

The

PSO Pileated



June 2020

The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

Volume 31, Number 2

From the President's Desk....

I trust that this moment finds you and your loved ones healthy, safe, and coping with our current situation. The PSO family is part of a state, national, and global community in the midst of a serious public health crisis. So many things that were easily taken for granted pre-coronavirus have become much more important to us. One of those is the friendship and camaraderie of others who share our passion for the birds around us. Yet, being safe this spring and summer has meant curtailing most of our eagerly anticipated group birding events. This is a year when we are likely to be spending our birding time alone or with immediate family. When we think of birding “in place,” take advantage of the chance to explore your hobby in a different way. After all, nature did not go on “pause” due to Covid-19. One constant that grounds us in time and place is the unfolding of spring migration, the frenetic pace of the nesting season, and the parade of fall migrants in our immediate surroundings. There is no need for social distancing between bird and birder!

It was interesting for me to look at notes made last September when I was considering what I would share in these quarterly articles. Coincidentally, my reminder for this issue was a quote by Mitchell Thomashow in *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*.



In the 1930s while raising her five children, Margaret Morse Nice conducted groundbreaking studies of Song Sparrows in her Ohio backyard.

Photo by Roger Higbee

“I find solace in the stability of my home landscape, believing that with increased awareness of the flora and fauna of this place, I will no longer be a transient, one who just passes through. Via intimacy with the local ecology, I aspire to become native.”

Recently, I came across a similar sentiment in the words of Terry Tempest Williams. “Perhaps the most radical thing we can do is stay at home, so we can learn the names of the plants and animals around us; so that we can begin to know what tradition we’re part of.”

With the breadth of our birding experiences limited this year, we have the opportunity to plumb the depths of our avocation. The ecology and behavior of your local birds can be a great source of discovery and enjoyment. I have always been taken with the story of Margaret Morse Nice. In the 1930s while raising her five children, she conducted groundbreaking studies of Song Sparrows in her Ohio backyard and made significant contributions to our understanding of the species and to the field of ornithology. While busy with full-time motherhood, she found a way to satisfy her curiosity and enjoyment of birds.

We do not need to discover thesis level insights to share in the wonder of our local ecology. Birds are continually putting on exhibitions of their unique place in the natural world and providing endless opportunities for the curious.

The aesthetics of plumage and song are one of the great joys of these creatures. One can simply take it all in and appreciate the beauty. One can express his response in prose or rhyme. Sit among birds while recording your thoughts in a field journal. Carry a sketch pad and learn a new way of recording what you see. A great source for how to get started is *The Laws Guide to Drawing Birds* by John Muir Laws.

Not an artist? Learning to identify birds by song and calls is a great way to appreciate their verbal artistry. By listening intently and unhurriedly, we can go beyond ID to recognizing individual voices and hearing subtle differences like phrase repetitions and patterns. A number of apps are available that allow us to record bird song on our cell phones, as well as several spectrogram programs that visualize the music of birds on our home computers. The Macaulay Library has many helpful resources for getting started in a “home study course” of bird vocalization.

Many of us now carry a camera along with our binoculars. We use it to record species and capture interesting behavior. Manufacturers are offering cameras designed for nature photography in a wide price range. Post processing software allows you to get creative with photos of your favorite subjects. In my birding toolkit is a

blind that I set up near feeders or at a safe distance from an active nest. Being out of sight is a way to get up close and personal to experience an intimate look into the lives of birds. In the confines of the blind can be a field journal, sketch pad, camera on a tripod, or an audio recording device.

These are but a few ways we can plumb the depths of the birding experience and “become native” without excursions to distant places. While these things are likely familiar to us or what we are already doing, we can be encouraged to use our current situation as an opportunity to explore such options more fully.

Festivals cancelled. Guided tours on hold. Non-essential travel discouraged. It is an abnormal place we find ourselves in as birders. Consider the current situation as an opportunity to explore new avenues of experiencing the birds we love. Describe a Brown Creeper carrying nesting material and placing it under a peeling shingle of tree bark. Photograph a pair of redstarts bringing food to their nestlings. Record the pitch changes in the song phrases of a Hermit Thrush. These are each enriching and satisfying experiences. Get out and bird. Your avian friends are waiting to keep you company.

Evan Mann, President
Susquehanna County

Greetings, All PA Birders!

“PSO 2020 All Things Birds” Postponed

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Board at its May 26 meeting decided to postpone the 2020 Annual Gathering (PSO 2020 All Things Birds) in Lancaster until September 17-19, 2021. While we regret the postponement, we felt with the uncertainty of the status of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the upcoming months that it was best to reschedule.

Utmost in our decision is the safety of our members and other fellow birders. In addition, we feel that postponing will mean that ultimately more PA birders will be able to enjoy the unique birding experience of Lancaster County together.

We thank the Lancaster County Bird Club (LCBC) for the wide variety of field trips they had set up for PSO 2020 and the leaders they provided. We are hopeful that we will

be able to offer these same trips in 2021. We look forward to our continued partnership with the LCBC on this event.

Those who already booked rooms at the Double Tree Resort at Willow Valley will need to call the venue at 717- 464-2711 to cancel your reservation. A block of rooms will become available next year to those attending PSO 2021. We will let you know when those rooms can be booked. Until then, please mark the dates, September 17-19, 2021, on your calendar and plan to join us for a great time of birding, learning, and meeting with friends old and new.

Be safe!

Good birding,

Vern Gauthier
Annual Meeting Chairperson

Recap of March PSO Board Meeting

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Board of Directors met on March 31, 2020, with 18 directors present for the teleconference meeting.

The board discussed what our response to Covid 19 should be with regard to our planned activities. It was decided that we should cancel the B4C (Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation) for this year and reschedule it for next year. We would like to hold any B4C donations until next year. Laura will notify our partners that we are canceling the B4C this year. Vern Gauthier made a motion that the B4C be postponed until 2021 to be held at approximately the same time as it was scheduled this year. He is also proposing that any donations that have been received be held until next year

unless the donors would like them returned. Carole Winslow seconded the motion which passed.

At this time the board did not think that there was enough information to make a decision whether to hold PSO 2020 All Things Birds or not. The consensus was that there are too many uncertainties and we should wait until the May meeting to make our decision. If things are no clearer by then we should cancel the meeting.

A complete transcript of the meeting minutes may be found on the PSO website.

Roger V. Higbee, Secretary
Indiana County
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Recap of May PSO Board Meeting

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Board of Directors met on May 26, 2020, with 17 directors present for the teleconference meeting.

Evan Mann began the meeting by saying that we need to decide at this meeting whether we should hold PSO 2020 in September. The board members discussed how they feel about having PSO 2020 this year. Mentioned in favor of having the meeting this year were:

1. We have never missed an annual meeting.
2. We could lose the venue if we cancel this year's meeting.

Mentioned against having the meeting were the following:

1. Many people will not attend.
2. The virus may return.
3. There are too many unknowns.
4. New regulations may be in place.
5. Would we be responsible or liable if people got sick?
6. We will lose \$1500 if we cancel and not reschedule.

All board members present at the meeting voted to postpone the meeting until 2021.

Holly Merker reported for the Education Committee. She will continue as the chair of the committee. Frontiers in Ornithology has been canceled for September of this year

and rescheduled for September of 2021. There will be no youth scholarships to the meeting or to any bird camp this year. Vern suggested that the number of both scholarships be at least doubled for next year.

Holly reported for PORC. The committee is keeping up with all decisions on bird records. Ian Gardner is resigning as secretary, so PORC is looking for a new one. They are asking that whoever takes the job keeps it for several years and that they be tech savvy.

Laura Jackson reported for the Conservation Committee. BLM is going to change a large area of western habitat in several states to benefit the sage grouse without regard to how this will affect other species. She will draft a letter to BLM expressing our concern about the lack of public comment on the proposal.

PSO made a \$100 donation to join the American Bird Conservancy, but no forms were filled out to join the Bird Conservation Alliance which is part of ABC. Laura will contact ABC to get PSO added to the alliance list which will send her notifications on important bird conservation issues.

A complete transcript of the meeting minutes may be found on the PSO website.

Roger V. Higbee, Secretary
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What You Can Do on the PSO Website

pabirds.org

Frank Haas - pso@pabirds.org

The PSO website has a bunch of resources for birders in Pennsylvania. This is the next in a series of articles on the features of the website.

Today's topic is the **About Us** menu.

The website has a lot of information about our organization. You can find it under the **About Us** menu.

Bylaws

The PSO's bylaws can be read (or downloaded) here.

Organization

Under Organization, you can find a list of PSO Officers, Board Members, and Staff. It also lists the standing Committees. If you are interested in working on one (or more) of the committees, contact the Committee Chair.

Board Meetings

The minutes of every board meeting are posted on this page. They are in PDF format, so they can be downloaded if desired.

Contact Us

Under the Contact Us menu you will find the same list as the Organization page!

Treasurer's Reports

The Annual Treasurer's Reports are found in this section. They are also in PDF format. Here you can see where we get our money and what we spend it on.

PSO Brochure

If you would like to give a friend information (and a Membership Form) about the PSO, you can find a downloadable brochure on this page. You could also use it for distribution at local bird club meetings, etc.

Meeting Sites

A map of Pennsylvania showing where we have held Annual Meetings is on this page. As can be seen, a lot of counties have not yet hosted a meeting. If you live in one of these counties and think it would be an appropriate location for an Annual Meeting, please contact our President.

Allegheny Front Hawk Watch

by Tom Kuehl

Hawkwatchers live for those days when epic flights of migrating raptors provide special lasting memories. March 14, 2019, was such a day at the Allegheny Front Hawkwatch. Although it's never a science when trying to predict when those days will occur, during the peak time for migration and if the winds are favorable for a hawkwatch – GO! For the spring Golden Eagle migration, it's more speculation than science; however, a second day with east winds is a likely contributor for pushing raptors onto Pennsylvania's western-most ridge. A quiet morning turned into a very busy afternoon as strong east winds and a warming sun provided ideal conditions.



Dave Poder got his amazing photo of the Golden Eagle with the moon.

For the 2019 season March came in like a lion with almost two feet of snow and ice socking in the Allegheny Front. Kudos to Compiler Bob Stewart for getting the watch reopened. While no significant snow fell during the past week, overnight cold produced crusty morning walks to the northern end of the watch site where observers positioned themselves for the flight. Parking spots were still at a premium, and so an ambitious Ed Gowarty, Sr., decided to dig himself a new spot during the morning lull.

As is so often the case, and especially so in the spring, there is little or no reward for an early arrival. For this day, we received just a little gift when an adult Golden Eagle floated low over the site

at 10:15 a.m. Shortly thereafter perhaps the same Golden Eagle rushed past us to the south – I hoped that it was in hot pursuit of a groundhog ready to peek from its hole to see if winter were over. Alas, it was to be the only bird of the morning. Hey, no wind, no sun, and as of yet, not even any vultures up and about – just another spring day at the Allegheny Front.

It remained cloudy for the next three hours; however, a stronger wind got the flight started. Surprisingly for the Allegheny Front, the day before had yielded an excellent flight of 11 Red-shouldered Hawks, which had another good showing today with a tally of 16. Adults were stunning in the blue sky, and a juvenile thrilled us with a close pass just over our heads. Cooper’s Hawk added to the mix with the day’s total of 18; several did their harrier-like display flight as they passed below us in the valley.

Though still cloudy through the 1:00 to 2:00 hour, the wind had started to pick up. Counter Dave Poder closed out the 2:00 hour with the day’s migrating raptor tally at 63; however, with still just one Golden Eagle, I wondered if, despite a favorable southeast wind, this day would just be a bust. Fortunately, that would not be the case. The skies continued to clear, and the wind got stronger. The 2:35 p.m. Golden Eagle broke the eagle jam after which there was no break in the action for Counter Dave the rest of the day. Five Golden Eagles was the 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. total, then 11 for 3:00 to 4:00 p.m., and a remarkable 22 for 4:00 to 5:00 p.m., which included a kettle of seven. Five were high, and two below; and another Goldie trailed that group, so eight were in sight at the same time! Dave Kipp, working to drain his third camera battery of the day, snapped merrily as the many late afternoon raptors passed by the moon (see Dave Poder’s photo) in the eastern sky.

Another 14 Golden Eagles were tallied from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. as the flight continued at a torrid pace. Past experience at the Allegheny Front shows that Golden Eagles continue to migrate until dusk on strong east winds, and that was our expectation. Unfortunately, this was not the case today as the flight died out rather abruptly at 6:00 p.m. with just one more migrant raptor to be counted for the day; that bird was a long-tailed raptor (an unidentified bird that could have been a Northern Harrier or Cooper’s Hawk) that streaked through the low blinding sun to the west.

See the Hawk Count Summary below: Tallied today were eleven migrating species including a distant single Osprey out over the valley and excluding one Peregrine Falcon that powered north parallel to the escarpment shortly after 3:00 p.m. Today’s total tally was 267 including 53 Golden Eagles! Per Compiler Bob Stewart’s research, the tally of

267 was a new record for a non- Broad-winged Hawk day for the spring, surpassing the tally of 231 recorded by counters Gene and Nancy Flament on March 15, 2003. The 53 Golden Eagle tally is a new spring record, besting the 51 on March 13, 2015, recorded by Counter Ed Gowarty, Sr., and (for the moment) ranks as the fourth highest count of Golden Eagles for both spring and fall. With the warming temperatures and calls of gulls, the day felt like a summer day at the beach, and we certainly are all grateful to have experienced this flight and appreciate the conservation work that made it possible.

Day's Raptor Counts		
BV	Black Vulture	7
TV	Turkey Vulture	93
OS	Osprey	1
BE	Bald Eagle	2
NH	Northern Harrier	2
SS	Sharp-shinned Hawk	7
CH	Cooper's Hawk	18
NG	Northern Goshawk	0
RS	Red-shouldered Hawk	16
BW	Broad-winged Hawk	0
RT	Red-tailed Hawk	60
RL	Rough-legged Hawk	0
GE	Golden Eagle	53
AK	American Kestrel	2
ML	Merlin	0
PG	Peregrine Falcon	0
UA	Unknown Accipiter	2
UB	Unknown Buteo	1
UF	Unknown Falcon	0
UE	Unknown Eagle	0
UR	Unknown Raptor	3

Observation Start Time	08:00:00
Observation End Time	17:00:00
Official Counter	Dave Poder
Observers	Bob Stewart Ed Gowarty, Sr. Greg Gdula Tom & Janet Kuehl
Weather	SE winds, high of 60. High, thin clouds. Visibility 40 km
Non Raptor Notes	150+ gulls flying W, Ravens, Crows
Visitors	Greg Gdula, Bob Stewart, Tom and Janet Kuehl, Jim Rocco, Ed Gowarty, Nancy Ott, Dave Kipp, Jack Gilbert
Forecast	Partly cloudy, mid 50s, WSW winds, windy

PSO Field Trip to Middle Creek 2020

by Chad Kauffman

On March 7, 2020, our PSO group visited the wonderful facilities at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area in Stevens, PA. Middle Creek is known for the Snow Goose spectacle that occurs each year for birders, nature lovers, photographers, and hunters alike. Traveling to Middle Creek makes you feel like you are in the middle of nowhere. It was first created in 1965 when the PGC bought land and created ponds. In 1971 the visitor's center was built, and Middle Creek was completed in 1973. Even though this seemed like a Field of Dreams, the PGC hoped it would work. Canada Geese were successfully introduced; Snow Geese followed. Tundra Swans came, and Bald Eagles appeared as well. The number of people visiting for various reasons through the year has increased to the point where the crowds can be overwhelming.

On the way from Juniata County, as we got on Rt 78 off I-81, we saw skeins of Snow Geese, smaller flocks of Canada Geese, and Tundra Swans leaving the fields and water. Meeting others at the visitor's center, we found that we had missed the liftoff from the lake which starts at dawn. We started slowly and steadily visiting the small ponds below the center where we enjoyed close looks at waterfowl species including Ring-necked Duck, Northern Shoveler, and American Black Duck. Bald Eagle, Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, and Red-tailed Hawk were playing in the high winds.

The Willow Point parking lot was actually quiet when we arrived. After the lift-off, many viewers had left for the day or moved to other spots. We fought the winds and found the lake mostly empty, but a few ducks were tucked in here and there and to the north. We got good looks at Ruddy Ducks, Common Mergansers, Mallards, and Wood Ducks flying around or swimming on the water. As we were walking back from the point, an Eastern Meadowlark in full sun displayed nicely for all of us to see.

We next stopped at the ponds near the white barn, where a Common or Eurasian Teal had been hanging out with some Green-winged Teal. Most people have speculated that it was a hybrid as it had both the vertical stripe as well as the horizontal stripe. We weren't able to find it but enjoyed good looks at the other teal, American Wigeon, and Ring-necked Ducks.

It was now time to tour the road loop. As we were coming to Stop 3, we saw a group of Snow Geese had already started flocking up, and more and more were coming in. We spotted Jonathan Heller, a local birder

who already had his scope up. He had snagged looks at a Cackling Goose, so we all parked and lined up the scopes and bins with him. Eventually we found the smaller goose and even though there was some debate about this particular individual, we still put the tag of Cackling on it. This was the biggest flock of Snows we had all day, but nothing else different stood out among them.

Leaving the WMA, we saw hunters, hoping for a successful hunt, in one of the local goose blinds on the hill.

Returning to the ponds near the visitor's center, we were able to see a distant Northern Harrier fighting the winds on the island.

Finishing our morning tour at the visitor's center, we were able to find some Carolina Chickadees at the feeders. These are a treat for the northern birders who come to the southeastern part of the state.

Losing part of our gang, the rest of us then headed to Hickory Road, just northeast of the WMA, where Red-headed Woodpeckers have been consistent. As soon as we pulled up, we saw two flying around and entertaining us

We continued with our group to visit the super special male Painted Bunting that has been wowing visitors for parts of the last four winters. It has returned to the same home for all but one year. It was a lifer for many of us.

While there, we received a report that the elusive Pink-footed Goose had returned to Woods Edge Park. We fought some traffic, accidents, and multiple stop lights and finally arrived at the park where a few friends were already standing along the road scoping the goose flock. Our crew hurried up to join local birder Tom Raub, who quickly got us on the Pink-footed Goose for great looks and some pics as well.

While it was disappointing that many of the geese had already left for the north, and in spite of low temperatures and high winds, it is always good to visit Middle Creek and enjoy the sights, birds, and later in the year, flowers, mammals, and breeding birds. I am very much looking forward to returning to Lancaster County sometime in the near future.



The Raven Reporter

Tales of Discovery about Pennsylvania Birds

Determining Links Between Pennsylvania and Central America

Pennsylvania has been a regular supporter of bird conservation in Nicaragua. The PGC has supported El Jaguar Reserve in Jinotega Province through the Southern Wings Program and the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). Jinotega Province is farm country with many vegetable and coffee farms as well as beef cattle. Many forests in the hills and mountains have steep slopes and very wet conditions that do not allow easy cultivation. Cloud forests often surround, or are just upslope from, coffee plantations. A lot of potential exists for improving the coffee plantations with the addition of native woody plants in the coffee fields and at the edges of fields by increasing erosion protection. The area has many Nearctic migrants including Golden-winged Warbler, Wood Thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Acadian Flycatcher, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. These birds coexist with many exotic-looking native species like Lesson's Motmot and Montezuma's Oropendula which nest there. Several species characteristic of cloud forests and montane oak forests breed in the immediate area.

In order to support full life cycle bird conservation, it is important to learn where "our birds" go in the winter and what challenges they face there and in migration. So, where do Pennsylvania's conservation concern species go? From research conducted by the Smithsonian Institute and the Stutchbury Laboratory, evidence shows that Wood Thrushes of the Mid-Atlantic Region, including Pennsylvania, migrate to Honduras and northern Nicaragua. One Wood Thrush banded in a coffee field at El Jaguar was found later in Bucks County where it probably was on its breeding ground. More tangible evidence would be helpful to better understand these connections and how these species migrate and what they do within their wintering area. Some species stay put for their stay while others wander widely in search of food.



The Pennsylvania Game Commission has really committed to the MOTUS network of studying migration with "nanotags" (small radio transmitters) across the state and now internationally. With financial assistance of Pennsylvania and Missouri, El Jaguar Reserve recently installed a MOTUS tower to better study migration in the region. ABC recently financed and assisted this research by placing "nanotags" on ten [Wood Thrushes](#) and ten Louisiana Waterthrushes there. Both of these forest songbirds nest in the United States including Pennsylvania and southern Canada. They both spend the winter mostly in Central America and southern Mexico. Some Louisiana Waterthrushes also spend their winters in the Caribbean region.

According to the ABC news release: "Information gathered via the nanotags, which emit signals automatically recorded by the Motus network's growing number of receiving stations, will inform conservation initiatives to save these and other declining long-distance migrants. Motus (the Latin word for "movement") is a program managed by Bird Studies Canada and is the central hub for detection data from more than 750 receiving stations that use automated radio telemetry to track movements of birds, bats, and even large insects tagged with lightweight nanotags. In 2019, with funding from the Missouri Department of Conservation, ABC helped install the first Motus receiving station in Nicaragua at El Jaguar. It was just the sixth installed in Central America. Andrew Rothman, ABC's Migratory Birds Program Director, has worked closely with the El Jaguar team to update its system. Dr. Jeff Larkin of Indiana University of Pennsylvania also is an important part of this effort. The El Jaguar Reserve is part of a larger Nicaragua Highlands ABC Birdscape, a landscape-scale area that provides wintering habitat for migratory birds. The elevation of El Jaguar increases its ability to gather data for radio-tagged birds entering that region. I have witnessed the wave of migrants going north in Central America and can vouch that when the birds are on the move, they really can flood an area through the narrow siphon of Central American habitat. For instance, in Panama a large percentage of the Swainson's Thrushes, Canada Warblers, and Olive-sided Flycatchers move through forests in the mountains and foothills. So much of the wooded habitat has been lost to urbanization and agriculture that the birds are more concentrated. More towers would help us better understand these movements.

For more information please visit the websites of these organizations including motus.org for more information on the Motus tracking system, ABC's story at <https://abcbirds.org/article/milestone-2020-songbirds-tagged-in-nicaragua-motus/> and its partners. In addition,

Willistown Conservation Trust (<https://wctrust.org/motus/>) and Powdermill Nature Reserve (<https://powdermillarc.org/motus-wildlife-tracking/>) are part of the Pennsylvania bird migration research network of cooperators that are playing key roles in studying birds here and where they connect. They deserve our support.

Goshawk Observations Still Needed.

Few birds in Pennsylvania are more challenging to survey, inventory, and study than the Northern Goshawk. For many years, this species was considered “Candidate – Rare” by the OTC and was changed to “Near-Threatened” when the committee changed to another set of status definitions and considered the results of the Second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas. I have discussed this OTC Sub-committee previously, so I will avoid some redundancy here. It is important to note that not only were fewer goshawks found with more effort during the 2nd Atlas, but the range looked as if it had contracted, receding from the southern half of the state and near the Delaware River. Some territories apparently were not occupied on an annual basis. After considerable effort, the Goshawk Committee has found that there are even fewer active goshawk territories now than during the 2nd Atlas. Many locations that were regularly occupied by goshawks have not been occupied for a few years. This has always happened with goshawks, but it seems to be happening with increased regularity. They are now very hard to find even where they had been found regularly. However, it has been observed that goshawks can and will recolonize a site after years of absence. I have observed this myself in northeastern counties. Among the many factors are changing prey populations, spring weather patterns, nest disturbance, mortality from West Nile Virus, and other causes. So, any observations of breeding season Northern Goshawks are appreciated. Any report will be treated with confidentiality.

Submit reports at:
<https://www.hawkmountain.org/goshawk-sightings-default.aspx>.

Observations of goshawks on PA Game Lands can be submitted to a PGC e-mail: pgcgoshawk@pa.gov.

COVID-19 Restrictions for Visiting Public Lands Should Ease.

It has been a rough several weeks for all of us with the COVID-19 threat to our health and well-being. Like all of you, I have been staying at home more and restricting my activities in public spaces. However, trails in state parks,

game lands, and state forests have been mostly open for the period and should remain open. Reasonable restrictions and limitations are in place, but yet opportunities to stretch your legs and enjoy nature fairly close to home exist. At least that is true for us in more rural counties and anywhere there are a few parks. Birding has increased in the local neighborhoods with many more people taking note of the birds right outside their windows during the lockdowns. More folks are visiting group Facebook pages to report their backyard orioles, grosbeaks, and thrushes. That can work for our birding community’s ability to reach more of the public in the long run. For my own part, I also have been collecting more breeding behavior information for my eBird reports and separating out “hot-spots” a bit more so I can better understand local distribution of bird species. And, I am continuing to search for rare breeding species and document their occurrences through eBird and private reports. For example, I have observed the local disappearance of Swainson’s Thrushes from areas where I normally find them, but some species like Prairie Warbler seem to be increasing.

I have been taking advantage of this by visiting my own local areas, my birding “local patches,” and doing bird-walking while taking care to maintain physical distancing. For me that has been Ricketts Glen State Park and the nearby game lands. It has been fairly easy to be safe since most trails do not get a lot of foot traffic, they are often wide enough to allow passage of other walkers, and fellow hikers are courteous and safe in their reactions to oncoming people for the most part. Some of the biggest challenges to maintain distances occur at the parking lot, trail heads, and “pinch points” like bridges and vistas. The news is changing fast, so even a newsletter is undoubtedly not the best place to update such dynamic health and safety information, but I would like to encourage the PSO birders to take the lead in safely leading bird walks and educational programs as soon as they are able. We now have a better idea of how to conduct ourselves during a pandemic. Face masks on! Space yourselves! Hopefully, we can reach out more to the general community to better enjoy nature which gives so much inspiration, stimulation, and solace during these difficult times. I know I will enjoy the outdoors with renewed appreciation for what we have around us and with whom we can share it.

Good birding!

Doug Gross
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Pennsylvania Ornithological Research

“Much has been learned about bird migration in these latter days, but much yet remains to be learned.” Wells W. Cooke emphasized that in 1915 in an essay in the *Bulletin of the U. S. Department of Agriculture*. He could not have imagined how much would become known a century later.

A research team led by David P. L. Toews, assistant professor of biology at Penn State University, uncovered for the first time a single gene associated with migration routes and wintering destinations of Golden-winged Warblers and Blue-winged Warblers. The results were published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2019 (Vol. 116, No., 37, pp. 18272-18274). www.pnas.org/content/116/37/18272

This could well be called a needle-in-a-haystack discovery. Various studies had previously identified vast chromosomal regions that might contain genes related to migration, but the authors believe this particular gene locus is likely the basis of natural selection on these species' migratory behavior and ecology.

The results were by no means attainable only within a laboratory. Coauthors Scott A. Taylor at the University of Colorado Boulder, Henry M. Streby and Gunnar R. Kramer at the University of Toledo, and Irby J. Lovette at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology contributed their essential effort and diverse expertise.

First, the investigation relied on attaching tiny geolocator devices to individual birds, which enabled tracking them from their breeding grounds to their wintering grounds and back again. Additionally, blood samples needed to be drawn from the birds for later genetic analysis.

In individuals sampled from across the breeding range, tracking showed that the Blue-winged Warblers wintered mainly in Central America. In important contrast, two different groups of Golden-winged Warblers were identified: a Great Lakes population that winters in Central America and an Appalachian population that winters in South America.

That finding is important from a conservation viewpoint. Golden-winged Warblers in the Appalachians have declined severely. For example, possible, probable, and confirmed breeding totals declined 61% between Pennsylvania's first Breeding Bird Atlas in 1983-1989 and our second Atlas in 2004-2009.

These Appalachian birds spend their winters in a limited area of northwestern South America where habitat destruction is severe. Perhaps conservation in that region could be a key to our Golden-winged Warblers' survival.

Incidentally, David Toews led research revealing that Pennsylvania's now famous triple-hybrid “Burket's Warbler,” which contained genes from the Golden-winged, Blue-winged, and Chestnut-sided species. PSO members can read Deborah S. Grove's article about the discovery in the April 2020 issue of *Pennsylvania Birds* (Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 223-225).

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PSO Pileated Quiz

How well do you know your Pennsylvania birds?

1. Two of the rarest birds ever seen here appeared in diagonally opposite corners of the state – one a shorebird in Erie County in 1979, the other a thrush in Bucks County in 2005. Name the species.
2. We call it the Red-necked Grebe. What did George Miksch Sutton call it in his *Introduction to the Birds of Pennsylvania* in 1928?
3. Between our first and second Breeding Bird Atlases, did confirmed breeding records of the Eastern Wood-Pewee increase or decrease?
4. The “Audubon's” and “Myrtle” Yellow-rumped Warbler subspecies have different colored throats? What is the color on each subspecies?
5. The Red-eyed Vireo and the Philadelphia Vireo have very similar songs. Which song is higher in pitch?

Conservation Chat Room

Keystone Species in the Keystone State



We are surrounded by babies this year: we just watched a doe in our front yard licking a newborn fawn while in the back yard a mother Hairy Woodpecker was feeding suet to a fledgling. Two pairs of phoebes are nesting – one at the house and one nearby at the plant shed; both are on nest

platforms that Mike built. We are also enjoying the nesting bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Wrens, and Carolina Wrens.

Then there are the Black-capped Chickadees. Mike bought two bird houses from Troyer's Birds' Paradise at a PSO Annual Meeting a few years ago. One house is made of PVC pipe with black paint markings, so it resembles white birch (#GBB Gilbertson Sparrow Resistant Bluebird House). The other is more like a traditional bluebird house, but with a slotted entrance just below the roof, called a "#PTBB Poly-Tuff Bluebird House." Call 814-587-2756 if you'd like to request a catalog.

I didn't really think birds would use either house since Mike placed one on a pole in the middle of our chicken yard, and the other one is very close to our house in the front yard. I was surprised when he chose those locations as I was sure no birds would use them. They were just too much out in the open. Surprise! We have two pairs of nesting chickadees this year! The pair in the chicken yard even survived a recent bear encounter. Video from our trail camera shows a bear inside the chicken yard late one night holding the PVC nest box with two front paws, then spinning it around on the pole before bending it at a 45° angle. Both parents flew out of the box as it spun, but the bear left soon afterwards, and the adults returned. No doubt the babies had a dizzy time of it, but everything is back to normal now.

Earlier in May, when we had a prolonged cold spell, we lost a clutch of 6 baby bluebirds. We were determined not to let that happen to the chickadee babies, so we ordered live mealworms and put them in two little feeders, one near each chickadee nest. It didn't take long for the Tufted Titmice, phoebes, and chickadees to devour them. After several days of sharing their mealworms with other

birds, the chickadees decided that they would up the competition. Instead of waiting for us to deliver the mealworms, they flew to us when we stepped outside, landing on our shoulders, demanding to be fed first. Of course, we complied by offering a few mealworms in an outstretched hand, and now the chickadees no longer have to compete with other birds. They have trained us to do exactly what they want. We watch them catching tiny caterpillars and spiders to feed their babies, but we better have some mealworms ready when we go outside, or we get a scolding!

If you are wondering how our baby bird adventures relate to keystone species, keep reading.

Here's a little history on the concept of a keystone species, which was first introduced by Dr. Robert Paine in 1969 after he researched sea stars in tidal pools in Washington State. He discovered that removing the top predator (sea stars) from the tidal pool actually reduced the biodiversity of species living in the pool. Dr. Paine recognized that the sea star prevented species lower down on the food chain from overusing their food resource since sea star predation keeps the populations in check. The Keystone Species Hypothesis states that "a keystone species is one whose impacts on its community or ecosystem are large and greater than would be expected from its relative abundance or total biomass."⁽¹⁾ Paine limited the concept to top predators.

Like many hypotheses these days, the Keystone Species concept has generated some controversy since it has been expanded by some ecologists to include any species that has a large impact on any aspect of an ecosystem. This broadening allows many more species to be labeled "keystone species" and inspired a group of ecologists known as the "Keystone Cops" to further define the concept, thus making keystone species rare.⁽²⁾ The controversy continues to this day, so for this article I am going to stay out of the weeds and follow a more general concept that also includes "ecosystem engineers." These are species that create, significantly modify, or maintain an ecosystem.⁽³⁾

We are all familiar with the important role that beavers play in creating wetlands. Other ecosystem engineers are prairie dogs, alligators, and elephants. But what about birds?

Do we have any birds that act as keystone species in the keystone state? Are there any birds that are ecosystem engineers? I mentioned one in the first paragraph.

According to Jared Lloyd ⁽³⁾, only one in ten tree cavities are created naturally. This means that about 90% of nesting cavities in a forest are created by woodpeckers. Since woodpeckers create a new cavity each year, the number of cavities really adds up if there are a lot of woodpeckers.

Can you name the seven species of woodpeckers that breed in Pennsylvania? Even the smallest species, the Downy Woodpecker, creates a nest cavity, but the dead tree needs to be a little punky.

Not so for the largest of our woodpeckers, the Pileated Woodpecker. It's about the size of a crow but isn't nearly as stocky. Unlike other woodpeckers, which excavate round holes, Pileated Woodpeckers excavate oblong holes. Their powerful beaks can do a real number on dying trees, rotting stumps, and snags. We enjoy watching Pileated Woodpeckers fling wood chips while they dig into a rotting stump. They are after carpenter ants and beetle larvae.

Once a woodpecker cavity is abandoned, it's available for a variety of animals that are considered secondary cavity nesters, since they don't make their own nests. This is why woodpeckers are considered keystone species. Woodpeckers provide homes for many other species such



We once watched a Black-capped Chickadee pair excavate a nest in a punky birch snag that Dave Bonta allowed to stand by his porch. It was amazing to watch those tiny birds digging into the tree with their even tinier beaks.

as titmice, owls, Wood Ducks, squirrels, fisher, wrens, swifts, swallows, bluebirds, nuthatches, American Kestrels, and bats.

Chickadees also use woodpecker cavities – not only for nesting but also as roosts at night.

Chickadees often huddle with each other at night, and they need a cavity to do that. Of course, chickadees can make their own cavity, but they need really rotten wood.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) considers woodpeckers so important that their forestry management plans favor woodpeckers. PGC foresters mark trees to save before a timber sale: a certain proportion of old trees, dying trees, mast trees, and snags are purposely protected for woodpeckers and other cavity dwelling animals. ⁽⁴⁾

In addition to building nest cavities, woodpeckers also speed up forest decay processes, increasing nutrient recycling. Woodpeckers are also the primary insectivore during the winter months, feeding on ants and wood-boring beetles. If you own forestland or cut firewood, consider leaving snags, logs and other downed, woody debris to provide more food and cover for woodpeckers and other species.

Laura Jackson, Conservation Chair
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- (1) https://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_gtr135_2/rmrs_gtr135_2_001_012.pdf
- (2) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/sdfe/pdf/download/eid/1-s2.0-S0169534700890473/first-page-pdf>
- (3) <https://www.americanforests.org/magazine/article/woodpeckers-engineers-ecosystems/>
- (4) <https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Education/WildlifeNotesIndex/Pages/Woodpeckers.aspx>

Plan Now to Attend Our Next PSO Annual Meeting

September 17-19, 2021

Lancaster, PA

Double Tree Resort at Willow Valley

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Answers to Bird Quiz

(page 8)

1. Surfbird at Presque Isle State State Park,
Redwing at Peace Valley Nature Center
2. Holboell's Grebe
3. decreased 41%
4. yellow on "Audubon's, white on "Myrtle"
5. Philadelphia Vireo's song



Tony Bruno found this Magnolia Warbler singing on territory in Armstrong County on 6/8/2020.

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