

Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society (APAS)

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Winter
2022

The Newsletter of the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society

From the President

The stunning picture below is of one of the ponds facing Whitetail Wetlands. It was taken by Jeanine [Ging] as we were walking to work on the Dunning's Creek Wetlands. She probably snuck this picture while I was not looking. She will tell you that while trying to open the wetlands, I was a little bit stressed. It was a monumental task, and the pressure was on. For years, the trails had gone unmowed and many were lost. The goal was to try to open a loop for our membership to be able to traverse without getting lost. And yes, you could get lost! She will tell you that I yelled,



Photo by Jeanine Ging

“We do not have time for beauty...we have work to do!” And, yes...I said that. But the seasons turn quickly, and night was occurring earlier and earlier each weekend. Chris Dick had just made a significant purchase, a specialized tractor, to open the trails. Now it was just a matter of man (and woman) power.

In the end, we got the work done and as you will see in the upcoming articles, we have had time for beauty!

The wetlands are one of the vital pieces of property

that allows the APAS to not only enjoy nature, but also support it. The Dick family has been instrumental in keeping land for wildlife. So has Jerry Fetter, owner of Whitetail Wetlands. Our relationship with Jerry has never been better and together we are working as a well-oiled machine.

In addition, the work done by Jeff Payne, who incidentally helped when Dunning's Creek Wetlands was first created, is paying off again. His relentless pursuit of finding waterfowl habitat is paying dividends. The Kimberly Run Natural Area has been a dream for many years and is now coming true. That project requires manpower, money, and support. As you read the articles in this issue, understand that the APAS has a long history of land management, volunteerism, and environmental advocacy. We all just need to work to make sure we have time for beauty.

Brian M. Wargo

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Re-opening the Dunnings Creek Wetlands

By Chris Dick (cw Dick@umich.edu)

The Dunnings Creek Wetlands (DCW) was once a staple of Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society (APAS) activities. Located along Dunning's Creek Road in Bedford, the 174-acre tract had barren and periodically flooded soils ("useless for farming" according to neighbor Jerry Fetter). My parents, Tom and Sally Dick, purchased the land at auction and collaborated with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to restore wetlands, primarily through a set of artificial lakes (impoundments).



A portion of the Dunnings Creek easement.

Jerry Fetter also worked with NRCS to restore wetlands to his adjacent property, the Whitetail Wetlands, and he helped with the Dunnings Creek Wetlands by blazing trails and hosting APAS events on his farm. During Earth Day celebrations, APAS volunteers planted button bushes and rod-osier dogwoods along the impoundments, and hawthorns and other native plants in the surrounding fields. Chris



Waterfowl observation blind built by Chris Payne for his eagle scout project.

Payne built a nature observatory on Bittern Pond (see photo) for his Eagle Scout badge. APAS held regular outings focused on birds, insects, limnology, and other aspects of the flora and fauna.

A township road and bridge gave access to the wetlands from Dunning's Creek Road. In 1989 the township vacated the road and some years later a flood dealt the bridge its final blow (see pic). Presently, Jerry Fetter lets APAS members park along his lane and walk to the wetlands.

In 1998 my parents registered the property as a conservation easement through the USDA. Based on this contract, the wetland owners (now, my



Remains of the Dunnings Creek bridge that once provided public access to the wetlands.

level exposes mud flats for shorebirds and helps control trees and muskrats that can damage the impoundments. Water level control can also help stave the carp invasion. According to Jerry, flooding of our largest impoundment left giant carp flopping on his access road.

As a first step toward reopening the DCW I purchased an 8-wheel brush-cutting tractor from Jerry (see pic). With Jerry's help, google maps showing the former trail system, and several Sundays of work, Brian Wargo and I (but mostly Brian) have opened up the old trail system, providing access to all of the impoundments for inspections and wildlife observation.

Some challenges remain. We need to repair water control boxes and water ingress/egress channels in the largest impoundment. We also need to obtain legal access to the wetlands for the NRCS, as required by the easement contract. A new bridge would cost anywhere from \$80,000 to \$100,000 – well beyond our means. For the time being NRCS has access through Whitetail Wetlands but that is not a long-term solution.



Jerry Fetter demonstrates the 8-wheel tractor he uses to manage Whitetail Wetlands.

Photo by Chris Dick



My family views the wetlands as a conservation legacy, and we want to continue to collaborate with APAS to maintain DCW as a refuge for wildlife conservation, research, and natural history appreciation and education. Keep an eye out for upcoming outings. Brian Wargo can provide an updated trail map and instructions for those interested in walking the trails. As I am learning a lot of the history of the wetlands, I'd appreciate hearing any stories or experiences from readers.

Large impoundment with button bush (likely planted by APAS members) in the foreground



Dunnings Creek Wetland trail map, as of January 2022. Created by Brian Wargo.

Wetland Walks

By Brian M. Wargo

Photo by Brian M. Wargo



An eclipse Wood Duck on Grebe Pond.

We are currently developing policies to ensure that we are not disturbing nesting waterfowl and balancing that with our longing to survey the overall activity. Thankfully, the APAS has experts to help us manage and schedule our actions.

Check our website for future events and consider attending one of our walks or workday sessions. If you already have, and simply need a parking pass, just email us to make sure particular trails are not closed. We may also ask you to submit your observations. As you can see, we are taking it slow, trying to avoid potential problems, and ensuring that Dunnings Creek Wetlands remains an important part of APAS's mission.

In the Fall of 2021, three wetlands outings introduced APAS members to Dunnings Creek Wetlands. The goal was to inform those wanting to visit of our policies, goals, and future plans. The wetlands is a magical place and keeping it so requires that we all do our part. The first is being a good neighbor, for we are currently parking on Jerry Fetter's Whitetail Wetlands Lodge property. The APAS assigns parking passes that list instructions on where and how to park, the trails to be used to access Dunnings Creek Wetlands, as well as rules for keeping wildlife the number one priority.



Photo by Brian M. Wargo

Rich Jones and Greg Gdula discuss the hole at the edge of Teal Pond while Laura Jackson looks for waterfowl.

From Snowshoers to Salamanders: The Somerset County Conservancy's Kimberly Run Natural Area is Growing for All

By Adam Katrancha

Situated at the crossing of Route 219 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and a jewel of Somerset County, the 373-acre Kimberly Run Natural Area (KRNA) is a destination for all seasons. Over the past year, cross-organizational events with the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society (APAS) have included recreational winter hikes, birding, and aquatic surveys. As with many groups, leaders often share their talents with organizations of similar mission, as is evident by the cooperation between APAS and the Somerset County Conservancy (SCC), of which numerous participants share member and leadership roles in both. Therefore, it is only natural to share the exciting news that SCC has recently executed a sales agreement to acquire the adjoining 275-acre Menser Farm. KRNA currently offers older growth forest, education programs, four miles of hiking trails, stocked trout and pheasants, and wetlands. The addition of the Menser Farm will expand opportunities with a collection of woodlands, old fields, and shrub-scrub swamplands creating a contiguous 648-acre parcel of protected land. Over one square mile will now be open for low impact public recreation and provide protected wildlife habitat within a 2-mile, 5-minute, drive of Somerset.



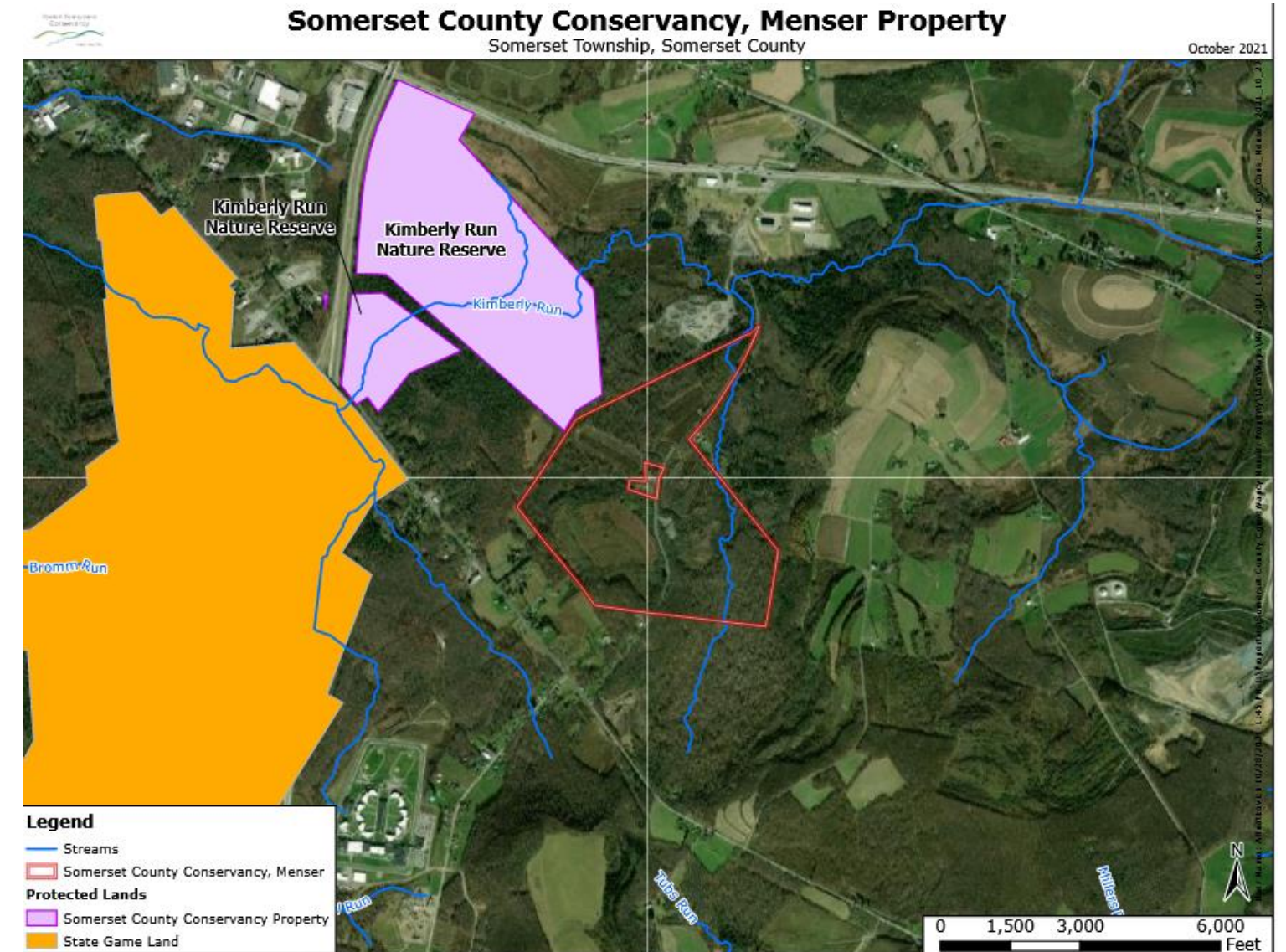
Photo by Dave Poder

A Hermit Thrush

This acquisition also extends the wildlife corridor north from the several thousand-acres SGL 50. The existing KRNA has had bird breeding surveys revealing interesting forest species such as Magnolia, Blackburnian and abundant Black-throated Green Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Willow and Alder Flycatcher, Brown Creeper, Veery, Wood and Hermit Thrush as well as grassland species such as state threatened Northern Harrier and the declining American Kestrel. The earliest known Somerset County sighting of the expanding West Virginia population of the Fisher was made at KRNA in 1996. The Appalachian Blue Violet was first described at KRNA and there are numerous interesting wildflowers (Stiff Cowbane) and bog plants (Cotton Grass, Sundew) on the site. Overall, the Menser farm tract is largely unexplored for the neighboring taxa and could offer even more!

Public recreation on KRNA has been increasing and the recent pandemic rapidly increased the usage by hikers, dog walkers,

and snowshoers/ XC skiers. The field portions of both KRNA and the Menser Farm are in the cooperative program with the PA Game Commission. This partnership benefits the SCC by allowing the PGC to manage the fields and help reduce invasive species with the reciprocation of public hunting in autumn. For many years SCC has eyed the neighboring farm parcel with their open expression of interest to the Menser/Minick families. Located in a highly developable area, the conservation minded Menser/Mimick families were receptive to SCC's quick negotiations to ensure the preservation of the property for perpetuity.



The Somerset County Conservancy, a 501(c)(3), is acquiring Kimberly Run - Menser Farm.

Adding this much land, of course, comes at a cost. With land cost, appraisals, surveys, Phase One environmental study, and legal fees; the anticipated expenses for acquisition approach \$400,000. The SCC will be applying through PA DCNR for a **matching** C2P2 grant and has started that process. While a reserve fund has been set aside for an opportunity such as this, SCC's goal is to raise as much of the \$200,000 match as possible, allowing some of the current reserve in the KRNA Stewardship and Maintenance fund to be retained for long-term care and the optimistic thought of trail expansion. At this time, the Colcom Revolving Fund will help the SCC bridge the time between real estate closing, applying for grants and raising the matching funds. As a community asset, open to the public, and unique in the region, SCC is graciously asking for financial assistance to bring this ambitious undertaking to fruition.

While the accompanying bulletin offers various support levels of generosity, any amount will help achieve this goal and be very appreciated. Even if financial support is beyond your means, please consider joining the SCC, its members, and friends at one or more of our outings. SCC is working hard to improve the Kimberly Run Natural Area and offers events for all ages and abilities. We hope you will join Somerset County Conservancy's team as we look forward to expanding our programs and activities. Come join the fun, we hope to see you soon.

<http://www.somersetconservancy.org/>

A Few Allegheny Front Hawk Watch Birds of 2021

By Dave Poder

Photo by Dave Poder



© David Poder

Top: Wood Thrush; Right: Black and White Warbler

One morning, the trees near the picnic table hosted a Black and White Warbler as it searched for some insects.

The long-unused birdbox behind the picnic table hosted Eastern Bluebirds this summer. On workdays, while busy cutting the grass, we viewed the adult Bluebirds constantly taking various insects to the hungry mouths inside the box. At the same time, Tree Swallows were also occupied with their own little ones in the bird boxes near the parking lot.

One early fall morning, while waiting for the fog to lift, I managed to get a photo of an Oven Bird (its nest on the forest floor resembles an oven and has a side entrance, hence its name). Near the same spot in late September, a Cape May Warbler in its Fall plumage made a quick appearance.

Bird photography at the AFHW was very rewarding for me in 2021, and it was not limited to raptors. There were some good subjects along the lane, and around the hawk watch itself.

In the spring, while walking up and down the lane at different times, I managed to get photos of Hermit and Wood Thrushes. Warblers near the lane included the Hooded and Black-throated Blue Warblers.

Photo by Dave Poder



© David Poder

Photo by Dave Poder



© David Poder

Photo by Dave Poder



© David Poder

The AFHW offers chances to see quite a variety of birds, but in the fall our main focus is on birds of prey.

This fall, two occasions would stand out for me. The first occurred one day in September when a Merlin put on a very spirited flying display showing its strong dislike for our "Pole Owl". The second was in mid-December when Golden Eagles flew by, lit up by the late day, low December sun, that fittingly brought out their

golden colors. One even gave me an unusual angle; as it powered down the valley, it suddenly banked left and I got an underside shot of it with the valley floor as the background. The very last one was flying south with a considerable crop very evident. (The Merlin and Golden Eagle photos are on the next page.)

With its variety of birds, big and small, I feel 2021 at the AFHW was an enjoyable year for me.

Photo by Dave Poder



Top: Ovenbird; Left: Cape May Warbler; Right: Bluebird with an insect.

2021 Allegheny Front Hawk Watch Fall Count

By Bob Stewart

After being closed to the public in 2020 due to Covid-19 precautions the watch opened for the public in the fall of 2021. The watch commenced on August 15th and continued through December 21st. The watch was manned for 713.25 hours with a total season count of 9638 raptors. This equates to 13.51 raptors per hour, or 4.09 raptors per hour when broad-winged hawks are not included.

The Black Vulture count of 8 was a 22-year low. The osprey count of 82 rebounded from 54 in the prior year. The Northern Harrier count of 35 was near the five-year average of 33. The accipiter flight of last year was down sharply from previous years. However, Sharp-shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks numbers had a dramatic rise. The Sharp-shinned Hawks numbered 1074 and Cooper's Hawks 102 – both still below the five-year average.

Red-shouldered Hawks numbered 38, slightly below the five-year average of 41. Broad-winged Hawks numbered 6724. This was well below the last three years but greater than the ten-year average of 6324. The Red-tailed Hawk number of 869 was well below the 2020 count of 1113 and five-year average of 1125.

The Golden Eagle count of 161 was a five-year low. The five-year average is 185. The Bald Eagle count of 194 climbed from 151 last year. The Bald Eagle five-year average is 187.

All falcon species showed a large rebound over 2020. American Kestrel numbered 35 – a modest increase over 31 last year. Merlin numbered 22 – a large increase over 13 in 2020. Peregrine Falcon numbered 29 – an increase over 21 last year. Kestrel and Merlin numbers were below the five-year average while Peregrine Falcons equaled the five-year average. This is our first year in counting that neither Rough-legged Hawks nor Northern Goshawks were counted.



Merlin at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch.

© David Poder

Photo by Dave Poder

MONTHLY RECAP

AUGUST- The first day of the count on the 15th yielded 67 raptors. The wind was from the ESE. The tally included ten Bald Eagles. The monthly (Aug 15-Aug 31) raptor count was 581. This was the third highest on record.

SEPTEMBER- The September Broad-winged Hawk count was 6365, well below the robust counts of the previous three years. One Golden Eagle migrated on Sept. 13 and again on Sept. 17.

OCTOBER- October generally provides a chunk of the Golden Eagle migration. This year only 12 Golden Eagles were tallied. This month did not seem like a typical golden eagle migration. Also noted, there were only two days with an east wind component after the 15th. It will be noted however that the bald eagle flight of 37 was just below the five-year average of 39.

NOVEMBER- November had only 6 days of an east component wind. The low number of migrants (420) continued through November. This was the third lowest count in twenty-five years. The Golden Eagle count was 98. The Bald Eagle count of 36 was a record high count for November. The previous record was 23 in 2013 and 2015.

DECEMBER-The site was manned for 68 hours over 12 days. There were eight days with an east component wind. 89 migrants were recorded, the largest in ten years. This was a record December flight of Bald Eagles (10) and Golden Eagles (49). Also noted for December were 1 TV, 2 SS, 2 RS, 22 RT, 1 UA, and 2 UR.

Of special interest is the December 5th flight. The counters Erika Bowman and Bob Stewart noted 7 Bald Eagles and 19 Golden Eagles. This was the highest daily December count for either species. The total raptor count for the day was 38, including 10 Red-tailed Hawks. Thirty percent of the Golden Eagle flight was in the month of December. This reflects the delayed start of the migration.

This year was our twenty-fifth year of an hourly count at our current Shaffer Mountain site. What a milestone! My thank you goes out to our counters: Debbie Bodenschatz, Erika Bowman, Ed Gowarty, Rosemary McGlynn, Dave Poder, Jim Rocco, Wayne Sierer, Bob Stewart, and Brian Wargo.



© David Poder

Photo by Dave Poder

Golden Eagle with a giant Crop at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch.

2021 APAS Christmas Bird Count

By Jeff Payne

December 19th dawned cloudy, very windy, with a wisp of snow and 29 degrees- the temperature and wind were not to change much all day, but this did not stop 21 intrepid birders from completing the APAS sponsored Christmas Bird Count. Eight teams travelled 502 miles by car and 13 miles by foot to record 4615 individual birds of 65 species in the 15-mile diameter circle centered near the Quemahoning Reservoir.

Due to the wind, the owls refused to vocalize, so the first birds of the day were often the early rising American Crows. The reservoirs were uncharacteristically unfrozen for this time of year; however waterfowl diversity was only average. As a matter of fact, several species present the afternoon before apparently used the strong NW winds to depart for the Chesapeake Bay—these species were among the 7 count-week birds that pushed the total species count to 72.

As usual the European Starlings led the list of most numerous bird (1374) followed by Canada Geese (435) and American Crow (426). Several birds were represented by only one individual such as a photographed Chipping Sparrow, a lonely Red-breasted Nuthatch and an exciting Merlin (at Flight 93).

The most significant bird of the count was from Sector 7, which is led by Deb Bodenschatz, and has Sandy and Bill Cline, observing had a Pine Warbler which was brand new for the count! Great find by the team.

Despite being a bit chilly everyone had fun and deserves kudos for continuing this long tradition of citizen science adding to the vast data base of knowledge on our avian friends.

Editor’s note: We thank Jeff for organizing our CBC and acting as the anchor, resident expert birder, and motivator for this unique winter experience. Please let Jeff know if you are interested in participating next year. New birders are welcome and can be paired with experienced birders (see the picture to the right).



Photo by Jeanine Ging

Chris and Susan Rihn (middle and right) experience their first CBC, joining Brian Wargo’s group, designated as Sector 4. The ominous, dark clouds seem to be a regular feature for the Christmas Bird Count.

Monarch Counts

By Bob Stewart

Below are the total monarchs counted for the last five seasons by month. As you can see, 2021 was our best year!

Month	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
August 15-31	133	831	229	274	342
September	611	1038	3923	1845	5240
October	777	1528	581	30	190
November	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1521	3397	4733	2149	5772

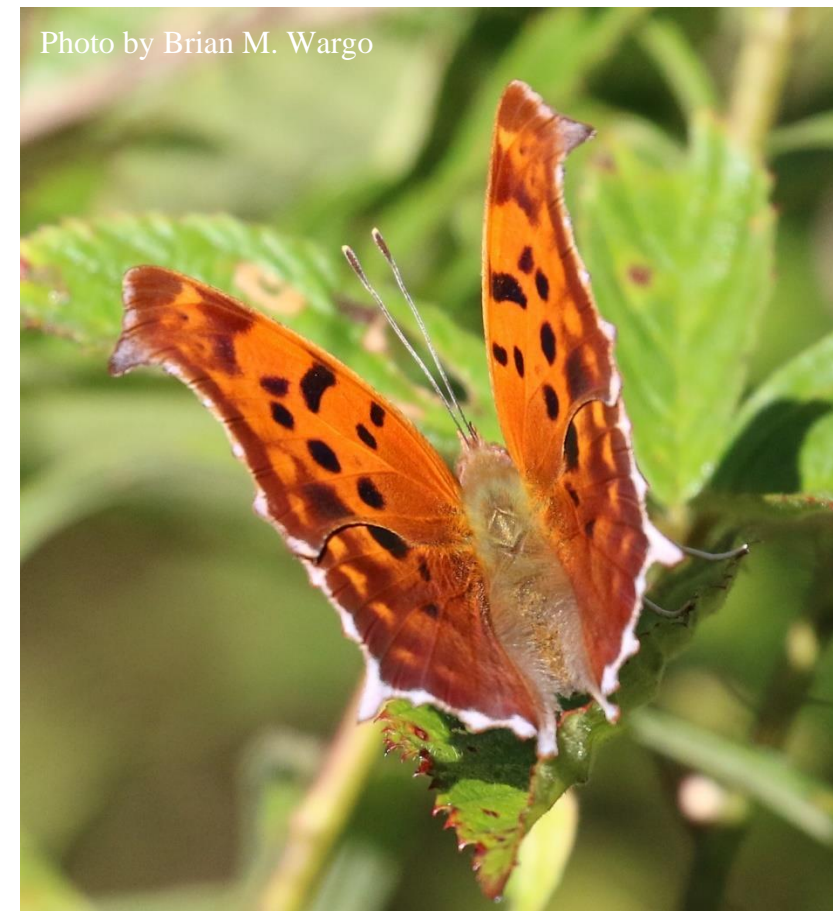


Photo by Brian M. Wargo

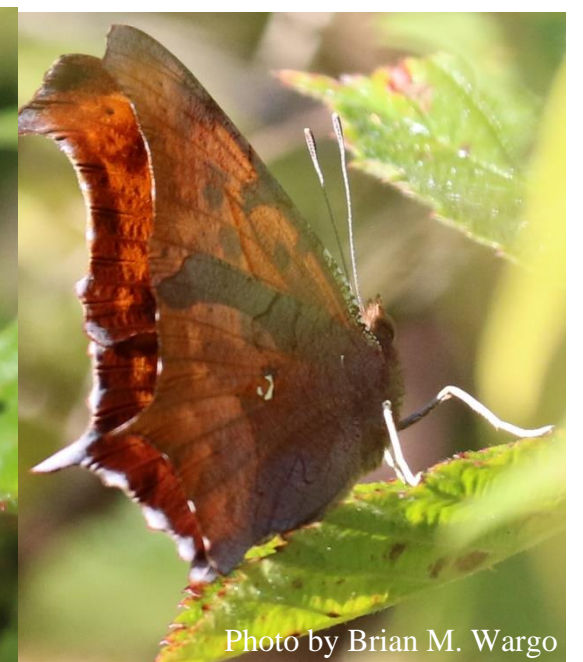


Photo by Brian M. Wargo

This question Mark Butterfly was photographed at the Dunnings Creek Wetlands. Notice the small whitish question mark in the photo to the right.

In Memory

By Bob Stewart

I received a note from Vicki Judd addressed to APAS. Vicki's husband, Bill was a key member in the early days of the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch. Bill passed away late this summer (2021). Transcribed by Bob Stewart.

November 10, 1995

A Memory !

Dean Jobe was at the site as Bill and I approached and he yelled "Golden Eagle just flew by" and I say "Oh, no I missed my life bird!" Well, oh yes- it was like someone opened the gates- 25 (yes 25) more came flying by before 4:30 PM. Great southeast winds, 38 degrees. Beautiful sightings- doesn't get any better than that. May the Front continue to grow and make memories for all who come there.



Photo courtesy of Gene Flament

Bill Judd sits at the front right at the Hawk Watch picnic in 2003.

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.

Sunday, January 23, 2022, 1:00 p.m. — Winter Walk/Ski/Snowshoe with Somerset Conservancy

The SCC would like to invite you to our first event at Kimberly Run Natural Area. On January 23, at 1:00 p.m. we will have a winter walk/ski/snowshoe. As the weather looks, we probably will not have snow, but in case we do, there will be a couple pairs of snowshoes available to use, first come first serve. Meet at Kimberly Run Natural Area entrance by 219. RSVP to: somersetconservancyevents@gmail.com with number attending and if equipment is needed.

Sunday, February 6, 2022 – Winter Outing at the Beaverdale Sportsmen's Association (BSA)

Winter Outing at the Beaverdale Sportsmen's Association – 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. The cabin and accompanying inside fireplace will provide shelter and warmth and, if conditions allow, we may also have an outdoor fire at the pavilion for cooking and warming. Plan to carry in your lunch and any other provisions you wish to share at your comfort level. 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. Also, due to the unforeseeable, ongoing Covid precautions may still be employed if warranted. 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. We will meet at the Sportsmen's property along Old Bedford Pike/Skyline Drive at 9:00 a.m. Bob Stewart will meet anyone not familiar with the Beaverdale Sportsmen's property at the Clear Shade Wild Area parking lot, just off Route 56 in the Gallitzin State Forest west of Ogletown. Bob will depart the Clear Shade lot at 8:30 a.m. Check the website for updates. (Address: Beaverdale Sportsmen's: 3264 Old Bedford Pike Extension)

Late February - Spring Hawkwatching – The hawkwatch will attempt to open in late February but is dependent on the conditions of the lane. Snow tends to build at the gate and the lane often has deep snow drifts. Check the website, Twitter, and our Facebook pages for updated conditions.

Early March - Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area Swan/Snow Geese Outing – The visitor center and interior roads open on Tuesday, March 1, 2022. Weekends are very crowded and less desirable. This outing is weather dependent, so be sure to check the APAS website for details. Wayne Sierer will lead a walk/talk concerning Swans and Snow Geese at Middle Creek. If interested, please contact Wayne directly at wcsierer@verizon.net.

April 23, 2022 - Raptorthon – Raptorthon is a joint venture between the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch and the Hawk Migration Association of North America. The purpose of Raptorthon is simple, to have fun birding while raising funds for raptor monitoring throughout the Americas.

May 6-15, 2022 - Biggest Week in American Birding – APAS members and AFHW frequenters will enjoy the most spectacular warbler migration at Maumee Bay in Ohio. If interested in meeting as a group, please contact Jeanine Ging at neanpsu@hotmail.com.