



Kingfisher Courier

Newsletter of Appalachian Audubon Society

November 2010

Thursday, November 18, 2010 Three Days of Birding in South Florida



American Bitterns winter in the southern US and Central America. Usually solitary, it walks stealthily among cattails or bulrushes. If it senses that it has been seen, the American Bittern becomes motionless, with its bill pointed upward, causing it to blend into the reeds. Photo: Wikipedia

If you enjoyed last year's "A Forest Story," be sure to attend November's program as **Gene Wingert** returns to take us on a tour of the ecosystems of south Florida. This program, so entitled to show how much can actually be seen in such a short amount of time, examines habitats and focuses on keystone species, with an emphasis on the wading birds that inhabit these areas.

A connection between Pennsylvania and Florida will be drawn as we follow these birds north during breeding season, and south for the winter season.

We will also examine some of the threats to the habitats of south Florida. We look forward to

Gene's brilliant photography and captivating presentation style!

Gene has been a member of AAS since 1972. He taught Biology at Cumberland Valley High School for 35 years, and currently teaches Biology and Environmental Science at HACC (since 1981) and Environmental Science and Biology at Dickinson College (since 1991). Gene is a familiar face in central Pennsylvania's environmental arena, and we look forward to welcoming him back!

AAS Programs (September—May) typically take place on the 3rd Thursday of each month at the **Christ Presbyterian Church, 421 Deerfield Road, in the Allendale neighborhood of Camp Hill.**

Join us at 7:00 pm for refreshments and conversation. The program begins at 7:30. *Directions to church on back page.*

Conowingo Dam Trip Promises Exciting Viewing

On November, 20, AAS will lead a trip to the Conowingo Dam, which is about eight miles north of Havre de Grace, Maryland. If you hadn't planned to go, you may want to reconsider!

Conowingo is an electricity generation plant. When the turbines are running, large intake valves draw water and fish through the dam, providing excellent feeding for fish-eating birds. (The generation schedule

is erratic and only generates when demand is high, however, there is some generation almost every day.)

According to an article by Rick Blom on the **Harford Birding Club** website, Bald Eagles are typically present from mid-October through mid-March, and are the primary attractions at the dam. Conowingo is considered one of the best places east of the Mississippi River to view Bald Eagles because the birds are nearly always present in good numbers (perhaps 30-40 in winter) and viewing is excellent.

Historically, Gull species and numbers would attract viewers—numbers would begin to build in November with the influx of Ring-billed Gulls, some years reaching 20,000, by the end of November. Today, they are not as much of a presence, however a sharp-eyed birder may spot a Lesser Black-backed Gull near the dam.

According to Les Eastman, woodland birds may be spotted along a trail that leads from the parking lot leads to the river. Hikers should be watchful for Bald Eagles along this trail as well.

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A Place for Awesome Education

"This place is awesome!" Those words were exclaimed by a fifth-grader from Perry County who was visiting Waggoner's Gap for the first time in mid-October. She was one of 20 home-schooled students from Perry County who joined me up there for a few hours with hopes of seeing large raptors with hooked beaks and sharp talons zoom by overhead.

It was a beautiful day to be on the rocks. Looking for migrating hawks, we gazed north across a multi-colored tapestry of autumn-colored trees, with a brilliant blue sky above and a fresh, cool breeze blowing from the north. The students all live in the valley below, but most had never been up to the Hawk Watch before. After what they experienced that day, I am certain many will return with family or friends.

I met them down in the parking lot, and handed out binoculars to those who didn't bring a pair from home. Our chapter has a box of them, purchased a few years ago for just this purpose with a National Audubon grant. Following a short lesson on migration and why the ridge is so important for raptors, we began our adventure up the path. Several times we stopped along the way at the trailside display signs to review the different families of raptors we might encounter: vultures, accipiters, eagles, harriers, buteos, falcons and osprey. We discussed how they all eat meat, have talons, and migrate together along the Kittatinny Ridge. Only the vultures can smell as they need that sense to find their food.

At one stop we found the distinctive scrape marks of a porcupine sharpening its teeth on the metal sign post. At another stop, a small flock of Chickadees paused in a low tree above us and had quite a conversation among themselves: "chick-a-dee-dee-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee" – then continued on their way.

While we were eating lunch on top, several low-flying Turkey Vultures ("buzzards" as the kids referred to them) were a big hit. They're a great bird for hawk-watch beginners as they soar in low circles providing plenty of time for us to find and focus them in the binoculars before they glide past.

After watching many vultures and a handful of other types of fast-flying raptors, we were getting ready to leave when one of the migration counters noticed a red-tailed hawk sitting very close in a tree watching us. How appropriate—a hawk watching us watch hawks! Everyone grabbed their binoculars and madly focused on the silent sentry. "Wow!" "That's so cool!" "Neat!" It truly was awesome.

Audubon PA has been raising money to improve the areas immediately around the Hawk Watch to provide a better facility for education experiences, group trips, and a variety of programming. Called the Cliff Jones Field Station at Waggoner's Gap, this "center" for Audubon education will make it possible to introduce this 'awesome' place to hundreds more students and their families each year. It is often said that people protect what they love, and love what they know. As more people get to know Waggoner's Gap and the work Audubon does to help protect the birds that rely upon it for nesting and migration, we'll have more people in the future supporting conservation in central Pennsylvania.

I know a few young people from Perry County who are well on their way.

In the Field with Ralph Kinter Mouse Trails in the Grass

(Originally published January 1991)

Have you ever walked in a field that has been freshly burned over, and noticed little paths in the grass? These were made by mice. The paths are well worn, running and criss-crossing each other in every direction. These paths gave the mice access to the seeds which are their main source of food.

Have you gone a step further, and examined those pathways more closely? Did you find any small pits dug at random intervals? Did you find mice feces in the pits? If you did, then these were the trails of the white-footed mice, *Peromyscus leucopus*.

On the other hand, if the pits were not found, but at irregular intervals you found small piles of mice feces along the trails, these trails were probably those of the meadow vole, *Microtus pennsylvanicus*, a short tailed mouse, also known as the field mouse.

W. J. Hamilton, Jr., in his book "The Mammals of Eastern United States" tells us that both of these fastidious little mice have developed habits of depositing their feces in one place.

Both of these mice are "harvest" mice, in that they harvest seeds and store them in convenient places for use during the lean winter months.

But the white-footed mouse will invade your home, while we have yet to find a field mouse or meadow vole inside a home.

The White-Footed Mouse

It is the habits of the white-footed mouse that we would like to discuss at this time.

Our first encounter with the white-footed mouse came when we discovered a large store of sunflower seeds behind a row of books in a bookcase. And on finding the pile of sunflower seeds, we knew, immediately, that we had white-footed mice.

Recently, we set about reconstructing a display board for use in the Audubon exhibits, using Velcro. In order to reconstruct it, we first had to dismantle it. And we had it backed with peg-board.

You can imagine our surprise to find that those little creatures had somehow managed to use those little holes for the deposit of their feces. How they managed that is a mystery, but there it was--the area between the peg-board and the display board was literally filled with mice feces.

It is this trait about the white-footed mouse that makes it an important cog in the balance of nature.

A number of years ago, at an Audubon Convention in Bellingham, WA, we had a speaker who talked about the old growth forests of the northwest. He pointed out that seeds of the fir tree fall into these white-footed



According to the Pa Game Commission, the white-footed mouse is probably the most abundant rodent in Pennsylvania. It is an important food for raptors, as this great-horned Owl can attest. Photo: USDA-NRCS



The meadow vole is easily distinguished from other mouse-like rodents due to its stocky body, short tale, and small eyes and ears. It is often a garden pest, but is food for many wild animals, and perhaps is the most important food for Barn Owls. Photo: PA Game Commission/Hal Korber

mouse pits, and germinate. It is the concentrated fertilizer of the mice which permits these seedlings to grow and thrive into mature trees. Take away the white-footed mice and most of these seedlings will fail.

- R.K.-

Conowingo Dam (continued from page 1)

Peregrine Falcons have also been seen chasing pigeons over the dam.

Visit the Harford Birding Club web site at <http://www.harfordbirdclub.org/conowingo.html> for information about how to get the best views. According to Eastman, the habitat no long supports the impressive list of shorebirds listed on the website, but it promises to be an exciting trip nonetheless.

At this writing, travel plans are still being developed. See page 4 for contact information about the trip. If you have a spotting scope, please consider taking it along. We hope that you will choose to join us.



Kingfisher Courier

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Directions to Christ Presbyterian Church,
421 Deerfield Road in the Allendale
development in Lower Allen Township:

I-83 Southbound, take exit 40B towards New
Cumberland. Stay straight, cross Carlisle
Road to Cedar Cliff Drive. Turn left onto
Allendale Way and turn left onto Deerfield
Road. The Church is on the left. Park in
second lot.

I-83 Northbound, take exit 40B, turn left onto
Carlisle Road/Simpson Ferry Road under I-
83. Turn left again at the light onto Cedar Cliff
Drive. Turn left onto Allendale Way and turn
left onto Deerfield Road. The Church is on the
left. Park in second lot.

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Inside:

Thursday, November 18th **“Three Days of Birding in** **South Florida”** **with Gene Wingert**



Why is AAS President Paul Zeph
surrounded by children? Read the
President’s Message—Page 2

Ralph Kinter’s Articles return -Pg 3

Oops! Last month’s note
about the combined issue was in error.

Next month, watch for a combined
December-January issue of the
Kingfisher Courier!

Upcoming Field Trips

Saturday, November 20

Eagles at Conowingo Dam

Watch dozens of Bald Eagles and
other birds at the Conowingo Dam
and lower Susquehanna River in
MD. To sign up, call Ed Smith at
717-960-9441 or email
esmith@navarrowright.com and
details will be provided.

Christmas Bird Counts! (CBCs)

Details may be obtained from each of the
local leaders listed below:

Harrisburg CBC--Saturday, December
18, 2010. Contact Deuane Hoffman at
717-564-7475/corvuscorax@comcast.net

New Bloomfield CBC--Sunday, Decem-
ber 26, 2010. Contact Ramsay Koury at
717-761-1871 or RKoury123@aol.com

Curtin CBC--Wednesday, December 29,
2010. Contact Scott Bills at 717-896-8859
or sbills@state.pa.us.

Newville CBC--Sunday, January 2,
2011. Contact Bill and Linda Frantz at
717-776-4463.

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