginia border.

We received the most trip reports from Seneca Rocks and Appalachian Audubon Chapters. Thanks for all of your support.

Wanted: Winter Birding in Special Areas

In some spots, the flurries are flying already. Evening Grosbeaks are being sighted from hawk watches and at backyard feeders. It's time to add a few wintery birds to SAP trip lists!!!



Compared to spring, SAP Central receives very few field trips from the winter months. Winter is by far the poorest season for SAP data. In an icy, snowy state like Pennsylvania, this is somewhat understandable. But, the extent of the winter blues has been even more severe than what can be expected.

Winter is a great time of year to add some finches and sparrows to the site list. Many SAPs do not have Rough-legged Hawk or Evening Grosbeak on their lists. Winter can be a good time to get a leg up on nesting birds. Bald Eagles start building nests in winter months. Great Horned Owls are much easier to find in December and January than later in the year. They can hoot and holler in the late afternoon.

Winter offers good opportunities to involve beginning birders in SAP inventories. There are fewer species to learn, so it is easier to learn the basics of bird identification and build confidence in identification skills. Many neophytes who help out during Christmas Counts can continue their climb up the birding skill ladder by participating in a few SAP winter field trips.

I will set an example this winter with some enthusiasm. I got snowshoes last year and plan to use them this winter on trails in Ricketts Glen, State Game Lands 57 and 13, and Wyoming State Forest. Snow-

shoes can take you where no birder has been before, at least in the winter. It is also a great way to explore animal and bird tracks deep in the woods. I was lucky enough to find fisher tracks last winter in one of my SAP areas.

New Special Areas on the Map

The project is expanding into new locations, some not previously covered very well by birders. Our fearless President, Bob Ross, dug into his bird data files and dusted off his canoe to tackle one of the state's most challenging bird hot-spots: "The Muck." It is one of the most underbirded, but most important wetlands, in the northern tier if not the entire state. It is also known, at least in part, as State Game Lands 313. What a terrific bird place! Rails! Bitterns! Ravens! Marsh Wrens! And, it's in Tioga County!?!?!

Pennsylvania's rambling, roving birder, Deuane Hoffman, gave Bob some help in May. Thanks to Deuane for taking time from his heavy birding schedule to help a far-away SAP. Bob has lots of old data but is looking for new friends to help him get current inventories of the Muck. Any potential canoe partners out there?

Members of the Lackawanna Audubon Society of the Scranton area have appropriately adopted Lackawanna State Park. Dr. Michael Carey of the University of Scranton is coordinating the project. Lackawanna has almost no reputation for birds, yet two summer trips produced a fine list of species. This park has much more forest than I had realized and the data certainly reflect wooded habitat. For a northerly spot, it has several species that we usually associate with the south. Birders found Red-bellied Woodpecker and Blue-winged Warbler as well as the more northerly distributed Black-throated Green Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Observers checked off three breeding spotted thrushes: Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush, and Veery. Lackawanna already is doing a great job at Promised Land State Park, one of the Poconos best birding spots. We need more action in the Poconos!

The Bartramian Audubon Society has gotten into SAP with a bang. Suzanne Butcher and Ruth Crawford have taken on one of the bigger and better game lands of the western counties, State Game Lands

95, known as "the Glades." A small team of Bartramians with the help of regional birders submitted 15 terrific field trips for spring and summer 1997. There are a Bald Eagle's nest and winnowing snipe there. They even found a few rails. The Glades show a large diversity of birds ranging from common thicket species like Gray Catbird to forest birds like Wild Turkey. The woods are large and mature enough to support Cerulean Warblers and Acadian Flycatchers. The Glades certainly deserve to be designated as an "Important Bird Area."

Jennings Environmental Education Center is another new SAP conducted in Butler County. Deb Yovanovich submitted 13 field trips for a place comprising mostly forest and remnant prairie. Deb's careful field work has yielded a long list of confirmed and probable breeding birds. Her work on bluebird trails has added considerably to the conservation of cavity nesting birds and brought in some more data, too. Since Jennings is an environmental education center, it is certainly appropriate for us to learn more about the birds that are found there.

Now, if we could only get somebody to adopt Moraine State Park as a SAP.

Species of Special Concern Update

Several birders responded to my requests for data on Species of Special Concern. Not only have people sent in their data and impressions of bird population changes but went out in the field to verify breeding SSC birds. For the most part, I do not want to attract undue attention to sensitive nesting areas of rare birds (besides the ones that are already well known). So, please forgive me for not sharing all locations with everyone. It must be said, however, that several Special Areas are also "special" because of the rare birds that breed there. Some rare finds will undoubtedly be presented in *Pennsylvania Birds*.

It seems to have been an especially good year for grassland birds. Many Henslow's Sparrows were located. John Fedak did a great job of finding breeding Short-eared Owls.

There were several reports of abandonment by Red-headed Woodpeckers of traditional colonies. The BBS route data also show a decline by this species. For

the purpose of SSC listing, we must pose the question: Is the Red-headed Woodpecker rare enough to be listed as a Candidate--Rare? The OTC will be looking hard at that species and others in the near future. Keep posted.

Through this exercise, it has become apparent that we have a great need for more regular inventories for many Species of Special Concern. What amazes the OTC is how little we really know about the populations of the some of the state's rarest breeding birds. Looking for "Species of Special Concern" in Special Areas is what this project is all about. More about this in future columns.

Thanks to everyone who looked for rare breeding birds in Special Areas. And, thanks to everyone who responded to my inquiries.

Powerbirder: John Fedak, One Man SAP Patrol

The Special Areas Project has benefitted greatly from the skills and energy of John Fedak of Seneca Rocks Audubon. He is the coordinator of several SAP locations. He started off by substituting for Fred Crowley at Beaver Creek Nature Area of Clarion County. After several dozen field trips there, he also adopted a slew of other birding spots near his home in New Bethlehem.

John does all kinds of locations. One of the most notorious is the Piney Tract (or Mount Zion) with its Upland Sandpipers, Short-eared Owls, and Henslow's Sparrows. We never can get enough data from a spot like that. He also collects data from Game Lands 213, Clear Creek State Park, Kyle Lake, and Game Lands 137. He has also started to contribute data for Conneaut Marsh, one of the state's biodiversity hot-spots. John has contributed over 100 field trips to SAP for 1997 alone. He also made the effort to track down nesting Short-eared Owls at several places this year with considerable success.

One of John's best attributes is his ability to include others in his SAP inventories. He involves both young and old, experienced and neophytes, into the SAP experience. Several students from Redbank Valley High School have gone birding to SAPs led by John. A true-to-life field trip at that age can be a great start on career of birding and nature study. As a

"powerbirder," John often birds all day long. He sometimes visits a few SAPs each day. So, I guess this is "powerbirding with a purpose." That is: adding to our knowledge of the birds on Pennsylvania's public lands.

Prodigal SAP Contributors: You Are Forgiven!

Do you have piles of bird inventory data filling up files and drawers at home? It's time to clean it up and transfer the data to Seasonal Summary Sheets. We will take data from past years! If you have more than one season's worth of data, just continue across the page in chronological order. We gladly accept data from more than one season on a Summary Sheet. I did this myself last year. I tracked down old field sheets and notebooks going back to 1991 and found many field trips to miscellaneous locations. After a few years of occasional trips, I've accumulated pretty good species lists to some obscure spots. You can do it, too.

As the days grow shorter and the nights agonizingly longer, please make use of the evenings to pull together field trip data from months or years past. Don't apologize or feel bad. Just send it in.

Grassland Bird Conservation: Apply Here!

Grouped by habitat, the breeding birds with the most declines in Pennsylvania are those associated with grasslands. Eastern Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, and their cohorts are going down the proverbial tubes in the Keystone State. Some SAP contributors have diligently logged field trips in grassy areas, reporting healthy populations of some grassland species including Henslow's Sparrow. Others have complained of losing their grassland birds due to management practices conducted on public lands.

Many of our state's most popular and recognizable birds rely on grasslands for habitat. Who doesn't like to see and hear Bobolinks fluttering above the grasses, bubbling their songs with legs dangling? Who doesn't enjoy flushing a covey of quail? Conserving grassland birds should be a high priority for all kinds of wildlife watchers and outdoors enthusiasts. It certainly presents many opportunities for partnerships between unlikely allies.

A Few Suggestions for Conserving Grassland Birds

- Delay mowing until mid-July, if not August.
- Be aware of nesting birds in fields. Plan mowing to accommodate the nesting periods of the local birds. We need to give birds time to raise their young.
- Think big when it comes to fields. Many grassland birds do much better on larger scale fields. If you want to see Upland Sandpipers and Short-eared Owls, go big!
- Start planting warm-season grasses wherever possible--switchgrass, big bluestem, little blue-stem, and Indian grass. Mixtures of grasses make better bird habitat than pure stands. These grasses are the native species that do not grow tall until later in summer, delaying mowing time. They are pretty tolerant of drought. They also provide great cover in winter.
- Maintain some areas with patches of bare ground. Surprisingly, some species like Killdeer, Horned Lark, and Vesper Sparrow like bare ground that occurs naturally due to grazing or fire.
- Avoid over-grazing pastures. Grassland birds can be quite tolerant of cattle as long as there are not too many trampling the ground.
- Target the rarest grassland birds for management. For instance, Henslow's Sparrows are the least tolerant to haying activities. By delaying cutting for 2 or 3 years, the grassland habitat will be more favorable for Henslow's Sparrow as well as other, more tolerant sparrows and grassland specialists.
- In general, reduce the use of pesticides.
- Work with farm conservation programs like streambank fencing. Streambank conservation programs benefit grassland, wetland, and thicket birds.
- Appreciate the beauty and benefits of goldenrods, asters, and other native wildflowers. Fields with these native plants make great bird habitat. Bobolinks like grassy fields with a mix of wildflowers.

The Wild Resource Conservation Fund and Birding

by Alan Gregory

It's time for birders and conservationists across Pennsylvania to speak out for our state's Wild Resource Conservation Fund. The WRCF is the only pot of money out there to fund the many non-game-related conservation and research projects now in progress and in the planning stages. The PSO's own Special Areas Project is very much dependent on funding from the WRCF. So are the new statewide herpetological atlas project, butterfly projects, and species-specific programs like raptor surveys and botanical field work. No WRCF, no SAP project, or amphibian/reptile atlas. That's the cold reality of the funding crisis facing the WRCF.

The sales of the Saw-whet Owl license plates pumped a lot of money into the fund and rejuvenated it. But, license plate sales have fallen flat four years after they first became available. And, there are now other specialty plates that compete for the same dollars.

There is a way out of the financial crisis--a way to give the WRCF the kind of long-term financial help it, and our field projects, need. A proposal being floated in Harrisburg would add another 50 cents or so to the tipping fee that garbage haulers pay to dump trash in Pennsylvania landfills (hey, lots of this garbage comes from out-of-state sources like New York and even Canada). Adding 50 cents or so to this tipping fee would hardly hurt anyone, including homeowners. Our weekly garbage bill would go up only a buck or so, according to the estimates I've seen. That's about the same price as a medium cup of coffee at one national chain of doughnut shops.

It's up to us, though--the conservationists and birders of Pennsylvania--to convince our state legislators that increasing the tipping fee to benefit the WRCF is a good thing and is the "right" thing to do. Lawmakers like Sen. Ray Musto, Luzerne County, and David Argall, Schuylkill County, who sit on the Joint Legislative Conservation Committee, need to hear from us--today. They and other conservation leaders in Harrisburg need to hear from the grassroots, folks who are concerned about the future of non-game wildlife in

Pennsylvania.

You can write your senator and representative at this address in Harrisburg: State Capitol, Harrisburg, 17120. You can also contact your legislators' district offices and pass on your comments to members of their staffs.

If we want programs like the Special Areas Project to continue at or above their current level, we've gotta yell and make sure we're heard. Please write or call your state senator and representative today. Speak out for the WRCF and non-game wildlife in Pennsylvania.

On the national scene, the Endangered Species Act (at this writing) is threatened by a rogue bill in the U.S. Senate. S.1180, the Senate bill introduced by Sens. Dirk Kempthorne (R-Idaho), John Chafee (R-R.I.), Max Baucus (D-Mont.), and Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to reauthorize the ESA, would fundamentally weaken our nation's premier wildlife protection law. After months of closed-door negotiations, the bill was introduced on September 16 and is now being rammed through the Senate with little opportunity for meaningful review or amendment. Although Kempthorne is touting his bill as a gleaming example of compromise and consensus, conservationists oppose S.1180 because it undermines the ability to recover our nation's imperiled fish, wildlife, and plants in the following ways:

1. A "No Surprises" policy guarantees protection for landowners but not for wildlife.
2. The bill limits watchdog agency review of federal projects that may harm endangered species.
3. It erects roadblocks to key ESA protections of listing and recovery planning.
4. An old loophole turns back the clock on designating critical habitat.

These dangerous provisions in S.1180 must be amended. Write a short letter to Senators Specter and Santorum and urge them to look instead at the ESA reauthorization bill offered in the House by Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.). This legislation, the Endangered Species Recovery Act, is the benchmark by

which we will measure any bill to reauthorize the Endangered Species Act.

Miller's legislation, HR 2351, is an innovative bill based in large part on the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences. This legislation serves to prevent species decline before they become endangered, and promotes the recovery of species to healthy populations to the point where they can be removed from the endangered species list. We can help ensure defeat of the Kempthorne bill and the passage of the Miller legislation by contacting Senators Specter and Santorum today. You don't have to write a lengthy two-page missive. Just put your own thoughts down on paper and make sure your voice is heard in Washington. No national conservation organizations support the Kempthorne bill and with good reason. It's a bad bill. Written to benefit rich corporations that stand to benefit from weakening the ESA, the Kempthorne bill is bad for America's wildlife heritage.

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past due

PSO Membership Form

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