



THE DRUMMER



www.senecarocksaudubon.org

November/December, 2006

Volume 23, No. 3

Next Meeting – November 13
Room 150, Becker Hall
Social – 6:30 p.m. Program begins at 7:00 p.m.

Gil Twiest

NOVEMBER PROGRAM - MEXICO

by Gary Edwards

Once again we're being treated to an exciting Gil Twiest Travelogue. This year he'll show us the highlights of Linda and his trip to south Texas and Mexico. You'll remember that Gil had a medical emergency that shortened their trip, but he's promised not to show pictures of his hospital stay. Bring a friend and enjoy the always great scenery, birds, mammals, and more as seen through the lens of a top-notch photographer. I promise you won't be sorry you came.

DECEMBER PROGRAM – MEMBER'S NIGHT

In keeping with tradition, the program for December's meeting will be provided by you, the artistic and creative members of this fine organization. You are invited to show slides, give a power point presentation, provide a narrative, a show & tell, or otherwise entertain the rest of the group. Please try to limit your presentations to less than ten minutes so that we have time for everyone. Also, if you know you'll be presenting, please let me know at the

November meeting or email me at gedwards@csonline.net with the particulars (title of presentation, length, equipment needs, etc.). It's your opportunity to educate or tickle us with your experiences. See you there. 🐼🐼



Presque Isle State Park Fall Migrant Field Trip November 19, 2006 at 9:00 A.M.

by Jim Wilson

Bartramian and Seneca Rocks Audubon Societies will meet at Presque Isle State Park for a joint fall migrant field Trip.

We meet inside Presque Isle Park in Erie. It is approx. 100 miles from Clarion by way of Meadville. From Clarion, take Rt. 322 West to Interstate 79 at Meadville. At the end of I-79 in Erie, take Rt. 20 West (26th St.) to Rt. 832 North, which becomes Peninsula Drive. There is a McDonald's on the right after you cross Rt. 5.

Our meeting place (Vista one Parking Lot) is a large parking lot on the right about a mile after you see the Presque Isle State Park sign. It is the first obvious place to scope Presque Isle Bay.

Fall migration at Presque Isle is best in November/December. It is usually windy on Presque Isle, and the weather can change quickly. Dress for winter weather.

Restaurants

There are a number of restaurants along Peninsula Drive and East on both Rt. 5 and 20. Also, at Mill Creek Mall and the interchange with I-90 and Peach Street, you will find a wide range of restaurants.

Restrooms

Most restrooms in the park will probably be closed. The park office, the Stull Interpretive Center and the boat launch restrooms should be open. If not, there is McDonald's on the way in.

Birdseed Sale Report

by Janice Horn

Beginning on Wed., Nov. 8th you can pick up the bird food that you ordered at Agway. You have until Sat., Nov. 18th to do that.

This year 40 people ordered 5,683 lbs., almost 3 tons. The total dollar amount for the orders is \$2,249.85. This isn't our best year for orders, but it's pretty good. In years past we are indebted to Pete Dalby for all of his work getting orders from numerous friends of Audubon. Many of these people have become accustomed to placing orders on their own, but a lot of others haven't "gotten with the program".

Thanks to everyone who has placed an order.



The Drumming Log

by President Deb Freed

Conservation projects come in all sizes, to fit just about anyone's time frame and interest.

One of our annual projects is the cleaning and repair or replacement of blue bird nest boxes at Beaver Creek. This year, a small crew completed the fall project. Jim Wilson generously contributed the wood and built new boxes. Jim Wilson, Gary Edwards, Carl Rowe and Deb Freed met at Beaver Creek on a beautiful fall day in October. While checking boxes a few resident mice surprised us. One nest was carefully lined with feathers and had the unhatched eggs still cupped in the soft bed. One wonders what happened to the adults. We talked about the tall grasses growing around the posts and tramped them down to reduce the predator cover. We talked about various box designs and maintenance for the spring. It was a satisfying morning.

Next June, SRAS and Clarion University will partner on a larger scale to sponsor a conference, Bird Conservation on Non-native Grasslands. Conference chairs, Genny Nesslage and Gary Edwards are in the planning stages with a small committee. They would greatly appreciate more help closer to the conference dates of June 1 & 2, 2007. The SRAS website will have conference

information posted in the coming month. As you learn more about the event, you just may find some way to help out.

Whether small or large, conservation projects are important. Find your niche and pitch-in. You'll become part of the Seneca Rocks tradition of year round activities.



Allegheny Front Hawkwatch October 26-27, 2006

By Flo McGuire

Our annual 2-day field trip to the Allegheny Front Hawkwatch was an exciting one. Jerry Stanley met SRAS members there on Thursday, when the weather was fairly good, and activity (predictably) was pretty slow. Those who stayed until a little after 4 pm, however, were treated to the sight of 2 Golden Eagles. On Friday, we had an easterly wind, which Jerry explained was the best, because the ridge runs north-south – the wind hitting the ridge head-on goes up, creating an updraft, which the raptors just love to sail through. Total count for Friday was 170, compared to 151 for Thursday; on Friday, almost twice as many red-tails were counted, 3 additional golden eagles, and a merlin. The biggest difference between the 2 days was not the number of raptors, but the fact that on Thursday most of the birds were out in the valley and hard to spot, while on Friday the majority of raptors flew right over our heads.

So, how can you tell the difference between those little black specks coming at you across the gray

October sky? One clue, according to Jerry, is that the large raptors will not move their wings much. If you see a bird that seems to be just lazily moving its wings every now and then, keep your eyes on it – it is likely to be an eagle. A Golden Eagle will look smaller-headed and longer-tailed than a Bald Eagle. Most of us can separate buteos from accipiters by the heavier bodies, longer wings and shorter tails. Jerry says that at this time of the year at the Allegheny Front, 95% of the buteos will be Red-tailed Hawks, but – look for a buteo that has comparatively smaller wings, because it may be a Red-shouldered. Two excellent hawk books are recommended by Jerry: *Hawks in Flight* by Pete Dunne, David Sibley and Clay Sutton, a book from 1988 which can now be found very reasonably on the internet; and a new book, *Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors In Flight* by Jerry Liguori. For more tips, join us next time. This hawkwatcher finds hawks to be an identification challenge as well as an endurance challenge (worst weather = best birds), but how can you measure the rewards of seeing a magnificent Golden Eagle with a 79” wingspan soaring over your head on its way from its breeding grounds in Canada?

Hawkwatchers on Thursday were: Jerry Stanley, Jim Wilson, Gary Edwards, Ron and Judy Montgomery, Carl and Joanne Rowe and friend John, and Flo and Jim McGuire. Five of us stayed overnight at the Shawnee Motor Inn, had a delicious dinner (complete with ghost story) at the Jean Bonnet Tavern, a Lincoln Highway Landmark, and returned to the Front on Friday.

The Allegheny Front Hawkwatch is maintained by members of the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society, and is manned every day for 3 months in the fall and 2 months in the spring. The site is known for its Golden Eagle migration which is frequently the second highest in the United States. The Broad-winged Hawk migration peaks here in September, when 8,000 have been seen in one day. This “ancestral highway” is only 2½ hours from Clarion – well worth the trip.



Dan Brauning and Gary Edwards ~
Piney Tract Dedication 10/11/2006

Grasslanders and Ridgerunners

Article and Photo by John C. Street

Grateful acknowledgement to John Street for the use of this article, originally published in Keystone Outdoors in the Jan/Feb 2001 issue.

Early morning sunshine splashes across the shag of untended field, an illuminating brightness not yet strengthened to take away the chill. All around, ventriloquial voices join a chorus of sound, a swelling tempo and then, with the shadowy passage of soaring predatory wings, momentary silence until the avian hunter glides over the horizon.

The foe's passing, like a conductor's arm down stroking for crescendo, reignites the voices. A brave solo *tsi-lick* opens the chorus and it spreads until nearly every grassy hummock erupts. Individual species, recognizable at their vocal reentry, are soon lost in the cacophony of sound. Only an occasional *chip, chip sheeee* breaks out of the rising melody.

Tiny baskets of woven nests have sprouted with the newly greening grasslands, illustrations of the imperative of spring, the season that brings many visitors, including the camouflaged intruder blended into the woodline listening for the approach of another, much larger bird. Procreation, vocalized by hundreds of avian voices, dominates the senses.

This old reclaimed strip mine was previously mocked as a "moonscape." Now, however, it is demonstrating the resilience of nature by creating

an eastern suburb for many bird species driven out of their native, western lands by modern agricultural practices and an exploding human population.

While not the reason for the cameoed visitor to be here this day, the abundance of grassland bird species intrudes into his subconscious. Already the Henslow's and grasshopper sparrows have signed in with their distinct voices. Then comes the lisp *tzip, tzip* of the Savannah sparrow and from the lower marshy areas, the *whooleeee wheeloooo* of the upland plover.

These 3,000 acres of reclaimed strip mine in southern Clarion County have become a proclamation to the ability of nature to adopt and heal. Though containing none of the plants and grasses – legumes, bentgrass or bluestem – normally associated with western prairies, the fescues and bird's foot trefoil serve quite nicely. Unfortunately, however, disturbing trends are beginning to emerge as well.

The voluntarily introduced plaque of multiflora rose, originally planted to prevent soil erosion, has taken a strong foothold. Combined with red and Scotch pine and the prolific locust, this musical grassland may soon be overgrown. Tellingly, the population of Henslow's sparrows, according to the latest Grassland Breeding Bird Survey, is already in decline.

That this haven for wildlife exists at all, however, is a conservationist's history lesson. The Surface Mining and Control Act, marshaled through an unreceptive Congress in 1977 by Morris Udall, forced resource extractors to rehabilitate the site of their diggings and to establish the very vegetation that now threatens this eastern prairie habitat and its new occupants.

These scarred acres, splotched across the landscape of seven townships, face other threats and not all are as benign or manageable as the invading multiflora rose or the dozen or so acid mine discharges that dot the site. In the mid 1980s, about the time the newly arrived grassland bird species were being discovered, a motor sports park was proposed for this land.

The same qualities – seemingly worthless real estate and remoteness – that attracted the upland plovers and the Savannah, Henslow's

and grasshopper sparrows, were seen as the essential attributes of a raceway. Today, while the concept of a motor sports park has died, many in this rural area still believe it should be the designated site for industrial growth. Out of sight, they reason, out of mind.

But there are other people who see this land as a different kind of opportunity. Margaret Buckwalter, a retired Clarion University Librarian who wrote the Important Bird Area (IBA) document for this property, “would like to see the tract justified as a Grassland Bird Area.” Arguably, Margaret believes, it is a “unique opportunity to study the reproductive success of grassland bird communities in these mini eastern prairies.”



Grasshopper Sparrow photo by Gary Edwards

Margaret, an outdoor enthusiast long before women were associated with such endeavors, has a long association with the avian community. She recalls a letter from 1932 that her mother wrote to her uncle that told of “pictures of birds all over my bedroom walls.” It is Margaret’s belief that “we’re not going to get old growth forests on these strip mines.” Consequently, she questions, “why not save them simply for the biodiversity they nurture?”

For these “little eastern prairies,” time is running out to answer this question. Walt Fye, credited with discovering the first Henslow’s, Savannah and grasshopper sparrows here in the early 1980s, believes these grasslands “will be lost within five years if large tracts aren’t brushhogged and treated with herbicides.” His request

for spot application of herbicides can’t be viewed as unreasonable if this “grand experiment in eastern grasslands” is to survive.

Walt, whose birding accomplishments also include formal reporting of the first nesting Dickcissels on this property in 1983, is the holder of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service banding permit and is the former Chair of the local Conservation District and the current Chair of the Clarion Office of the Alliance for Wetlands. Regardless of the public’s perception of herbicides, Walt’s commitment to this land and its birds is unquestionable.

The quantity of these grassland species is the reason this eastern prairie setting should be preserved according to Dan Brauning, non-game bird specialist with the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the original editor of the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas Newsletter. Every June, three dozen Pennsylvania grassland routes are surveyed by volunteers. On these Clarion County sites, the count can go as high as 800 birds. This is “the densest population and the largest diversification of species of any site in Pennsylvania,” according to Dan.

In addition to the volunteers who provide the raw census data, Dan believes this Clarion County site also represents “unique opportunities for research.” He was referring to the graduate level students from Penn State, West Virginia and Clarion Universities who study here because of the species variety. And there are many aspects to their research.

“What we have here,” Dr. Pete Dalby from the Biology Department of Clarion University explains, “is a little prairie surrounded by a woods full of predators.” While this seems like a statement of the obvious, it is also an encapsulation of the unknowns driving the research.

“Grassland bird species, especially low-ground nesters, didn’t evolve with some of our predators. We don’t know,” Pete added thoughtfully, “the reproductive success of grassland species in these mini prairies. In contained environments like this, we have the opportunity to look at the process of plant successions, but more importantly,” he added, “to learn how to manage

these ecosystems as eastern refugiums for the misplaced western species.”

An equally important value according to Pete “is the diversity and quantity of habitats, many of which are defined by seemingly intangible things like soil type, slope and sun exposure.” Wistfully, he adds, “there is so much we don’t know and probably so little time to learn.”

Saving these eastern prairies can’t come a moment too soon. Traditional western grasslands, once stretching from the Mississippi to the foot of the Rocky Mountains and up into Canada are nearly gone. Estimates of this loss run as high as 99 percent, something like 90 million acres according to the writing of John Carey in the June/July issue of National Wildlife. Each acre of eastern grassland, therefore, takes on added importance.

“In ball-park figures,” according to Dan Brauning, “there are 43,000 hectares [2.4 acres per hectare] of reclaimed strip mines planted in grasses in western Pennsylvania.” Ironically, although there are some public holdings like State Game Lands 158 in Cambria County and State Game Land 72 in northern Clarion County that are planted in warm season grasses, most of Pennsylvania’s “mini-prairies” are privately owned. “Of the thirty-five routes covered each June for the Grassland Breeding Bird Survey,” Dan explained, “only a handful encompass public land.”

Margaret and Dan and Pete and Walt, none of whose names appear on the property’s deed, have found something worth saving in this reclaimed landscape, something that may have to be intensely managed to survive but that is unquestionably worth the effort. Unfortunately, management depends on ownership and that issue remains unanswered.

While the commitment and interest of these ridgerunners – now turned grassland – birders is evident, these things are not on the camouflaged visitor’s mind this morning. For several hundred yards his quarry has verbalized his interest in the pleading hen hiding in the brush at the edge of the woods.

The number of this gobbler’s offspring nourished on the insect life of these rough grown fields is

probably staggering as would be the number of grouse broods fed in these grasses. So prompted by consumptive motives, the visitor has learned that what is good for the grassland birds is also good for game birds.

Perhaps in a moment the musical notes of the Henslow’s sparrow or the haunting call of the upland plover will intrude into his thoughts again, helping to balance the questions of survival that its advocates are asking. But at this particular moment, the singular value of this land is strutting up the woods line, soon perhaps in range.

And that, on this sunny morning, is enough.

Editor’s Notes: *Many old-time birders may know the upland plover, which is now called the upland sandpiper. Dan Brauning was the Project Coordinator for the (first) Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas in addition to editing the newsletter.*

Clarion Christmas Bird Count

Mark your calendar for the twentieth Clarion CBC, which will be on Saturday, December 30, 2006. Please come to the December meeting or contact Deb Freed about your count area. We will continue the tradition of meeting at BJ’s Eatery for supper and tallying. Join us and become a part of the original citizen science project.

For 106 years, volunteers have been collecting information on the birds in their communities. The CBC database now contains more than a century of data on early-winter bird populations across the Americas. This one-day annual event is an opportunity to meet other local volunteers, hone your birding skills, and take part in a seasonal tradition.

To view the data and some interesting charts, see the Audubon Christmas Bird Count website at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/index.html>. For example, Tufted Titmouse range expansion is shown by maps for each decade at “What we’re learning”.

Last year, we were the only CBC in Pennsylvania to find a Snowy Owl. Can we top that? See you on December 30!



NAS Board Meeting

At a recent National Audubon Society Board Meeting, a significant amount of meeting time was devoted to global warming and wind energy development. Alan Wilson, Chair of the Conservation Committee, led a discussion on a refined Audubon Framework for engaging on the broad issue of global warming focusing on Audubon's key strengths.

- Science - birds as indicators
- People - motivating individual action
- Grass Roots - build policy capacity
- Field Presence - work at local, state and national levels

As part of the Framework, the Board adopted the following Principles to guide our actions:

- Global warming is a serious and present threat to people, birds and other wildlife. The U.S. should adopt a clear national policy to proactively reduce the threat of global warming.
- Adopt quantitative and mandatory domestic reduction targets for all greenhouse gases with a credible system to measure emissions and track progress.
- Use economic incentives as well as mandates to achieve the reduction targets.
- Increase research and implementation of safe and cleaner technology and energy production.
- The U.S. should assume a global leadership position to address this threat to human and ecosystem health.
- Local and State governments should take aggressive actions on their own or with regions. The cumulative impact of many actions will make a difference in both combating global warming and creating political demand for action.

During the discussion on global warming, the Board also agreed that Audubon has a unique role to play in the ongoing debate on wind energy.



Now I see the secret of the making of the best person. It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the lark.

~Walt Whitman

Scott Weidensaul

Jamestown High School, Nov 15, 7:00 pm

The Roger Tory Peterson Institute is presenting a lecture by Scott Weidensaul. In 1953, Roger Tory Peterson and noted British naturalist James Fisher set out on what became a legendary journey - a 100-day trek over 30,000 miles around North America. Two years later, *Wild America*, their classic account of the trip, was published. On the eve of that book's 50th anniversary, naturalist Scott Weidensaul retraces their steps to tell the story of wild America today, in his book *Return to Wild America: A Yearlong Search for the Continent's Natural Soul*. How has the continent's natural landscape changed over the past fifty years? Find out during this fascinating program. For more information contact Jim Berry at 800-758-6841 ext. 225, or email jberry@rtpi.org. Cost \$7; RTPI members \$5. Books will be available for author signing.



Audubon Camp in Maine

Are you interested in a vacation to Hog Island? The 2007 schedule is out, and offers some surprises - "Joy of Birding" with Scott Weidensaul; an Elderhostel Nature Writing Workshop; a Yoga Retreat. Hog Island offers a diversity of programs to people of all ages. Adult, teen, youth, and family sessions focus upon one's sense of ecological appreciation, knowledge, and call to action. 2006 marked the addition of interpretive programs for day visitors as well as half-day cruises to see Atlantic Puffins and other coastal wildlife.

There is an early registration discount for most Residential Sessions if you book before December 1, 2006. For more information: <http://www.naturecompass.org/fohi/programs/preview2007.html>



We're pretty proud of this *Drummer* - notice that it debuts our new Masthead with our new Logo!! Many thanks to the Logo Committee for their creative efforts.

This is a combined November-December issue - our next *Drummer* will be out in mid-January to announce the February program - we may also have a January activity.

Audubon Calendars will be available at the November meeting for those who ordered. There will be some extras, also, for \$10 each.

Hosts for Upcoming Meetings:

Nov 13 - Judy & Ron Montgomery
 Dec 11 - Shirley Monrean and Walt Fye
 ~~Thanks to Kathy Pokrifka for hosting our
 October meeting.



SRAS Board Members

<u>Deb Freed</u> , President, Membership	226-4719
<u>Gary Edwards</u> , Vice-president, Programs	676-3011
<u>Dennis Beaver</u> , Secretary/Publicity	676-6564
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Seneca Rocks Audubon Society