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The Newsletter of the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society

From the President

The year 2020 will forever be known as the year of COVID-19. Nearly everyone's life has been altered during this pandemic. Many have lost their jobs, while others have been deemed essential workers. Regardless, most have followed some type of emergency guidelines. At the APAS, we are a non-profit organization made-up of all volunteers. Our work is completed because we deem it essential.

Despite canceling nearly every in-person activity, the important work of collecting data has commenced uninterrupted. The Allegheny Front Hawk Watch continued to count hawks, albeit without the public's participation; the butterfly count was conducted by individuals instead of groups; and the Christmas Bird Count was a solitary affair that lacked the celebration dinner at the end of the day. Owl banding, which is already relegated to a small group of die-hard individuals, became smaller and more dispersed.

Workdays were also altered so that projects could be completed alone or while distancing with a few trusted others. The grass continued to get cut, the invasive plants pulled, trees removed, undergrowth kept in check, and construction work was completed.

We also used virtual and electronic media to keep our mandate to educate our membership and the public at large. Doing so required us to build a new website that was more interactive and could be updated quickly. We created a video series that kept our membership informed and hopefully brought the feeling of community through the screen. We even held our first virtual meeting with Kate St. John, who elaborated on Peregrine Falcons.

In the background, as always, tedious paperwork needed completing. Grants needed writing, schedules needed making (and canceling), newsletters needed printing, board meetings needed running, and so on...

As we head into the new year, vaccines are on the way and the hope of meeting in person looms as a prophecy. Until then, we must ensure that we make it through the next couple of months. And while the events planned for spring are tentative and will most likely be altered, we will emerge from this pandemic. Hopefully, we will be wiser, more empathetic, and more committed to each other and our shared values. Please practice appropriate pandemic behaviors and I look forward to seeing each of you as soon as it is safe!

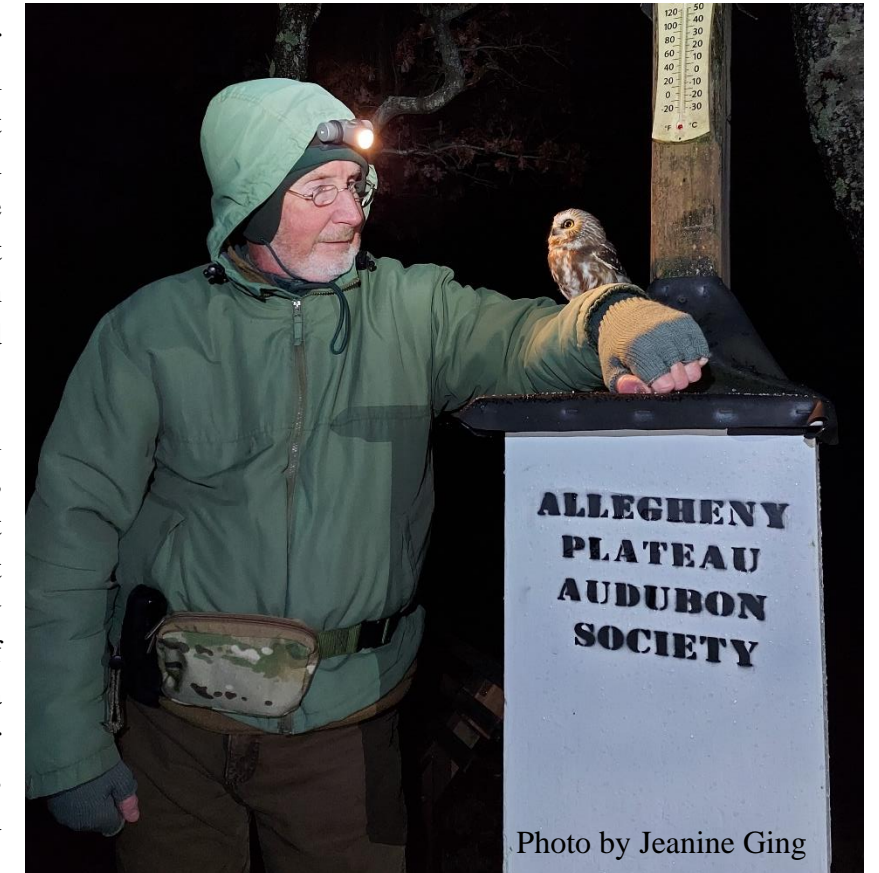


Photo by Jeanine Ging

Wayne Sierer is an essential worker at the APAS.

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Brian M. Wargo

Getting to Know Saw-whet Owls

By Rosemary McGlynn

At the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch, led by Dave Darney, we have been fortunate to participate in banding these feathery creatures during migration. Recently I discovered an article describing one Alaskan couple's experience with Saw-whets in breeding season, so I wanted to share a glimpse of another season in the owl's life.

Nancy Pfeiffer and her husband Fredrik Norrsell live in a cabin in the woods outside Palmer, Alaska north of Anchorage. From March through June in 2019 they watched and photographed a pair of the little owls raising their family. The owls utilized a nesting box just off the back porch and seemed relatively unphased by human activity, something we have noticed at banding time.

In early March, Fredrik heard the "whet-what-what" of a male establishing his territory and trying to attract a mate. By April 1st, a female had moved into the box. While she incubated the eggs, the male delivered a collection of shrews, voles and small birds. The female left the box only once each night in the early evening. She returned within minutes and did not bring prey. The male seldom entered the nest box; but merely dropped off food and flew away.



A Saw-whet Owl brings food back to the owl box.

By early May, the 28-day incubation ended, and the eggs hatched. The female stayed in the box feeding the chicks. The male dropped off prey, announcing his arrival with a soft "whet-what" call. With four hungry owlets to feed it wasn't long before both parents were hunting. On the night of June 3, Fredrik observed the parents bringing 16 voles and shrews in a 4-hour period.

On June 6, a small, round head poked out of the box. Bright yellow eyes took their first peek at the world. Before long Nancy and Fredrik could recognize individual owlets by their size (eggs were laid/hatched several days apart) and distinct white facial markings. The owlets displayed an interesting behavior. They would stick their heads out of the box and bob back and forth in a rhythmic, dance-like motion (uh-huh, uh-huh). Apparently, this helps teach them to focus their eyes on different depths.

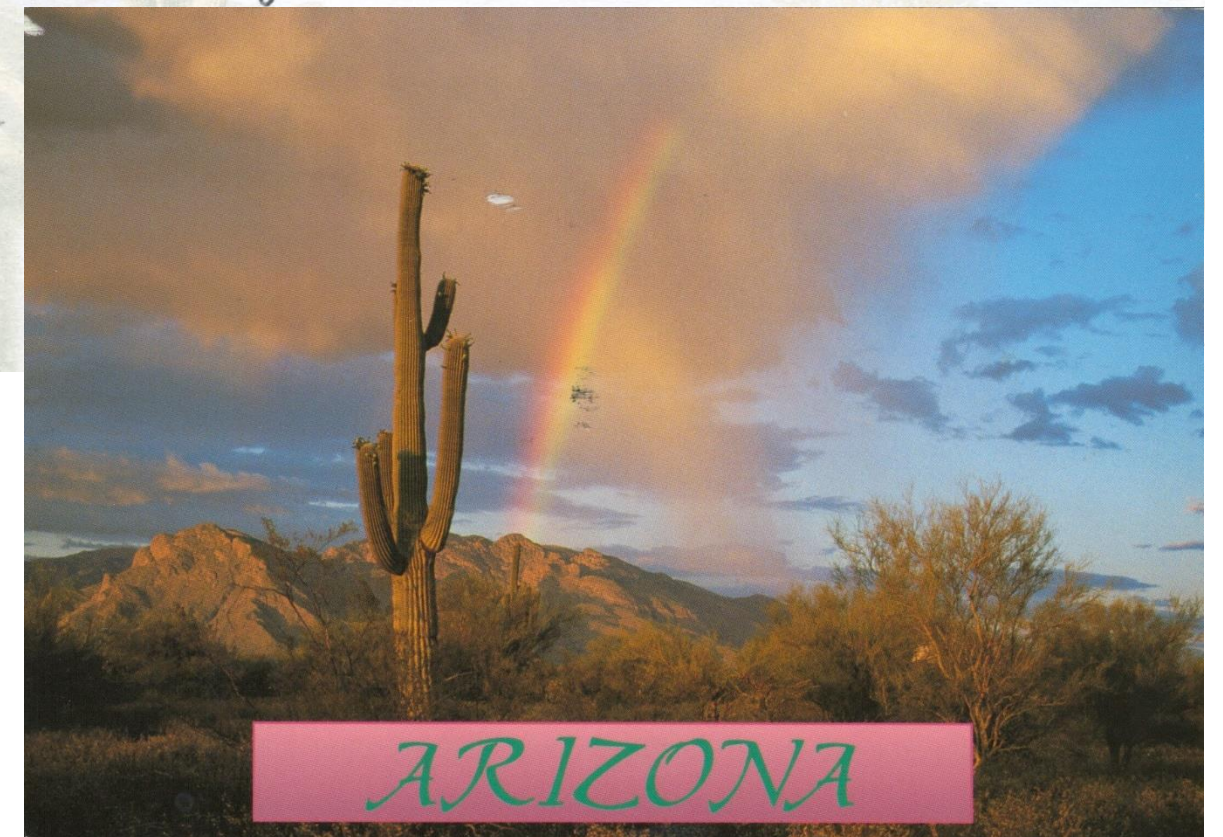
By June 16, only one fledgling remained in the nest; its siblings stayed in nearby trees. The "doting mom" had flown the coop! In good years of prey abundance, she might find a new mate and raise a second brood. The male continued to feed the fledglings and teach them to hunt for another month. By the end of June, all four young owls were hiding in the forest near each other, about a hundred yards from their nesting box.

Over the fall and winter, Nancy and Fredrik saw an occasional owl, or signs of owl activity. In the spring of 2020, weather conditions and deep snow forced the birds to find better territory. But, Nancy and Fredrik are hopeful of having many more Saw-whet summers.

Postcards from Ima Crazi

By Bob Stewart

Shown here is a postcard from our Allegheny Hawk Watch friend, Ima Crazi. Ima traveled frequently and sent post cards to Che Mincone, the compiler at the time. She was a frequent visitor to the hawk watch. She signed the visitor's book but NEVER revealed her identity. Che has shared many of these postcards. In the future I hope to share several more of these to delight our members.



The History of the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch

By Jim Rocca

With the passing of Bob Gorsuch, one of the original counters, I started thinking of all the people who helped establish the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch (AFHW). The people who have passed on include:

Ruth and Glen Sager, who were original members of the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society (APAS). It was Ruth that taught me a lot of what I know about raptors.

Dave Eschterich, another original APAS member who was also a counter for a few years. Dave, with his friend Perry, were responsible for clearing the large trees over the escarpment.

Dean Jobe was another counter and was also the compiler for the AFHW. for a few years. Dean's claim to fame was that on a slow day of counting, he leaned against one of the trees next to the picnic table and said, "I can hear them coming!" Just then we looked up and there were two Bald Eagles coming around the point.

Tony Barley was also a counter who always had a joke or a funny story to share. Tony also dubbed the name of the three small ridges north of the watch the three sisters.

Tom Bodenschutz was a counter and Vice President of the APAS. He counted with his wife Debbie.

Reta Payne another original APAS member, was secretary for a few years and counted with her husband Jeff.

Lee Tosh was an observer and a retired teacher. She was also a cook and would show up on Fridays with coffee and cookies and hot soup for the counter and whoever was there. On Friday nights when owl banding was going on, she would supply hot chocolate, coffee, cookies, and soup for Dave Darney and the people who were there to help or observe the banding.

Chuck and Joanie Tague were another couple who were counters. They came from Powder Mill bird banding and the National Aviary.



This photo is courtesy of Gene Flament (center) with his daughter Amanda. Tony Barley is on the left and Chi Mincone is on the right.

Other people who contributed to the hawk watch were:

Neil Woffinden, a retired professor from University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.

Che and Marion Mincone - Che was the compiler for the hawk watch for years.

Gene and Nancy Flament - Gene built the benches that sit over the edge of the watch. Nancy always had cookies or brownies to share.

Other counters include:

Karen and Merle Jackson, Dick Byers, Ken Byerly, Mark McConaughy, Eric Hall, Tim Anderson, Bill and Vickey Judd. Tom and Janet Kuehl are still observers at the hawk watch.

Jeff Payne and his wife Retta Payne (mentioned above) were counters who always brought their sons, Christopher and Matthew, and who would be found under the picnic table playing with their toy dinosaurs.

Debbie Bodenschutz and her husband Tom (mentioned above) counted for years and now Debbie is one of our regular counters.

Kevin Georg and Ron Rovanseck started counting on Tussey Mountain with other people. From there they moved across the valley to what was then Colonel Gage's cabin. The count was conducted from there for a few years. From there the watch was moved up the ridge to Andy Cobin's property. He let us clear a small section. The watch was conducted from there for a couple of years.

Tom and Sally Dick, along with their son **Christopher** (a newly appointed board member), purchased the land where the hawk watch is now located. Tom and Sally not only established the hawk watch but were counters for many years. They are now retired and living in Chincoteague, Virginia. If it wasn't for Tom and Sally, there probably would not be an Allegheny Front Hawk Watch. I think we all owe them a thank you for them giving us a great place to count hawks.

Other people who have contributed to the success of the hawk watch are our spotters, including **Joe Sabo**, who is excellent with his scope at identifying hawks and eagles, **Nancy Ott, Ralph Yoder, Ed Gowarty Jr., Jack Julian, Wayne Sierer, Kim Van Fleet, Jeanine Ging, and Brian Wargo**, who also help **Dave Darney** with the owl banding. Our newest spotters are **Adam Katrancha** and **Greg Gdula** who supply a lot of the manual labor at the watch. Thanks guys! Oh, and of course **Mike Lanzone** and **Trish Miller** with the Golden Eagle research at AFHW. Our present counters include. **Bob Stewart**, our present compiler, **Debbie Bodenschutz, Brian Wargo, Jim Rocca, Rosemary McGlynn, Dave Poder, and Ed Gowarty Sr.**

If I missed anyone, I apologize. Trying to remember for thirty years is not easy!



Photo courtesy of Gene Flament

Rosemary McGlynn at the Hawkwatch 15-years ago.

2020 Allegheny Front Hawk Watch Fall Count

By Bob Stewart

The watch commenced on August 15th and continued through December 30th. It was manned for 721 hours with a total season count of 12,132 raptors. This equates to 16.83 raptors per hour, or 3.89 raptors per hour when Broad-winged Hawks are excluded. December results had only 15 raptors observed over 14 days of counting.

This year was a very trying and dangerous one for our team members. A new contagion referred to as a corona virus spread throughout the globe, infecting and killing many in our local area. Our determined counters wanted to continue to record the migration and they worked to limit their interaction and potential spread. All season, the gate was closed and visitors were not admitted. Although the number of infected sky-rocketed and cases were reported locally, we were able to remain virus-free.

For the second consecutive year we were blessed to have a robust Broad-wing Hawk flight. There were 9326 Broad-wings, well above the 10-year average of 5681. Red-tailed Hawks were near the 10-year average. The Osprey flight was 54 for the season, the smallest in over 20 years. All species of falcons had a very large drop. American Kestrels numbered 31 (the 10-year average is 63). Only 13 Merlins were seen (the 10-year average is 30). The 21 Peregrine Falcons noted a low value, where the 10-year average is 29.

All species of accipiters were drastically lower this year. Sharp-shinned hawks numbered 658 (the 10-year average is 1215). Cooper's Hawks numbered 82 (the 10-year average is 164). Rounding out the accipiters were 3 Northern Goshawks. The Northern Harrier count of 40 was a nice bounce back from 29 in 2019. Red-shouldered Hawks numbered 67, well above the 10-year average of 46.



Photo by Dave Poder



Photo by Dave Poder

© David Poder

Above: This amazing shot of a juvenile Bald Eagle wondering where all the visitors at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch have gone!

Left: A juvenile Northern Harrier is captured at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch as the sun begins to descend behind the trees.

The Bald Eagle count of 151 was the lowest in the last four years. Golden Eagle numbers also decreased this year to 186, below the 10-year average of 206. The first Golden Eagle came early on September 7th and was recorded by Debbie Bodenschatz. The next golden didn't appear until October 18th when Bob Stewart recorded seven on that day. On October 31st, Brian Wargo recorded 32 Golden Eagles, the highest count day of the season. Jim Rocco had 26 Golden Eagles on November 10th. Ten Golden Eagles were counted in December.

This concludes our twenty-fourth year of an hourly fall count at our current site on Shaffer Mountain. We all have enjoyed the time viewing the annual migration. Thanks goes to Tom Dick for his generosity in purchasing this property so we all can witness the annual miracle of migration. I would like to express my appreciation to our counters: Debbie Bodenschatz, Ed Gowarty, Rosemary McGlynn, Dave Poder, Jim Rocco, Wayne Sierer, Bob Stewart, and Brian Wargo.

Pawpaw – The Tree and its Fruit

By Bob Stewart

Although I am unaware of any native pawpaw in our region, I have developed a curiosity about the tree. The scientific name for the pawpaw is *Asimina triloba*. It is our only native member of a large, mainly tropical plant family *Annonoaceae*. The pawpaw is a small understory tree, and it produces the large edible fruit in North America. It is found from eastern Texas to Florida and north to southern Ontario. The tree may achieve a height of about twenty feet and the leaves are compound and very large. Trees may be grown from seeds or grafted plants. It takes four to eight years to fruit from seed plantings and three or more years from grafted plants.



Deer avoid browsing pawpaw leaves and branches. Reduced deer browsing has two benefits to the pawpaw. The first is that pawpaw doesn't need to exert energy to recover from browsing. The second is that frequent deer browsing on saplings and shrubs preferred by the species helps support the growth and reproduction of the pawpaw.

The fruit resembles a green baking potato and may grow in clusters. The skin color may vary from green to brown. The seeds are dark and similar in size to the almond. They are many and scattered randomly in the fruit. These seeds, along with the skin can be toxic to humans. To produce fruit, the blossoms must receive pollen from a different pawpaw tree. The insect pollinators include flies and beetles. Hikers, birds, and wild animals, including opossums, foxes, squirrels, and racoons, enjoy the fruit.



Humans deploy different methods to enjoy the fruit. One may cut the fruit in half across the middle and squeeze the fluid into your mouth. Then spit out any seeds. Another method is to cut the fruit and spoon out the pulp like custard, spitting out the seeds as needed. Pawpaw can be used to make bread, craft beer, wines, ice cream, and jam. The fruit has a tropical flavor some describe as banana, mango, or vanilla custard. It is an incredibly healthy fruit with antioxidant properties. It reduces inflammation, fights disease, and may make you look younger.

Several APAS members have connections to the pawpaw. Mike and Laura Jackson have trees on their property, while Jack Gilbert and Bob Stewart have saplings. Eileen Gilbert has prepared many foods with pawpaw including bread, pies, and jam, and Jim Rocco has even recited a traditional American folk song about harvesting of the pawpaws.

Two-Person Raptor

By Dave Poder

Taking a good photo of a falcon or accipiter as it jets through our Allegheny Front Hawk Watch is not easy to do. So, when it happens, it's especially rewarding.

This fall, I was happy that I quickly managed to get a few "keeper" pictures of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, an American Kestrel and a Merlin. The problem is that these raptors come across our hawk watch so fast that I like to think of them as two-person raptors - one person to exclaim, "Here it comes!" and the other to say, "There it goes!"

Fortunately for me, I was able to capture these raptors in the photos as "Here it comes!" was being said.

Editor's note: Dave Poder regularly shares his photography tricks with visitors at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch. When the pandemic is over, come out and see him at work!

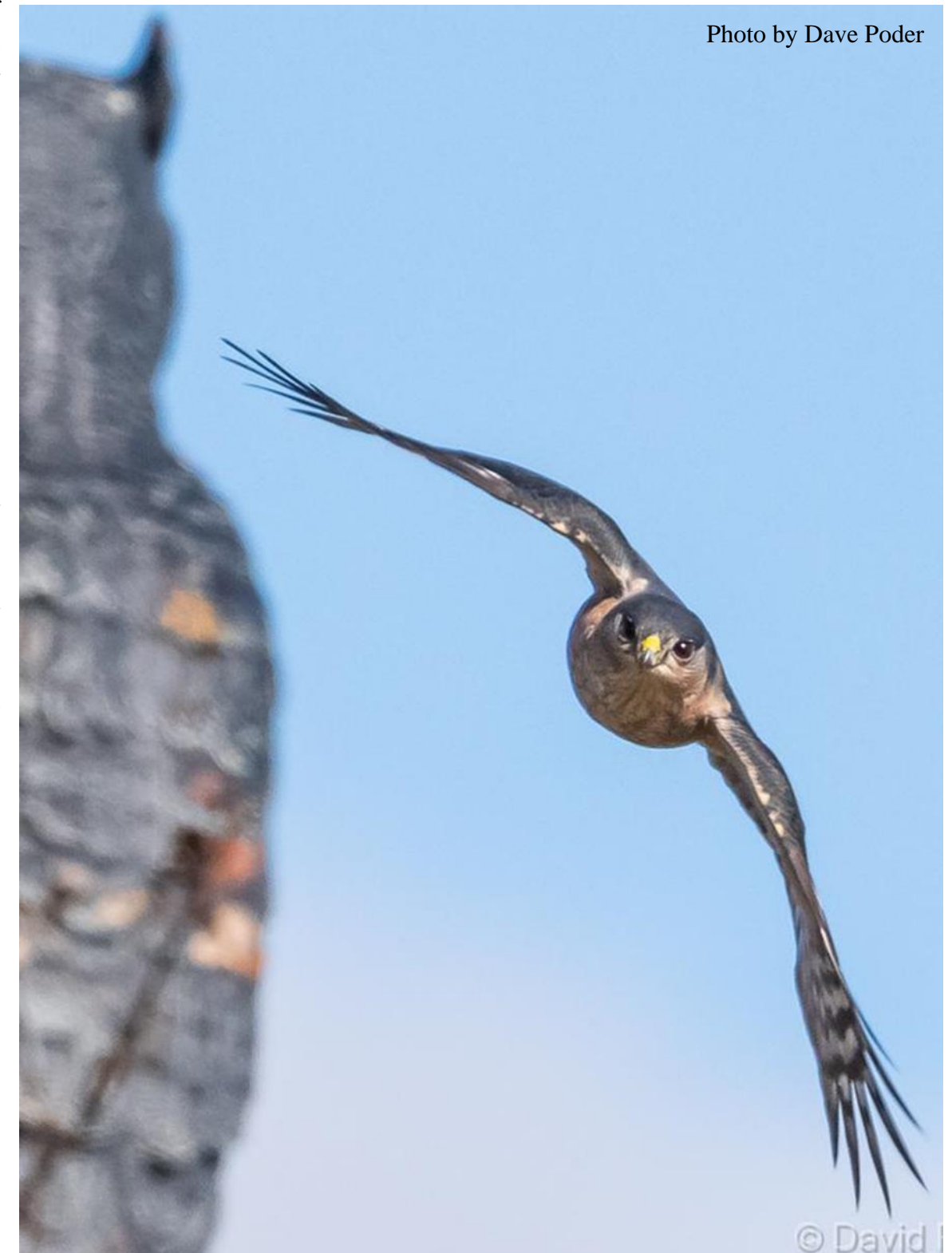


Photo by Dave Poder

A Sharp-shinned Hawk comes in to attack the owl decoy.

Kate St. John – APAS's First Virtual Meeting

By Brian M. Wargo

The COVID-19 pandemic required that our meetings at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown be canceled or conducted virtually. Thankfully, our members and our speaker agreed to the later solution. On Thursday, October 15, 2020, at 7:00 p.m., the APAS held its first virtual meeting using Google Meet.

Despite our demographic being a bit older and less technically savvy than the younger generations, dozens of members logged in. For many, it was their first experience using the technology. Aside from a few members who had conductivity issues, the program delivered by Kate St. John was a success.

Kate's presentation focused on Peregrine Falcons and their plight over the last century, as well as their successful reintroduction. Several breeding pairs were tracked from their home in western Pennsylvania all over the eastern United States.

Overall, the presentation was a hit, and the APAS has more virtual events this spring!



Photo courtesy of Kate St. John

Kate St. John has been following Peregrine Falcons for many years.

Twenty Years of Owl Banding at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch

By Jeanine Ging

The fall of 2020 marks the 20th year of Dave Darney banding owls at Allegheny Front Hawk Watch. Dave and his few assistants worked behind a closed gate this season to continue the work of gathering data on Saw-whet Owls. It turned out to be one of the better years in recent history with 96 Saw-whet Owls being banded. It was a good year all around the area with many banders getting higher numbers of owls than in recent years. Through weekends in October and most of November, Dave and his crew sat patiently in the woods waiting for the arrival of the owls. The rewards were plentiful with one particular night of 29 owls and two foreign recaptures.

One of those recaptures was a female from near Ellenville, New York that had been banded in 2018 and hatched in 2017. The second foreign recapture was a female from near Danielsville, Pennsylvania that was hatched this year and was banded originally on October 27, 2020. She was caught at the Allegheny Front on November 13, 2020.

Banding and recapturing Saw-whets provides data that allows us to more deeply understand how these creatures live, where they migrate to, where they nest, and what migration routes they are following. Dave and his owl banding crew are looking forward to opening to the public next fall, so that they can share this cool and cold experience.



Photo by Jeanine Ging

Dave Darney has spent the last 20-years as the official owl-bander at the Allegheny Front.

Night Sky at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch

By Dave Poder

The Neowise Comet was viewable in our area in mid-July, so a few APAS members made a visit to the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch (AFHW) to get a look. I took this photo at around 4:00 a.m. on July 14, 2020. The comet was not big, but I set up my camera, pointed it to the Northeast, and hit the shutter button, and captured this image.



Photo by Dave Poder

Nearly a month later, in mid-August, we made a return to the hawk watch with the hope of seeing some meteors during the Perseid meteor showers. The night we chose yielded some meteors, but nothing special. I managed, however, to catch one in this photo.

The meteor is a fine line in the upper left of the picture. Facing south from the AFHW, and the camera set for a 32-second exposure, the Milky Way shows up as well as the two bright spots on the left, which are Saturn and Jupiter. What seems to be a shopping center at the bottom are actually very dim lights in the valley that the 32-second exposure made quite bright.



Monarch Migration Ignores Travel Restrictions

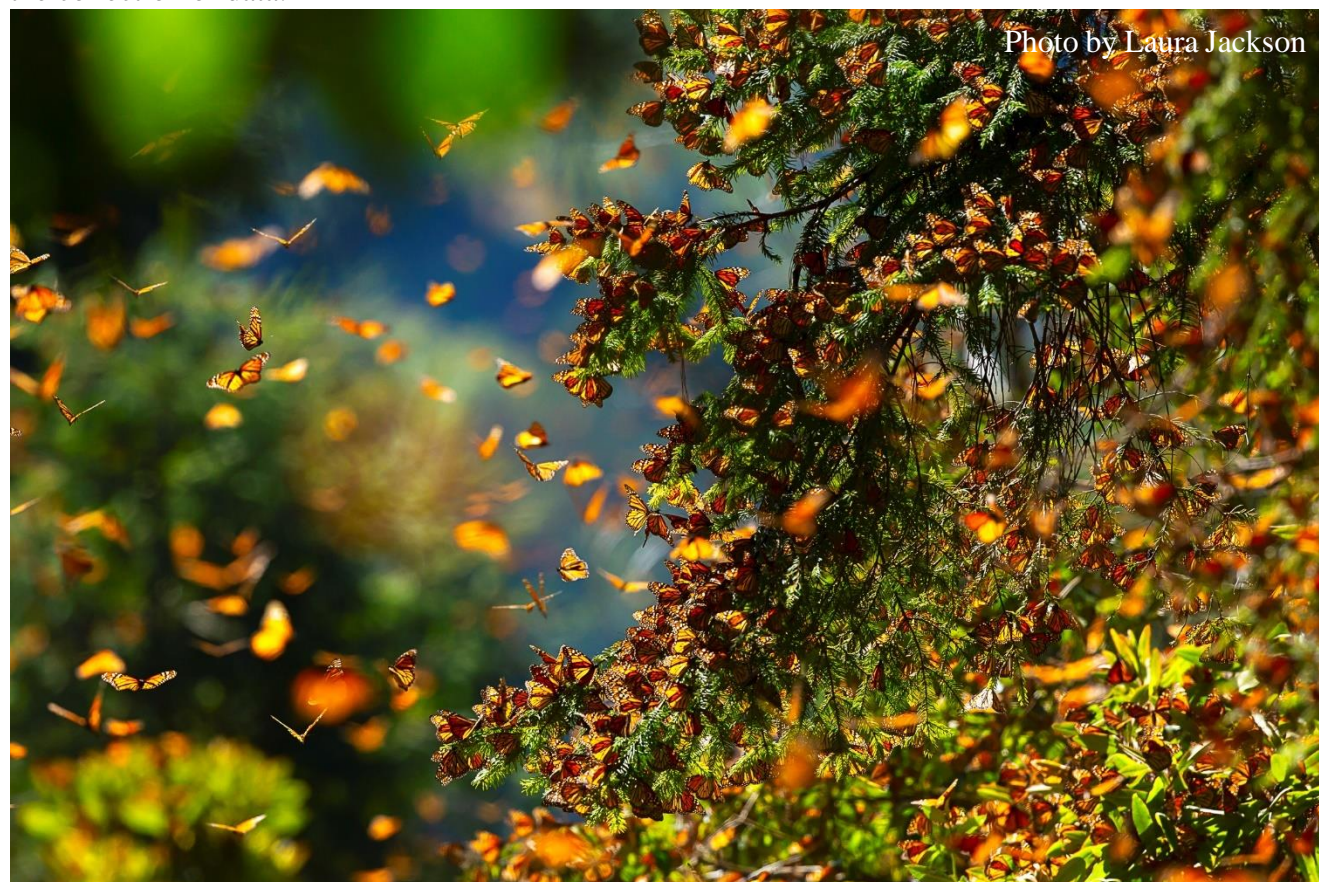
By Jeanine Ging

The Monarch butterflies did not heed the travel restrictions this year. Instead, they continued their migration to Mexico, flying by the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch, which just earned the official status as a Monarch Waystation. This designation requires providing a space to stop, rest, and refuel for the Monarchs during their long journey south.

The Monarchs seemed to rush south early this year, which was expected. Monarch Watch, the organization that issues tags and collects data on Monarch migration, put out a statement early in September, stating that you should tag Monarchs as soon as you see them and not to wait until the typical peak week.

Twenty of the 21 Monarchs tagged at the Allegheny Front this fall were all captured and released on September 5, 2020. This busy day provided lots of data on the Monarchs flying through the area. For those unaware of this type of data collection, volunteers net each butterfly and bring them to the tagging station (the picnic table at the hawk watch) where a unique identification sticker is strategically placed on the discal cell of the wing. The butterfly is then weighed, its wings measured, it is sexed, and a sample of its abdomen cells are taken to test for the *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) parasite. Happily, none of the Monarchs tagged at the Allegheny Front showed OE parasite.

Bob Stewart, the compiler for the Allegheny Front, reported that 2149 Monarchs were counted at the hawk watch this year with 1845 being part of the September rush. This number is significantly down from last year's total of 4733. Like everything else, we hope to have the tagging station open to the public next fall with nets for visitors to help in the collection of data.



This is a tree in Mexico that is filled with Monarch Butterflies. Laura Jackson will be explaining this photo and others in the next virtual meeting.

Outings, Meetings, and Events

As with all outings, presentations, walks, meetings, talks, etc., always check the APAS website, the Facebook site, or the Twitter account for updates or cancelations before leaving home. Our website is www.alleghenyplateauaudubon.org.

Thursday, January 2021 – 7:00 p.m. - APAS Virtual Meeting with Jason A. Beale - Wildlife Corridors – Details on the Zoom link forthcoming.

Wildlife Corridors are an essential part of keeping an intact ecosystem. Jason will speak about this important matter. More details forthcoming. Check our website for updates.

Sunday, February 7, 2021 – Winter Outing at the Beaverdale Sportsmen's Association (BSA)

If conditions allow, this will be a snowshoe/cross country ski excursion. If there is insufficient snow, we will rendezvous at the cabin and explore the winter landscape on foot. Due to ongoing corona virus precautions, there will be an outdoor fire at the pavilion for cooking and warming. The cabin and accompanying inside fireplace may also be used with appropriate PPE and social distancing precautions if needed. Plan to carry in your lunch. Spring water is available and camp coffee can be brewed for those that wish to enjoy the nostalgia. Unfortunately, at this time, we must ask everyone to use their best judgement concerning the weather and their attendance, as we cannot allow crowding within the clubhouse or the sharing of communal refreshments.

Everyone is welcome. Even those that do not ski, snowshoe or hike are encouraged to visit, tend the fires and enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow outdoor enthusiasts. Attendees should access the area via Hollow Road in Ogletown off of Rt. 56. Old Bedford Pike (from Windber) does not receive winter maintenance so it may be impassable. If there is substantial snow, parking will be along Skyline Drive adjacent to the club's lane. Check the website for details before coming out. Extra directions on where to meet if you are unsure of the area are also on the website.

Thursday, February 18, 2021 – 7:00 p.m. – APAS Virtual Meeting with Laura Jackson - “Saving Monarchs, One Yard at a Time” – Details on the Zoom link forthcoming.

In January 2019, a small group of travelers visited Mexico to experience one of the greatest wonders on Earth: overwintering Monarchs. The group also explored a few of the natural wonders of Mexico's Sierra Gorda – a biological melting pot unmatched in North America for its biodiversity – where we found endangered Military Macaws. As a result of visiting several Monarch sanctuaries in Mexico, Laura and Mike Jackson are even more committed to helping Monarchs on their property in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. Learn about their trip, the mysteries of Monarch migration, and how we can work together to help Monarchs in our backyards.

Laura Jackson is a retired schoolteacher who loves to explore the outdoors and all of its creatures. Laura taught high school biology and environmental science in Bedford, PA. Her favorite hobbies are gardening with native plants, birdwatching, and nature photography. Laura is the Vice-President of Juniata Valley Audubon Society, and President of Save Our Allegheny Ridges. She also serves on the advisory group for Pennsylvania Forest Stewards and the Center for Private Forests at Penn State. She has been a Pennsylvania Forest Steward since 2000. See our website for more details.

Check the website for the latest on events. If the coronavirus inoculation campaign is successful, more events will be available.