

PSO

Newsletter



The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

December 1998

Volume 9, Number 3

From the President's Desk

As I write on December 5, the outside temperature is still hovering in the mid-50s at 7:00 p.m. Temperature records have fallen across the state in the past week and the first really cold wave of winter 1998-99 still appears to be a week or so off. What this warm early winter means for birds in Pennsylvania will be borne out in the weeks ahead as the 99th Christmas Bird Count period gets under way.

In my corner of Luzerne County, the warmer-than-average weeks of late fall-early winter have kept some continental migrants, like Killdeer, Eastern Towhee, Gray Catbird, Eastern Phoebe and American Robin, in the local woodlots and fields. In colder winters of years past, these and other species were much harder to find at this time of year at our latitude. The 99th CBC promises to be exciting and fruitful for birders across Pennsylvania. Make sure to get out and participate in at least one of the many CBCs conducted in our state.

On the downside, the warm weather has also led to exceedingly dry conditions across the state. The Pennsylvania Game Commission a few days ago banned all smoking from its lands and both the Susquehanna and Delaware basin commissions have issued advisories calling for voluntary water conservation measures. (Shouldn't we be conserving water all the time?) Some counties including Somerset are tinder boxes, according to state forestry officials. And so we keep our eyes on the weather and try to get a handle on how today's climatological records will

affect the 1999 breeding season. Keeping good field notes is among the best ways we can track changes.

Your Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology will celebrate its 10th anniversary in 1999 and to help make the celebration special, our annual meeting has been moved to coincide with the heart of the fall migration. Many PSO members have in the past suggested this move, and the 10th anniversary year gave us the nudge to try this change. Thus, our 1999 annual meeting will be held on the weekend of September 24-26 at the Holiday Inn in Morgantown near Reading in Berks County.

With this being our 10th anniversary meeting, we expect to attract an outstanding speaker of national prominence for the Saturday night banquet. The birding field trips for the weekend will take us into diverse habitats—from shorebird and waterfowl sites to forested areas in search of fall warblers, and we expect another excellent slate of Saturday afternoon speakers including a session on bird identification. With all of the indoor activities under one roof, this annual meeting promises to be our best yet.

Look for more details about our 1999 annual meeting in the spring newsletter, but for now be sure and reserve the weekend of September 24-26 in your date book. A special thanks goes out to Frank and Barb Haas for their leadership in making all of the preliminary arrangements. Their spirit of volunteerism and take-charge attitude is very much appreciated by all of us in the PSO.

In Harrisburg these days, the conservation of

Pennsylvania wildlife and wild plant heritage has taken a back seat. As the Wild Resource Conservation Fund teeters on the brink of bankruptcy (only \$23,000 or so remained in the Fund in late fall), massive public works projects dominate the headlines. Gov. Ridge ventured over to Pittsburgh in early December to talk about the building of new stadiums for that city's professional sports teams. Now while everyone seems to have a different opinion on the importance of such things as stadiums, the fact remains that the proportion of money spent on basic conservation-related research pales when compared with the massive outlay of funds on "public works" projects such as interstate highways and stadiums.

Please take time this week to express your thoughts on the importance of the Wild Resource Conservation Fund to Pennsylvania's flora and fauna--and the economic health of our towns and state. The PSO's own Special Areas Project depends almost entirely on funding from the WRCF.

Best regards to everyone.

--Alan C. Gregory, President

The Statuses--They're a'changin'

The old adage that "what goes up must come down" doesn't necessarily apply to species' populations. And few would claim that what goes down must come up. But, several birds that had declined severely have experienced dramatic population increases in recent years. The Peregrine Falcon, Osprey, and Bald Eagle have each benefited from substantial (and expensive) recovery programs, and dramatically expanded their nesting populations. Osprey, extirpated for decades, nested in at least 14 Pennsylvania counties in 1998, when about 40 pairs were documented. New sites were found in Beaver, Mercer, and Pike counties. The Ornithological Technical Committee proposed to the Game Commission that the Osprey's status be dropped from Endangered to Threatened. Final action on that proposal is expected in January. Osprey are now more common than ever previously documented in Pennsylvania. Osprey never was a federally listed species.

Bald Eagles have seen a similar expansion. Dropping to two pairs in the 1970s and early 1980s,

eagle numbers have risen dramatically after protection by U.S. Endangered Species Act, prohibition (at least in the U.S.) of DDT, and reintroduction efforts during the 1980s restoring nesting pairs. Eight new nest sites were identified in 1998, the largest recorded expansion in a decade. A total of 28 nesting pairs produced about 25 young. New nesting pairs were found in Dauphin, Erie, Lancaster, Mercer, Northumberland, Tioga, Venango, and Warren counties in 1998. The state's eagle population has been growing at about 15% per year for the past 10 years. Nationally, the Bald Eagle's status was changed from Endangered to Threatened in 1995 across most of the United States, where the national breeding population is estimated to be about 4,500 pairs.

The last of the triad of large, endangered but recovering raptors is the Peregrine Falcon. It too experienced a dramatic recovery, after being extirpated across the eastern U.S. in the 1970s. About 175 pairs now are found on cliffs, urban centers, and coastal towers of the eastern United States, including 8 pairs in Pennsylvania during 1998. The eastern population has lagged behind the recovery seen in other areas, and suffers from lower reproductive success at unnatural aeries. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is moving forward on its plan to remove the Peregrine from the federal Endangered Species list in 1999. With the small nesting population in Pennsylvania, it will likely remain on the state list for some time. All of Pennsylvania's active nests so far are on man-made structures--buildings and bridges.

The common thread through these dramatic success stories is a reintroduction method known as "hacking." Young birds, captive-reared in the case of Peregrines and imported from wild nests in the case of Osprey and eagles, were released in Pennsylvania and neighboring states to accelerate the recovery program once the environment could support the species. The Game Commission and Wild Resource Conservation Fund played key roles in these reintroduction efforts. The opportunities to observe eagles, Osprey, and Peregrine Falcon in Pennsylvania are now greater than at any time during this century. That's quite a legacy to leave as we move to a new millennium.

--Dan Brauning
State Ornithologist
PA Game Commission

“Them Canadian Crows”

by Arlene Koch

I walked out the front door and across the lawn so that I could better see up along the edge of the fence row across the road. A rather large, light-colored bird was perched at the end of a small branch close to the bottom of a leafless wild cherry tree and I wanted to make sure it was the mockingbird that often sits there.

Well, it wasn't a mockingbird but instead an exceptionally light blue jay, doing for all the world what looked like a mockingbird imitation, right down to the bobbing of its cocked tail. "So much for my knowing what's going on," I thought to myself. But it's always that way with birds, isn't it? Just when you think you've got something locked in tight about a particular species, something happens to completely dispel that myth.

Walking back to the house I glanced up at the cold, overcast sky that was peppered with the black silhouettes of crows. They were moving around in all directions--some high, some low, and some just apparently flying nowhere in particular. I suddenly became aware of all the different noises and sounds they were making and no doubt had been ever since I closed the door and stepped outside. But I've become oblivious to the constant ruckus because here where I live, in a valley located only a few miles west of the Delaware River and New Jersey, American Crows are so numerous in the winter months that I just don't pay much attention to them.

And while I don't consider myself an expert on crows of any kind, I do consider myself an expert on fielding questions about them. Every year here in the Lehigh Valley, which encompasses the cities of Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton, the natural flocking together of huge numbers of crows causes some people to panic. When I first began getting calls about them five years ago, I thought it was just a fluke, something that would happen only that year. But, boy, was I ever wrong! So when a local TV station contacted me and asked me to do an interview with them about the "crow situation," I agreed. I was president of the local Audubon chapter at the time, and I thought this would be a good way to get some free PR both for birders and conservation efforts in general. That year the big,

black, and admittedly often raucous birds had decided to set up a rather large roost site in a stand of trees in an upscale neighborhood in Bethlehem. Making matters worse, the parking lot of a pretty prestigious church was where the greatest concentration of them spent the night. Now this was certainly totally unacceptable to the people of the neighborhood. Could there possibly be anything worse than coming out in the morning and finding whitewash on a brand new Lexus? I think not!

But, as it turned out, I should've followed my first instinct and not done the interview. When it appeared that night on the news, there were about three minutes' worth of complaining people saying things like, "I can't even go out outside. I'm afraid they're going to attack me," or, "You should see the mess on my car, and I just had it washed," or, "What does this mean? Why are all these crows here? It's an omen! It's got to be some sort of an omen!"

And then there I was, for all of about 5 seconds. With a caption on the TV screen under my face billing me as President of the local Audubon Society, the only thing they quoted me saying was, "Crows are really beneficial birds...." And of course that totally disassociated, five-second quote followed right on the heels of everyone else's complaints. So much for trying to make the Audubon efforts look good.

So recently, when I saw on the PA Birds listserve on the internet that there was a problem this year with crows around the capitol building in Harrisburg, I laughed, knowing there was no way I was going to get involved, not even in cyberspace. Sometimes it seems that even when we birders try to enlighten the nonbirding world, they just don't want to know the truth. I've come to believe that subconsciously people want to think that the annual wintering crow flocks really do have something to do with Alfred Hitchcock's movie.

And now I just smile each year when my father-in-law, an old PA Dutch farmer who claims to know just about everything now that he's in his 80's, says that "the cold weather's a-coming because them Canadian crows are here again and bringing it along with them." I've closed the door on any more crow explanations. Besides, he's mostly right.

The Conservation Corner

With Congress and the PA legislators on break, we, the conservation community, get a short break from all the nonsense that has been going on in both legislative bodies. With this break, I thought PSO members might be interested to read about the Flight Plan concept developed by the Partners In Flight program.

An article in the summer, 1998 issue of Bird Conservation (American Bird Conservancy), reiterates the issue of how do we keep common birds common and prevent them from becoming threatened/endangered. If this can be accomplished, the controversy that usually accompanies protecting threatened/endangered species can be avoided.

The Partners In Flight program has developed a strategy, called Flight Plan, to address this very issue. Because this plan will be an ongoing program, PSO members may have the opportunity to participate, and a brief review may be of interest. The Flight Plan consists of four steps: *Set Priorities, Establish Objectives, Conservation Action, and Evaluation.*

Step No. 1, *Setting Priorities*, identifies which species need the most help and protection and identifies the habitats that are needed to support those species. This is an important step particularly in regard to identifying critical habitat because the federal government is leaning more and more toward Habitat Conservation Plans as provided for in the Endangered Species Act.

Establishing Objectives is the second step which means determining an appropriate population for the survival of the selected species and considering how much habitat is necessary to insure the survival of



the population. This will be a difficult step but a critical one that will need constant revision. With many threatened/endangered species, we don't have the necessary data to adequately establish a population level and habitat requirements. This may provide a good opportunity for PSO members to help out. Identification of Important Bird Areas and good field data will be important in not only setting objectives but in revising them as needed. Further, in preparing plans to meet the objectives, interested groups and citizens should have an opportunity to provide input. Again, PSO members can be of vital importance by providing input during the preparation of population and habitat objectives.

Once objectives are established, then Step No. 3, *Conservation Action*, kicks in. This step will attempt to protect identified habitat and implement management practices so that the species moves toward and eventually reaches the population objective. At this point, PSO members may be able to help with the management practices and/or help secure critical habitat. In particular, protection of habitat will be of critical importance because this will cause controversy. Many anti-environmental groups oppose restrictions on private property and oppose any more public land purchases. PSO members can play an important role by supporting habitat protection and, where appropriate, supporting land purchases.

The last step, *Evaluation*, will determine how the management practices are working and whether or not the stated objectives are being met. At this point, individual species management plans will be revised as needed as well as population and habitat objectives. With the successful implementation of these four steps, we can look forward to the recovery and/or survival of threatened/endangered avian species. Something I believe we all can agree on. In closing, good planning will lead to good conservation, and good conservation will lead to more birds. If all of us do our share in planning and promoting conservation, then good birding will continue not only for this generation but for generations to come.

Mark Henry, Conservation Editor
P.O. Box 410
Pine Grove Mills, PA 16868

Citizen Team Identified Unexpectedly High Biodiversity on Proposed I-99 Corridor along Bald Eagle Ridge

by Bob Ross

This summer a citizen team of more than a dozen participants planned and conducted a biological assessment of the Bald Eagle Ridge where Penn Dot prefers to locate the new I-99/Route 220 four-lane highway. This highway is needed to alleviate traffic on the present Route 220 from Tyrone to Port Matilda. Emphasizing avian and amphibian biodiversity, the report to the Army Corps of Engineers entitled "Biological Assessment of the North and South Bald Eagle Creek Drainage Related to I-99 Highway Proposals for Bald Eagle Ridge, Pennsylvania," authored by Jack Cupper, Robert Ross, Donald Bryant, and Susan Brawn-Kauffman, describes over 2,000 birds of 78 species breeding there, 6 species of amphibians, 4 reptiles, a half dozen mammals, as well as various plants, insects, and aquatic species. Along ridgetop to bottom-forest transects, team members found high densities of the following forest-interior species: Eastern Wood-Pewee (18/km²), Wood Thrush (63/km²), Red-eyed Vireo (50/km²), Black-and-white Warbler (10/km²), American Redstart (10/km²), Ovenbird (46/km²), Scarlet Tanager (38/km²), and Eastern Towhee (40/km²).

The Ovenbird, noted for its decadal decline in eastern U.S. forests, occurs at densities of only about 2/km² in a Wisconsin forest (Emlen 1984). The observed density of 46/km² on Bald Eagle Mountain, which includes some inappropriate habitat on the valley floor, compares favorably with a density of 63/km² in the White Mountains National Forest of New Hampshire (King et al 1996). Wood Thrush, also declining on Breeding Bird Survey routes, were found on Bald Eagle Mountain at densities nearly twice (63/km²) those of a Wisconsin forest (Emlen 1977). Scarlet Tanager and Eastern Towhee were an order of magnitude denser on Bald Eagle Mountain than in a Wisconsin forest (Emlen 1984). Some species, however, such as Gray Catbird, were 2-3 times denser in Wisconsin than on Bald Eagle Mountain (Emlen 1977, 1984). Bald Eagle Mountain densities of the

Brown-headed Cowbird, a nest parasite of many forest birds, were four times denser in the Wisconsin forest (Emlen 1977).

The non-avian biota observed in this study suggest that the mature forested systems on Bald Eagle Ridge are particularly diverse and complex, providing important and extensive habitat for a wide range of wildlife. The amphibians in particular are valuable members of the forested hillside ecosystem.

As a result of the transects, observation of the unique hydrology of Bald Eagle Ridge was possible. The characteristic ridgetop seep channels, springs, and wetlands were noted for their distinct habitat characteristics. These three general types of habitats encountered on Bald Eagle Ridge were analyzed in context of their unique habitats.

Seep channels were present in the South Area. It was in these channels (some perennial, some intermittent) that the majority of the salamander species were observed. In the earlier transects, when water flows were greater, the salamanders were found in abundance. During later transects, in a much drier period, when the visible flow of surface waters had diminished or terminated, the same density of amphibians was found, but they were slightly deeper under the rock and soil. It was evident that this aquatic habitat is hydrogeologically fragile but enduring. As a result of both direct habitat loss and indirect impact to existing water supplies (seeps, springs, and perennial streams) proposed for Bald Eagle Ridge, resident amphibian populations both upslope and downslope of the ridgetop highway alignment would likely become permanently dislocated or extirpated from the area. Therefore amphibians at the top of the food chain in perennial spring systems, such as the Northern Spring Salamander, would probably survive neither in the immediate vicinity of large cuts and fills nor downstream where subsequent alteration of hydrologic characteristics would occur.

Four distinct spring pools were observed during the study, two at each of the North and South study areas. All of the pools would most likely be important water sources for turkey and woodcock, as well as the native trout. The pools are also refuge for salamander species in winter.

The largest wetland system in the study area was the SGL 278 wetland in the South area at the toe of Bald Eagle Ridge. This type of wetland was observed to be habitat for breeding Red-spotted Newts and is also typical habitat for Northern Green Frog, Spotted Sandpiper, and two state-listed plants. It was a concern of the study team that the RT-G cuts proposal for the ridge in the headwaters of this wetland may dangerously limit the amount of water available for the wetland in periods of limited precipitation. Measurements of alkalinity of the outflow of the SGL 278 wetland were identical (180 ppm) to those of the ridgetside seeps and springs, indicating that the vast majority, if not all, of the contribution to the flows to the wetland originate on Bald Eagle Ridge.

In summary, non-game birds on Bald Eagle Mountain were unexpectedly diverse and numerous. Populations of several neotropical migratory species of concern in eastern North America were relatively high, while those of the nest parasite Brown-headed Cowbird

appeared to be relatively low. These findings suggest that the Bald Eagle Mountain habitats surveyed represent healthy sources of recruitment for many of the forest-interior species of concern, rather than population sinks typical of marginal or low-quality habitats. Thus the forested habitats sampled by these transects merit serious consideration for conservation and protection based on forest-interior birds alone.

Impacts of a ridgetside highway alignment on resident amphibian populations would be direct and permanent for some species of salamanders, with extirpation from ridgetside likely and significant reduction in biodiversity as a result.

Due to the unique nature of the ridgetside seeps, springs, and wetlands observed on the flanks of Bald Eagle Ridge, it was the educated judgment of the team that there is no way to implement the RT-G alignment above the aquatic resources and the associated habitat without drastic and irreversible damage.

Christmas Bird Counts

<i>Name of Count</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Compiler</i>	<i>Phone Number</i>	<i>Date</i>
Allentown	Lehigh	Dennis Miller	610-759-7514	12-19
Audubon	Montgomery	*Tony Fernandes		
Bald Eagle S.P.	Centre	Gene Zielinski	814-353-8212	1-3-99
		Harry Henderson	814-867-0733	
Beaver	Beaver	John Cruzan	724-846-5342 (h)	12-19
			724-847-6726	
Bedford Co.	Bedford	*Janet Shaffer	814-356-3553	
Bethlehem/Easton	Northampton	Elaine Mease	610-346-7754	1-2-99
Bernville	Berks	Ed Barrell	610-926-2962	1-2-99
			ebarrell@early.com	
Bloomsburg	Columbia	Bob Sagar	717-925-6461	12-20
Buffalo Creek Valley	Butler	George Reese	724-353-9649 (h)	12-19
			412-856-6400 (w)	
Bushy Run S.P.	Westmoreland	Dick Byers	724-593-3543	12-27
Butler	Butler	Helen Crawford	724-421-4919	12-19
Central Bucks Co.	Bucks	Ken Kitson	610-847-2968	12-27
Chambersburg	Franklin	Edith Lindsell	717-263-4361	12-19
Clarion	Clarion	Margaret Buckwalter	814-782-3925	1-2-99
			buckwalter@mail.clarion.edu	
		Walter Fye	814-797-1800	
Clarksville	Greene	Ralph Bell	724-883-4505	1-1-99
Culp	Blair	Debora Haine	814-695-8239	12-19
Curtin	Dauphin	Scott Bills	800-228-0791	12-29
		Deuane Hoffman	717-564-7475	
			d19kh@aol.com	

<i>Name of Count</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Compiler</i>	<i>Phone Number</i>	<i>Date</i>
Dallas Area	Luzerne	Ed Johnson	717-675-3376	12-19
Dingman's Ferry	Pike	*Thomas Shimalla		
DuBois	Clearfield	*Harold Webster		
Elverson	Chester	Bob Cook	610-286-9919 dunlin50@aol.com	12-26
Emporium	Cameron	*Bob Martin	814-486-1990	
Erie	Erie	Joan Howlett	814-734-1765 dhowlett@edinboro.edu	1-2-99
Gettysburg	Adams	Art Kennell	717-642-6995	12-18,19
Glenolden	Delaware	Skip Conant	610-544-0871	12-19
		Nick Pulcinella	610-583-3201	
Hamburg	Berks	Laurie Goodrich	610-756-6961 goodrich@hawkmountain.org	12-27
Harrisburg	Dauphin	Bill Tripp	717-737-8808	12-19
Huntingdon	Huntingdon	Dave Kyler	814-643-6030	12-20
Indiana	Indiana	Roger & Margaret Higbee	724-354-3493 bcoriole@twd.net	12-26
Johnstown	Cambria	*Tom Dick	814-266-6412	
Lake Raystown	Huntingdon	Greg Grove	814-667-2305 gwg2@psu.edu	1-1-99
Lancaster	Lancaster	Ed Pederson	717-284-4502	12-26
Lebanon Co.	Lebanon	*Fritz Heilman		
Lehigh Valley	Lehigh	*Dennis Miller	610-759-7514	
Lewisburg	Union	*Dick Nickelsen		
Lewistown	Mifflin	Linda Whitesel	717-436-8048	12-19
		Marilyn Miller	717-248-0024	
Linesville	Crawford	Ron Harrell	814-337-5445	12-20
Lititz	Lancaster	Bruce Carl	717-859-4179	12-27
Lock Haven/Jersey Shore	Clinton	*Wayne Laubscher		
Mansfield	Tioga	Bob Ross	717-376-5394 rossr@epix.net	12-19
Mount Davis	Somerset	John Tilley	814-662-4372 814-662-4005 (w) thetilleys@gcnet.net	12-22
Nescopeck Mountain	Luzerne	Alan Gregory	570-788-1425	1-2-99
		John Heuges	570-788-0628	
New Bloomfield	Perry	Ramsay Koury	717-761-1871 rkoury123@aol.com	12-27
Newville	Cumberland	Bill and Linda Franz	717-776-4463	1-2-99
Pennypack Valley	Philadelphia	*Peter Kurtz		
Pittsburgh	Allegheny	Jim Valimont	412-828-5338 jvalimont@ppg.com	12-26
Pleasantville	Venango	Russ States	814-676-6320 russ@csonline.net	1-3-99
Pocono Mt.	Monroe	*Chris Turn	717-588-6850 birder@postoffice.ptd.net	
Potter County	Potter	David W. Hauber	haubers3@penn.com	1-3-99
Raccoon Creek S.P.	Beaver	Bill Smith	724-375-9613	12-29
		Chuck Tague	412-488-8760	
Reading	Berks	Bill Uhrich	610-373-8109	12-20
Rector	Westmoreland	Bob Mulvihill	724-593-7521	1-3-99
Ryerson	Greene	Marjorie Howard	724-499-5642 birdwatcher@alltel.net	12-19
Scranton	Lackawanna	*Rosann Bongey	717-698-8266	

<i>Name of Count</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Compiler</i>	<i>Phone Number</i>	<i>Date</i>
Southeastern Bradford Co.	Bradford	Bill Reid	717-836-2734	12-26
Southern Bucks Co.	Bucks	Robert Mercer	215-785-1177	12-19
Southern Lancaster Co.	Lancaster	Bob Schutsky	717-548-3303	12-20
			FAX 717-548-3327	
			birdtrek@epix.net	
State College	Centre	John Peplinski	814-238-6541	12-20
Susquehanna Co.	Susquehanna	Jerry Skinner	507-278-3384	1-2-99
			jsskinner@epix.net	
Thompson	Susquehanna	*Katherine Cameron		
Tunkhannock	Wyoming	Rick Koval	717-829-4381	12-20
			unibirder@aol.com	
Upper Bucks Co.	Bucks	Hart Rufe	215-348-6709	12-20
			wrufe@tradenet.net	
Warren	Warren	*Michael Toole		
Washington	Washington	Roy Ickes	724-228-3532	12-19
West Chester	Chester	*Barry Blust	610-458-5616	
White Mills	Wayne	*Voni Strasser	717-226-1460	
			FAX 717-226-9856	
			sawwhet@ptd.net	
Wild Creek/Little Gap	Carbon/Monroe	Joel Silfies	610-926-3817	12-20
Williamsport	Lycoming	*Mark Cline	717-323-4008	
Wyncote	Montgomery	Martin Selzer	215-233-9090	12-19
			MSelzer@prius.jnj.com	
York	York	Bill DelGrande	717-854-6728	12-19

*Compiler of the indicated count in 1997; no current information concerning this year's count.