

PSO Pileated



From the President's Desk...

It's hard to believe fall is already here. In Somerset County, several frost events and even snow are enough to confirm that winter isn't far ahead! Before winter finally arrives, make sure to get out and do some fall birding. A great way to do this is to attend one of the many PSO field trips to hawkwatches. We have two more hawkwatch field trips in our line-up. The next trip will be to Tuscarora Summit, The Pulpit Hawk-

watch, on October 18-19. Mid-October is near peak time for many species, so expect a nice mix. This two-day event allows birders to attend either one or both days. This season's final hawkwatch trip to the Allegheny Front on November 8-9 will target the peak for Golden Eagles. And let me tell you, if you have not been to the Allegheny Front before, the eagles generally pass by very close to the site, often at or below eye level! We would love to see you at one or both of the outings.

For more information, including directions and meeting times, please visit our Facebook page or send me an email. I know that many of you have attended recent PSO field trips during the last several years. I would love to hear your comments. If you have stories and/or photos reflecting on any of the field trips or the annual meeting, send them our way! I plan to compile your thoughts and comments in a future newsletter article. Please send photos that you don't mind showing up here!

Now let's fast forward beyond this winter's expected snow to spring 2015 and the next annual meeting. We had a great meeting this year, and those who attended can attest to that fact. Next year we are aiming for an even better meeting! Mark your calendars, as the 2015 Annual Meeting will be May 29-31 at the Days Inn and Conference Center in West Chester, PA. We are planning

some exciting outings including trips to Bucktoe Creek Preserve for the shorebird and kite watch and to John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge for shorebirds.

Did you know that 2014 is PSO's 25th year? We plan to celebrate this achievement with special festivities during next year's annual meeting. Also, during the year we will have other events to help celebrate. To stay up to date on all these and other field trips make sure you find us on Facebook. To follow and get notifications of

new events, click "like" and "follow." Then from the triangle near "liked" click "get notifications." Finally, we love to hear from our membership, so please drop us a note with ideas, comments, or anything else you want us to know!

Good birding!

Michael Lanzone, President
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Mike Lanzone photographed this Golden Eagle at the Allegheny Front Hawkwatch in November 2012. On a good east to southeast wind they often fly very close! Join this year's field trip on November 8-9.

Delaware Shore Spots Revisited

by Chad Kauffman

On August 16-17, about two dozen birders, mostly from PA, invaded Delaware to hit some of the good shorebird spots. Some trip attendees were visiting for the first time while others were regulars to most of the hotspots. We birded a few little known spots, but we still weren't able to hit all of them in just two days.



Photo by Chad Kauffman

The downside of going in August is that many of the beach-goers are still on the road and at the hotels, but the upside is that the shorebirds don't care about that, and if you want to see them, it's best to go when the variety of species is at its peak.

The high water levels didn't offer the best viewing, but visiting Bombay Hook or Prime Hook is always good. We were a bit disappointed because what had been plowed fields that usually harbored shorebirds were now planted in corn.

We had more than 100 species on the trip list. My eBird lists tallied 113 species, but I know that I didn't see some species that others noted.

We took our time birding Bombay Hook, making sure that everyone was able to see various birds, pointing them out, and explaining the field marks. One of the highlights of the whole trip was seeing and hearing two Sedge Wrens past the Allee House. They had been reported for at least a week or so prior, and we were lucky enough to enjoy them with our group. I normally don't go that far on the road, but it just shows what you might miss if you don't check certain areas more often. We spotted both adult and immature Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, great birds that aren't always seen on a trip to Bombay. The Clapper Rails were out and about more than normal.

We then headed south to Port Mahon Road, but the water was high and the road conditions were horrible. This road is always worth checking out, but we didn't add much to our list.

The Dupont Nature Center at Mispillion Light was our next stop, and it never fails to disappoint. Dupont has become a regular stop on my trips to Delaware. Alex Lamoreaux and Tim Schreckengost hooked up with us and spent the rest of the day helping us find birds. They had staked out various locations for us while we shuffled

vehicles and people around at the hotel in Dover. Black and Surf Scoters, more shorebirds, and our first Boat-tailed Grackle were nice additions to our day's list. Four gull and four tern species, all sitting on posts, afforded nice close looks.

Fowler Beach was our next profitable destination where the highlights were Marbled Godwit, Willet, Western Sandpiper, Least Tern, and Black Skimmer. Seaside Sparrows put on a nice show right on the road where we were walking, giving everyone nice views.

Prime Hook Beach Road was quiet, but Broadkill Beach provided good looks at Black Tern. This is the farthest south we went as we wanted to start at high tide at 6:00 a.m. Sunday at Bombay Hook.

Some of us observed the sunrise on Sunday morning at Bombay. This is something that I had never experienced before, but I will certainly make future attempts to see that again. Seeing the sun rise, reflecting on the grass and water, while the egrets and herons were making their morning trek to feed, was actually surreal. We watched some of the birds evicted by the high tide flying right over our heads into Raymond Pool. The morning was very good as the birds were coming in, and the other field trip participants finally joined us. Most of the group enjoyed hearing Northern Bobwhite after a discussion concerning whether any had been heard the day before. This isn't a common occurrence for us in PA any more as they have all disappeared from our area. Other highlights from Bombay on Sunday were a Peregrine Falcon who came across the mudflat in front of us to grab breakfast, Stilt Sandpipers, a close flying Black Tern, and calling Great Horned Owls.

A visit to the Charles Price Park for early Upland Sandpipers didn't pan out, but many got to see the park for the first time. This has become a hotspot for the uppies as the airport isn't always a good place to bird.

Our final destination for those who hadn't already left the group was a visit to the 1000-acre marsh where we found our only adult Little Blue Heron. I think the trip went well, and I would like to see this become an annual offering to our PSO members.

Militia Hill Hawkwatch Revisited

By Chad Kauffman

I had been looking forward to finally visiting Militia Hill for some time as I had heard about the many good birds that have passed by there over the years. The week before our September 20-21 field trip, they had reported large numbers of Broad-winged Hawks. We tried to pick the peak weekend, but we didn't have any way to command the winds, so that was our downfall both days. Most of our group arrived Saturday morning around 9:00, and we were all pleased to have found it easily. The site boasts a nice parking lot and real restrooms right there at the hawkwatch site. I didn't realize that this is the only hawkwatch located in a state park. None of our field trip participants had visited this site before, so even walking on the platform to look around was a treat for all of us. They had a nice set of feeders and different plant life around that allowed us to enjoy migrating warblers. We all saw the wind forecast, but we had hopes that at least a few birds would come through.

We were entertained by resident Red-tailed Hawks, including a local that would perch in a tree almost right above the hawkwatch, affording great looks for those who noticed it. A pair of resident Cooper's Hawks chased each other, and we saw vultures as well.

Some of our group took advantage of a late morning walk around the trails to find more warblers. After lunch, I joined the walking group for another trail walk but didn't have much luck on that walk. After a nice dinner with some of the counters at a nearby brew pub, we decided to give it another shot on Sunday morning.

On Sunday a field trip had been scheduled, and it was great joining with a few locals and other nature lovers to



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Photo by Chad Kauffman

see what the foggy morning offered. We spotted several morning flocks of flycatchers, warblers, and local breeders. Some of us weren't impressed with finding the season's first White-throated Sparrow already so far south; this might mean something, or it might not. All I knew was that it was the weekend's first and another new county bird for Montgomery. Many of the field trip walkers enjoyed an Ovenbird sitting right on the trail, but before the rest of us arrived, another walker came from the opposite direction and it disappeared. When we got back on the hawkwatch platform, we found out that we had missed a Connecticut Warbler right near the feeders as well as a Dickcissel that was perched on a tree nearby. I went down the hill trail and pished up a storm. While I didn't kick up either of them, I did cause quite a frenzy of birds which mobbed me. Among the locals was a late Blue-winged Warbler along with another half dozen warblers.

The highlights for Sunday at Militia Hill were the groups of Common Nighthawks that came through in the morning as well as later in the day.

In the afternoon, I left the gang and thanked them for welcoming our small group that did show up. I headed to Rose Tree Park Hawkwatch, just southwest of Militia. I knew the winds weren't going to be any better there, but I wanted to find and see the location. When I pulled in, I spotted two counters and spent a few hours there enjoying that location and the winds. I know both hawkwatches had really nice numbers before our official field trip as well as afterward, but we just didn't have the luck of the draw and the winds on our side. I hope to return to both and enjoy the nice September birds for which both watches have been known, and I hope others will join me as well.

Northern Cardinal Captures Argiope Spider

by Mike Fialkovich

Sometimes you are fortunate enough to observe predator/prey interactions right in your own backyard on a small scale.

On a Saturday morning in late August, I noticed a Black-and-Yellow Garden Spider (*Argiope aurantia*) hanging on its web in the shrubs outside my living room window. These spiders are quite large (particularly the females), colorful, and conspicuous. The web was supported by a tall arborvitae shrub and flat-topped yews planted next to my house. Upon seeing the spider, I knew the shrubs would not be trimmed until it was gone.

I checked daily and the spider was always there, hanging head down waiting to snare a passing insect. After a heavy rain shower over the Labor Day weekend damaged the web, I watched the spider engaged in repairing the web.

A few hours later by chance I was looking out the window and saw a female Northern Cardinal land on the tall arborvitae. I could see she was eyeing the spider, and I wondered if she would try to catch it. She flew down to the yew and fluttered up to the spider, trying to hover while attempting to grab it. I thought the spider would drop quickly into the shrub to take cover, but it just moved slightly. The cardinal repeated the hovering and jabbing three times before she finally grabbed the spider and flew off with it. It appeared she flew right through the web as it was heavily damaged after she departed.

Before this event I wondered how many spiders are preyed upon because they are obvious to birds while in the web. Little did I know I'd witness the arachnid being preyed upon by my resident Northern Cardinal.

I no longer have an excuse for not trimming the shrubs.

Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo Listed as Threatened

On October 3, 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to list the western population of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. This listing is expected to provide the necessary protections for this species whose numbers have plummeted in recent decades.

In part the final rule states:

“We have determined that the western yellow-billed cuckoo meets the definition of a threatened species and is likely to become endangered throughout its range within the foreseeable future, based on the immediacy, severity, and scope of the threats to its continued existence. These include habitat loss associated with manmade features that alter watercourse hydrology so that the natural processes that sustained riparian habitat in western North America are greatly diminished. Loss and degradation of habitat has also occurred as a result of livestock overgrazing and encroachment from agriculture. These losses are exacerbated by the conversion of native habitat to predominantly nonnative vegetation. Habitat loss results in the additional effects associated with small and widely separated habitat patches such as increased predation and reduced dispersal potential. This threat is particularly persistent where small habitat patches are in proximity to human-altered landscapes, especially agricultural fields, resulting in the potential for pesticides to poison individual western yellow-billed cuckoos and reduce their prey base.”

The final rule, effective November 3, also states that collisions with towers during migration are significant threats to the remaining western Yellow-billed Cuckoos.

Bird Quiz

1. Of these two Green-winged Teal subspecies, American and Eurasian, which has the vertical breast bar and which has the bright horizontal white stripe?
2. Lapland is the only longspur on our official state list, but in his *Pennsylvania Birds: An Annotated List*, Earl Poole included another longspur species in his supplementary list of birds reported but not accepted. Which species?
3. Among Empidonax flycatchers on the Pennsylvania list, which has the longest primary projection, and which has the shortest?
4. What species' English name is a translation meaning "hunter with a covered nose"?
5. Of our two Yellow-rumped Warbler subspecies, Audubon's and Myrtle, which breeds farther north in western North America?

(Answers on page 12)

The Raven Reporter

Tales of Discovery about Pennsylvania Birds



Remembering Martha – Lesson from the Passenger Pigeon Extinction

Only a century ago, North America lost the Passenger Pigeon when Martha, the last of her tribe, died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. For wildlife conservation in America, this is a date for all to remember because there are so many lessons learned from this event and so many changes that came with these lessons. The downward spiral and eventual loss of this most abundant bird on the continent is a story of a species “that became extinct through the avarice and thoughtlessness of man.” Modern day conservation organizations, wildlife agencies, regulations, and hunting seasons are all legacies of the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon. We learned that even impossibly abundant species can be lost through foolish human behavior, so it is smart to “keep common birds common” as part of our conservation strategy. Basic inventory and monitoring birds are vital parts of this approach to best manage our wildlife populations. Involvement of the public in all aspects of bird science and conservation is essential for success. This “biological storm” of a bird was lost by everyone, so any prevention of future losses also involves the same broad-based involvement of the public. Ironically, Martha never lived a day in the wild and was one of several Passenger Pigeons raised in captivity.

This is one of the best-told stories about nature in America that is difficult to retell without repeating well chosen words. Many nature and wildlife writers have written eloquently about the fantastic story of the bird and its incredible loss, some of these written only recently. As Aldo Leopold wrote: “*The Passenger Pigeon was no mere bird, he was a biological storm. He was the lightning that played between two biotic poles of intolerable intensity: the fat of the lands and his own zest for living. Yearly the feathered tempest roared up, down, and across the continent, sucking up the laden fruits of forest and prairie, burning them in a travelling blast of life. Like any other chain reaction, the pigeon could survive no diminution of*

his own furious intensity. Once the pigeoners had subtracted from his numbers, and once the settlers had chopped gaps in the continuity of his fuel, his flame guttered out with hardly a putter or even a wisp of smoke.” (On a Monument to a Pigeon, 1947).

The first population estimate of any North American bird was made for this species by Alexander Wilson, the father of American ornithology and Pennsylvania resident. While he was riding horseback in Kentucky on his way to Frankfort, Wilson witnessed a flock of Passenger Pigeons fly over for four hours. He estimated that the column of flying pigeons was at least a mile wide. Wilson calculated that the length of this flock was 240 miles with a density of about three birds per square yard. Using these figures, Wilson estimated that this flock contained “two thousand two hundred and thirty millions, two hundred and seventy-two Pigeons! – an almost inconceivable multitude, and yet probably far below the actual amount.” (Now this would be written as 2,230,272,000). The size of this flock and the abundance of this species was and still is hard to imagine. It is even harder to imagine that these birds are now gone completely from the earth.

This abundance of Passenger Pigeons extended to Pennsylvania. The original range of this large dove was most of eastern North America south of the boreal forest zone and west as far as the Rocky Mountains. This was a creature of the mature eastern deciduous forest. The main part of the breeding range was in southern New England, New York, the Mid-Atlantic states including Pennsylvania, the Great Lakes region as far west as Minnesota, and the Upper Mississippi Valley as far south as Kentucky.

The Passenger Pigeon was quintessentially a nomadic species. Its huge flocks roamed great distances to take advantage of seasonally abundant mast crops, primarily acorns and beechnuts. Their migrations are legendary with flocks blackening the skies for hours. Unique among America’s forest birds, it nested in huge colonies of hundreds of thousands of pairs. These nesting colonies stretched many miles, occupying several square miles of forest. One of the last Pennsylvania colonies found in Potter County was reported as two miles wide and 40 miles long. Another nest colony reported from 1869 along Mehoopany Creek in Wyoming County in what is now SGL 57 was “seven miles long by two or three miles wide.” Even larger colonies were reported in the Great Lakes states. These large flocks flew great distances from a colony to mast-rich feeding grounds several miles away. The “pigeons” also had a strong preference for salt and visited salt licks in large numbers.

The Passenger Pigeon also was a formidable bird which may have comprised a quarter of the continent’s birds. It was a large, long-tailed pigeon vaguely like a larger

version of the Mourning Dove but with a more colorful plumage and body parts. Passenger Pigeons were two to three times larger than the Mourning Dove so they had an appropriately larger appetite. As Leopold expressed, this species was a formidable ecological force of nature. A foraging flock of Passenger Pigeons consumed all the mast they could reach. Passenger Pigeons consumed vast quantities of beechnuts and acorns, and some American chestnuts. They also foraged for wild fruits like grapes, cherries, dogwood berries, pokeberries, mulberries, partridgeberries, elderberries, blackberries, currants, and many others. Unfortunately, they also foraged in fields of cultivated grains including wheat, barley, rye, and oats, making them legitimate agricultural pests on a grand scale. Their large flocks also weighed down tree limbs, breaking branches, and causing some overlaid trees to fall down. So, the pigeon cities served as natural disturbances in the eastern deciduous forest, creating openings where there were large trees and expansive canopy. Of course, the large trees also were responsible for creating vast amounts of mast that the pigeons and many other kinds of wildlife consumed. Passenger Pigeons probably competed directly with many other species for food.

The best source of information about Passenger Pigeons remains Bill Schorger's encyclopedic account of the history of this species in the 1955 book, *The Passenger Pigeon: Its Natural History and Extinction*. Of course, there are other excellent resources including the Birds of North America account, the recently published *A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction* by Joel Greenberg, and the Game Commission's own website and PA Game News. More details of Schorger's records have now been made available by Dr. Stan Temple of the University of Wisconsin – Madison on the Project Passenger Pigeon website. There are many accounts of Passenger Pigeons in the state including the first known poem written by a Pennsylvanian in the 1700s that was about the "pigeons" seen by John Holme.

*The Pidgeons in such numbers we see fly
That like a cloud they do make dark the sky;
And in such multitudes are sometimes found,
As that they cover both trees and ground:
He that advances near with one good shot
May kill enough to fill both spit and pot.*

John Holme, undated (from the Passenger Pigeon Project website)

Pennsylvania's landscape bears the mark of the "pidgeons" with many place names commemorating the vast flocks of birds. Widely dispersed locations from Philadelphia to the wilds of Forest County were named in some way for Passenger Pigeons. The name "Moyamensing" in west Philadelphia was a native American word for pigeon

droppings. There are Pigeon Creeks in Chester, Sullivan, and Washington counties. Pigeon Hollow is a geographic term used in Cameron, Lycoming, and McKean counties. From direct records of pigeons, we know that they were reported in at least 39 counties. The place names given strongly imply that "Wild Pigeons" were also present in another five counties, bringing the total number of counties known to have had Passenger Pigeons to 44. With their nomadic habits and preference for mature trees, Passenger Pigeons probably occurred in almost all Pennsylvania counties at one time since European settlement.

Pennsylvania is the site of one of the only three monuments erected to commemorate the Passenger Pigeon. In 1947, this monument was placed "in the interest of the preservation of wildlife" near Hanover by the Boy Scouts of America. The monument, located at Codorus State Park overlooking Lake Marburg, was later replaced after suffering vandalism. The area was then known as the "Pigeon Hills." This is appropriate since there are so many accounts of the huge flocks of "pidgeons" in the state especially the forested counties of Penn's Woods. There transcribed is the following statement: "In the interest of the preservation of wild life, We here dedicate this memorial to the ill-fated Passenger Pigeon which from the earliest pioneer days until the 1880s flocked to these Pigeon Hills. This migratory bird, now extinct, was once so plentiful its numbers darkened the skies."

The loss of the Passenger Pigeon from the North American landscape is one of the most profound and devastating human impacts on wildlife in modern history. Between subsistence and market hunters, this species was killed by the tens of thousands each year. At first, people took advantage of the abundant food source to provide meat for their families' tables. As market hunting grew as a profession, more Passenger Pigeons and other game were killed literally by the train carload. As the country's communication and transportation systems grew in size and efficiency, the word spread about pigeon roosts, and the reaction speed to a harvest opportunity grew substantially. Many skills were learned for baiting pigeons and catching them. With advances in firearms, pigeons were killed *en masse* when they were flying in flocks. When a colony was found, it was soon attacked and devastated by "pigeoners" who caught adults flying near nests and captured the young pigeons called "squabs" as preferred table offering.

Declines in the state's Passenger Pigeon numbers were noted by the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the 1880s. The last known active professional "pigeoners" were plying their trade as late as 1878. This completely unregulated harvest across the range of the species caused a deep spiraling decline from which it could not recover despite its large numbers. Its own

gregarious habits may have worked against it, because Passenger Pigeons were not as efficient foraging or effective nesting in smaller bands of birds. Many of the last wild Passenger Pigeons were killed for the sake of a private collection.

Efforts on the part of conservationists and regulators were too little and too late for this migratory bird. The “hunter-conservationist” was a rare bird then, so those who saw the need to put the brakes on the pigeon-killing free-for-all were drowned out in the conversation about wild pigeons. Species that move from one state to another need regulatory protection wherever they go. The country was not ready for that kind of approach to management and regulation in the late nineteenth century. Even if there had been a halt to the slaughter of pigeons, the huge habitat loss of mature forest may have doomed this nomadic, colonial, mast-eating bird. The last reports of this species in the state were in 1906. The last Passenger Pigeon named Martha died in captivity eight years later. The formation of wildlife agencies, conservation groups, and regulations are a direct result of the loss of the Passenger Pigeon.

There are many lessons to be learned from Martha’s death. One of them is that we must remain eternally vigilant about managing wildlife since even a common species could become extinct without proper attention. This also means monitoring – counting birds and where they live – as part of the equation. Cooperation between states and countries also is vital to good management of migratory animals. Just one missing link in the chain can cause a species’ loss.

For more details about the natural history and extinction of the Passenger Pigeon and about the Pennsylvania story in Joe Kosack’s articles, please check the PGC website and *PA Game News*.

PA Birders Contributed to First Rusty Blackbird Spring Blitz

(With Kathy Korber, PGC, and Judith Scarl, International Rusty Blackbird Working Group)

Pennsylvania was one of the states and provinces that participated in the first Rusty Blackbird Spring Blitz conducted this past year. The Blitz was truly an international effort to collect data on migrating Rusties to better understand their migration pattern and stopover behavior. We wanted to learn where most Rusty Blackbirds stopped in migration on their way north to their boreal home. I reported some of the results in the last Raven Reporter, but we wanted to share with you a few more details of those results. This is especially true since PA birders contributed so much to this project.

During the official Blitz dates (1 March-15 June 2014), 13,398 checklists containing at least one Rusty Blackbird observation were reported to eBird. Pennsylvania was seventh on the list of the states and provinces with the highest number of Rusty Blackbird reports. New York, Ontario, and Ohio had the greatest number of individual checklists that included Rusties with 1696, 1230, and 1139 checklists, respectively. Pennsylvania followed these with 742, making it to seventh position among participating states and provinces. That’s a pretty impressive result and a testament to Pennsylvania birders who took on the challenge of “getting Rusty.” The overall results of the Blitz were reported by the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group. For many more details and information about Rusty Blackbirds, please visit that website: <http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migrationblitz/>.

Rusty Blackbird reports were widespread in 53 of the state’s 67 counties; more were noted in the southern and central parts of the state. Philadelphia County reported Rusty Blackbirds most frequently with 186 reports. Rounding out the top five counties, based on the number of reports (field trips with Rusties) were Crawford (59), Schuylkill (42), Centre (40), and Bucks (38). However, the top five county list varies only slightly if we consider the number of Rusty Blackbirds reported. Lebanon County replaces Bucks as the fifth best county when considering the number of blackbirds reported.

One of the main goals of the Blitz was to find out which locations are most important to Rusty Blackbirds as stopover locations. Rusty Blackbirds visit a variety of locations but mostly places where there are mud and shallow water for foraging or large trees for roosting. The locations with the most reports of Rusty Blackbird in the 2014 Blitz were John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) at Tinicum, Philadelphia, with 191 reports followed by Conneaut Marsh (34 reports), SGL 313, Crawford County, and Silver Lake Nature Center (24 reports), Bucks County. These tallies may be artifacts of birder activity as much as blackbird activity. However, the highest one-day observations were at the Toftrees Ponds in Center County with 200 Rusties observed. The second and third largest daily tallies were made at Conneaut Marsh with 125 and 100 birds respectively. This was followed by a report of 70 at Erie NWR (Crawford Co.), 60 at Geneva Marsh, the Wells, 50 each at Mifflintown, Juniata County, and 50 at Pine Road, Lebanon County. We are pleased that birder participation gave us some excellent results from the northwestern wetlands which were expected to be important stopover locations for Rusty Blackbirds.

During the Blitz, 356 checklists were submitted from observations made at locations in PA Important Bird Areas. Two of the state’s popular Important Bird Areas

(IBA) played a prominent role. The already mentioned John Heinz NWR had the highest tally and Conneaut Marsh – Geneva Marsh (SGL 213) was next on the list. Other popular IBA locations included Independence Marsh with 17 checklists; Scotia Barrens at Scotia (SGL 176) and New Kernsville Lake with 9 each; Lake Somerset with 8; Presque Isle SP, Yellow Creek SP, and Marsh Creek each had 7; and The Glades (SGL 95), Erie NWR, Bucktoe Creek Preserve and Crow’s Nest Preserve tallied 6 each. Multiple birders also visited Quakertown Swamp, Wildwood Lake Park, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Park, and Bald Eagle S.P. during the Blitz. Since Rusty Blackbirds are often associated with wetlands and riparian areas, it is a natural fit for IBA birders to check for this species. We suspect that Rusty Blackbirds visit many other IBA locations including other wetlands, shallow ponds, lake margins, and riparian areas. They can be easy to miss, accounting for absent data from many locations.

Of Pennsylvania’s 746 checklists with at least one Rusty Blackbird observed, only 43 were submitted under the specific Rusty Blackbird Blitz protocol. Traveling Counts made up the majority of survey types with 562 checklists. Birders submitted 92 checklists under Stationary Counts. There were 47 Casual Observations checklists and two Exhaustive Area Count checklists. The Rusty Blackbird Blitz protocol is an option that can be selected from the survey type drop-down list (rather than traveling, stationary, casual, and special surveys). It allows more detailed reporting of habitat and other interesting information. However, the basic eBird report is also very helpful because it is geographically specific. Local hotspots that are nested with a larger eBird hotspot are even more helpful.

Some of our rural and northern counties were sparsely covered or lacked coverage altogether. During the Blitz, there were no checklists with Rusty Blackbird observations submitted for Armstrong, Bedford, Cambria, Cameron, Carbon, Elk, Fulton, Greene, Lawrence, McKean, Potter, Sullivan, Venango, or Wyoming counties. This probably reflects some lack of birder and eBird activity in these counties. It also may reflect the speed of the spring migration. Winter seemed to linger into late March to mid-April in 2014, perhaps delaying Rusty movement northward and causing a quick leapfrog over the northern counties. All of these counties listed above include some Rusty Blackbird habitat, particularly Lawrence, Armstrong, and Wyoming Counties. Filling in the blanks in coverage is our next challenge in “getting Rusty!”

Thanks to everyone who looked for and counted our migrating Rusty Blackbirds. Bob Mulvihill of the National Aviary served as state co-coordinator for the Blitz in PA. We also thank Sarah Sargent of Audubon Pennsylvania for promoting the project with Audubon members.

Note that Kathy Korber of PGC compiled the PA data and wrote some parts of this section.

State of the Birds 2014 Report Highlights, Successes, and Challenges

The new State of the Birds report was just released with a news conference at the Smithsonian Institute featuring John Kress, Interim Under Secretary for Science, Dr. Dan Ashe, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Dr. Peter Marra, the head of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. This is the fifth report in the State of the Birds (SOTB) series. Appropriately, the report was dedicated to the memory of Russ Greenberg (1953 – 2013), the former SMBC Director and remarkable bird researcher. Russ was an innovative researcher who pioneered Neotropical migrant work including the shade grown, bird-friendly coffee concept, the Bridging the Americas education project, and International Migratory Bird Day. This news conference is worth watching at: <http://smithsonianscience.org/2014/09/news-conference-state-of-the-birds-2014/>

The State of the Birds gives the United States a middling grade in its progress, noting some progress despite many challenges. Conservation works! We did bring back the Bald Eagle from its endangered status, a success that we have enjoyed here in Pennsylvania. Many other species have increased in recent decades. Through proper management, the Kirtland’s Warbler has increased from a handful of birds living in the Jack Pine savannah of Michigan to more than 1700 individuals. The largest bird in North America, the California Condor, was declared extinct in the wild in 1987 but now is flying over several western states and increasing its range. Other recoveries including Osprey and other raptors mark progress that comes from setting goals and applying good conservation practices. We now are attempting to duplicate these successes with other species.

One of the themes coming from bird conservation education is that “Where birds thrive, people prosper.” Birds have long held the position as measures of ecological health and have long been cited as the “canaries in the coal mine.” They also can directly link to the health of the environment that supports our own welfare. Some examples include riparian birds like the American Dipper and the Louisiana Waterthrush. So, even non-birders should be concerned about bird declines since they signal the declines of ecosystem health. Birders should not be the only advocates for these environmental protections that promote ecosystem and human health.

The 2014 SOTB report justifiably focuses on some of our greatest bird conservation challenges on the continent,

including the Western aridlands and grasslands, coastal habitats, beaches and salt marshes, and the Hawaiian Islands, now known as the bird extinction capital of the world. One of our main strategies is to not only prevent extinction of species but to maintain the level of abundance of our commoner species so they are not threatened. The Neotropical migrants directly involve our Pennsylvania habitats. Many of these remain relatively common. We have been focusing on Golden-winged Warbler and Cerulean Warbler in our own state.

Overall, wetland birds have increased in recent decades due to the protections granted to wetlands and water pollution regulations. This SOTB report features trends in bird populations rather than population estimates to track different bird habitat guilds. Most bird habitat guilds have declined in recent decades. For Pennsylvania, this applies to forests and grasslands particularly. Although there are successes on a continental level with wetland birds, the Second Atlas of Pennsylvania Breeding Birds shows a decline in almost all breeding wetland bird species. So, Pennsylvania is a sad example to one of the positive stories of bird conservation. As indicated in the previous essay,

the lessons of the Passenger Pigeon are being applied today with many pro-active actions. Among these are the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the Duck Stamp, Migratory Bird Joint Ventures, the Conservation Reserve Program, and the basic wildlife regulations and protections we now take for granted. Hunters and birders alike are working hard to keep common birds common and prevent any more bird extinctions.

For more information, please check the 2014 State of the Birds report at: <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/> where the report and the latest Watch List are offered.

Please visit the PA eBird portal page to keep up with our news. I invite PSO members to suggest good news items and stories for our eBird portal page. <http://ebird.org/content/pa/news/remembering-martha-the-last-passenger-pigeon-lessons-from-the-past/>

Good birding!

Doug Gross, PA Game Commission, Non-game and Endangered Bird Supervisor, 106 Winters Road, Orangeville, PA 17859; E-mail: dogross@pa.gov

PSO Field Trips

Saturday and/or Sunday, October 18-19 –

Tuscarora Summit (the Pulpit Hawkwatch, located in Fulton and Franklin counties) – From US 30 and PA 75 in Fort Loudon, go west on US 30 for 4.2 miles to the top of Cove Mt. Park at Mountain House Restaurant (south side of US 30) or in the parking area (north side of US 30 across from the restaurant). Access to the site is from the right and to the rear of the restaurant, where one should find a small faded sign indicating The Pulpit. A small path leads off to the right onto a field of boulders under a power line gap.

Saturday and/or Sunday, November 8-9 –

Allegheny Front Hawkwatch, located in Bedford Co. near the Somerset line. From PA Route 56 in Windber, take PA Route 160 South into Central City, (approximately 10 miles). As you enter Central City, PA160 becomes Main St. and will lead to a stop sign at the intersection with Sunshine Ave at the First Commonwealth Bank. At this point continue straight through the intersection staying on Main St. which will shortly end at a "T" where you will turn left onto Shaffer Mountain Road. Continue on Shaffer Mountain road for 0.8 miles and make a right hand turn onto Lambert Mountain Road (SR 1035). Take Lambert Mountain Road for approximately 2.9 miles into the little village of Daley. Look for a small, white church on your right. Beyond the church is an intersection where the main

road turns left, but continue straight up a narrow road which is still Lambert Mountain Rd. Continue past the Daley Cemetery on the right. Approximately 0.5 miles up the narrow road which will become dirt and chip there will be a blue metal gate on the right. This is the entrance to the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch.



Bird Quiz Answers

1. American, the vertical bar; Eurasian, the horizontal stripe
2. Smith's
3. Longest on Acadian Flycatcher, shortest on Least
4. Pomarine Jaeger
5. The one we consider our "eastern" Myrtle

Chat Room for Conservation

Audubon: Climate Change is the No. 1 Risk for Birds



It's fall, and American Goldfinches fill my wildflower gardens, feeding on the seeds of Black-eyed Susans, Brown-eyed Susans, Purple Coneflowers, Oxeye, and Woodland Sunflowers. Gone are the pretty blooms of summer, which fed a plethora of butterflies, bees, flies, and wasps. Now it's the birds that are busy, reaping the results of the pollinators' efforts. The only bright colors in my gardens are the red blooms of the Pineapple Sage in my herb bed and those of the native Trumpet Honeysuckle along the garden fence. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are still buzzing those plants, searching for the sweet nectar.

I recently learned from a Penn State biologist who researches pollinators that hummingbirds actually learn to seek out red flowers. It seems that red is not a visible color to bees and wasps, like it is to hummingbirds, so insects don't raid the nectaries of red flowers. Biologists theorize that hummingbirds seek out red flowers after they realize red flowers contain the most nectar. I once watched a hummingbird buzz up and down a red fence post, searching for the "flower." It finally flew away when it could not find the nectar source. I hope the hummingbird learned that three-foot, skinny red objects are to be ignored, since it wasted a lot of energy. Hummingbirds need all the nectar and bugs they can get. Their high metabolism requires them to eat one-half their weight in food each day!

It's hard to imagine my backyard empty of common birds like American Goldfinches and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, but that is predicted in a major initiative that the National Audubon Society just released on September 9, 2014. Although birds like American Goldfinches and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are listed as stable in terms of climate sensitivity, many other birds will be significantly impacted by climate change.

Audubon reports that climate change is the No. 1 threat to North American birds.

I received a "Bird Status Spreadsheet" of Pennsylvania birds from Audubon, which lists 424 species of birds and the prediction of how much each one is at risk. Audubon scientists looked at Christmas Bird Count data to determine winter sensitivity to climate change, as well as the North American Breeding Bird Surveys, to determine how each species will be impacted by climate change in

its breeding range. Birds that are described as "endangered" or "threatened" are species that will lose 50% of their current ranges by the end of the century – unless we take aggressive action to reduce the impact of global warming.

What Pennsylvania birds are at risk? Here are just a few that are threatened: Black-and-white Warblers, Black-throated Blue Warblers, Hairy Woodpeckers, Hooded Warblers, and Veery. A few examples of endangered bird species are Eastern Whip-poor-wills, Mallards, Northern Saw-whet Owls, Osprey, and Ruffed Grouse.

Fortunately, there is a lot we can do to help birds at risk due to a warming climate. We can conserve energy, create backyard bird habitat using native plants, and implement rooftop solar. We can support land conservancies, which will protect and expand resilient habitats. Forest landowners should consider a conservation easement on their property, which will keep the trees from being cut down for development. We have donated a conservation easement on our 113 acres to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. We want our habitat improvement efforts to last beyond our short tenure as caretakers. Helping to maintain Important Bird Areas is also vital to the health of our birds.



Magnolia Warblers, like this individual photographed at the 2010 PSO meeting at Presque Isle, are threatened by climate change.

Photo by Mike Jackson

I've only touched the surface of Audubon's climate report and how birds will be affected. To see a complete list of birds that may become extinct and to understand just how the study was conducted, go to climate.audubon.org. Even the Bald Eagle, our national symbol, is climate endangered. Surely there is something each of us will do to help save our birds.

– Laura Jackson, Bedford Co.

Ornithological Literature Notes

Reclaimed surface mine lands are a haven for many of our most severely declining grassland birds, but the attraction won't necessarily last forever. Original reclamation habitats change over time, and it is a challenge for researchers to pin down the changes and effects that matter most.

Jason M. Hill and Duane R. Diefenbach in the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at Penn State University investigated the changes and possible effects on Grasshopper Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow populations at 61 surface mine grasslands including portions of Clearfield, Centre, and Cambria counties. They reported the results in a 2014 paper in *Conservation Biology* (28:735-744).

Focusing particularly on study sites totaling 3,931 acres, the authors compared landscape and vegetation characteristics between 2002 and 2011, with estimates of the sparrows' occupancy rates surveyed between those same years. They documented how the habitat features are related to the two species' density and occupancy probability.

Transect surveys showed an average 72% decline in Grasshopper Sparrows and 49% decline in Henslow's Sparrows at the sites. During the same period, two aspects of habitat at the sites were correlated with the declines:

◆ Average density of woody vegetation nearly tripled from 8.1 to 21.1 percent. An increase would be expected as a result of normal ecological succession in the plant community. The authors note that previous studies have demonstrated negative effects of increased woody vegetation on the occurrence of grassland birds.

◆ The sparrows' occupancy declined with grasslands' increasing "perimeter-area ratio." This is the ratio of the length of a forested or other "edge" perimeter to a grassland's area. Geometrically, an irregular perimeter has a longer boundary than a simpler perimeter (e.g., a circle). An uneven perimeter, in effect, has more edge, and the authors note that the two sparrows are known to be "edge-sensitive"—tending to avoid grassland edges.

Meanwhile, the researchers found that the sites' grassland area, proximity to the nearest neighboring grassland, and surrounding landscape composition were "not parsimonious predictors of occupancy probability for either species." Grassland size is, thus, only one component of the density and occupancy patterns at the sites.



Cris Hamilton photographed this Henslow's Sparrow at the Piney Tract, Clarion Co., in June 2011.

The proportion of woody vegetation and the amount of "edge" are evidently also important to the species' habitat preference. Hill and Diefenbach conclude that management intervention to maintain those characteristics will be important to the sparrows' future on our reclaimed surface mine grasslands.

That study refers only to sparrows' density and occupancy of grasslands. However, reproductive success evidently relates to more subtle features of non-woody vegetation, according to the two authors. They reported in a 2013 paper (*Auk* 130:764-773) that experimental removal of woody vegetation at Cambria and Clarion County study sites did not immediately increase Grasshopper and Henslow's nesting success or fledgling production. Instead, short-term reproductive success was associated with factors involving height of grass, depth of thatch, and amount of bare ground.

Nevertheless, the authors noted in the 2013 paper that ecological succession, when it increases density of shrubs and trees, may eventually make habitat unsuitable for grassland birds. Either removing woody vegetation from existing sites or acquiring new sites with few trees and shrubs may be necessary to maintain suitable habitat in the long term.

Both papers are available on the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units website: www.coopunits.org/Pennsylvania/People/Jason_Hill.

—Paul Hess
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Did you know that ragweed seeds constitute a good percentage of the vegetative portion of a Henslow's Sparrow's diet?

PSO Newsletter

This newsletter is published four times a year by the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology. To renew your membership, either pay on line or send your check made payable to "PSO" to:

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Bird Quiz Answers

1. American, the vertical bar; Eurasian, the horizontal stripe
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3. Longest on Acadian Flycatcher, shortest on Least
4. Pomarine Jaeger
5. The one we consider our "eastern" Myrtle

American Birding Association Now in Delaware

The American Birding Association (ABA) has moved their headquarters from Boulder, Colorado, to Delaware City, Delaware. One of the reasons for this move is to appeal to backyard birders as well as the more serious birders and the ornithologists with which this organization is usually identified. They are hoping to attain a major growth spurt by being located in a center of heavy population in the mid-Atlantic region.

Delaware state has helped ABA financially with the move, and in exchange ABA will promote the Delaware Bayshore through eco-tourism by offering field trips, lending binoculars, distributing printed guides, and assigning expert birders who can help visitors bird the bay and enjoy the area. It has also been predicted that ABA's presence will also encourage government to take the conservation of the whole Delaware Bay more seriously.

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