



Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy ■ www.loudounwildlife.org

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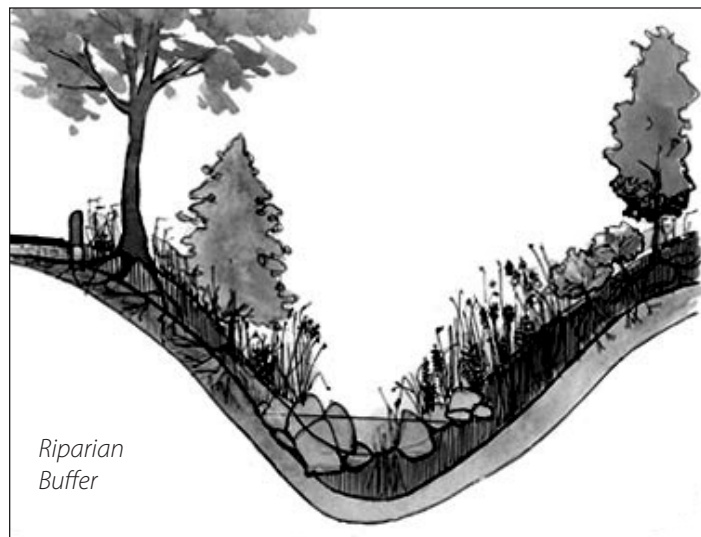
Riparian Buffers - The Very Best Protection

by Joe Coleman

Riparian buffers are the single most effective means of protecting water resources. Streams guarded by a healthy forested riparian buffer run far cleaner and cooler and are more stable than a stream without any kind of buffer.

Riparian buffers are the strips of grass, shrubs, and, ideally, trees and shrubs along the banks of rivers and streams. They serve as a buffer between our uses of the land nearby and the water itself, and are the last line of defense for water quality. They filter nutrients and other pollutants, lower water temperature and improve aquatic habitat, stabilize stream banks, and enhance the area for recreation and wildlife.

Riparian buffers are complex ecosystems which, when managed correctly, perform invaluable services for all of us.



Riparian Buffer

How Buffers Work

As Filters: Riparian buffers trap pollutants and nutrients that would otherwise wash into our streams. Depending on the width and complexity (the amount of vegetated cover), between 50 and 100 percent of the sediments and nutrients settle out and are absorbed by the buffer plants. A number of scientific studies show that wider, forested buffers are much more effective than narrow, grassy buffers. Forested buffers achieve filtration rates 10 to 15 times higher than grass turf and 40 times higher than a plowed field.

Phosphorus and nitrogen from fertilizer and animal waste become water pollutants when there is more than the plants can use. But because phosphorus binds to soil particles, much of it is captured and filtered out of surface runoff by passing through the buffer. The chemical and biological activity of the soil, particularly in forested riparian buffers, captures and transforms nitrogen and other pollutants into less harmful forms. These buffers also act as a sink where nutrients and excess water are taken up by root systems and stored in the trees' biomass.

As Stream Flow Regulators and Stabilizers: Riparian buffers slow the velocity of the water running off the land, allowing water to soak into the soil and recharge the groundwater supply. By entering the stream at a slower rate and over a longer time period, buffers help control flooding and maintain stream flow during the driest times of the year.

By reducing runoff and holding bank soil together, buffers keep stream banks and streambeds stabilized, resulting in less damage locally and downstream. When plant cover is removed, more surface water reaches the stream; the water crests higher and stronger and causes more damage.

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A Word from the President

by Nicole Hamilton

As I write this column, it is late August and the Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures are starting to return to Thicket Court where I live. A few stay with us year round, but in late fall and winter when migrants from the north and west join our flocks, their numbers swell for a few weeks. It is a majestic sight. Our house is on a rise with woods around us. There's a farm field down below, across the way. My guess is that our hill, while small, somehow provides the proper break to the winds coming up off the fields to create a wonderful updraft that these raptors love.

As I stand in our front yard today, listening to cicadas buzzing out their end-of-summer song, twenty vultures soar overhead — their great wings outstretched, so relaxed. They give a slight tweak to a feather or two to shift direction or course. I see them

look down at me, curious, as I look up at them, curious. I turn away for a second to catch the sound of other birds in the trees. When I look skyward again, all the vultures have vanished, and I hear myself say aloud, "Where did you go?" In an instant, like the crescendo of a great symphony, they all lift up over the tree line. I feel as though I can hear the music to which they soar.

Then, I am reminded why we do what we do for Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy...these birds are not as loved or appreciated by everyone. They are often persecuted and driven out of our neighborhoods by people who don't like how they look or don't understand them. Almost every year, we need to raise our voices to teach people about their interesting lives and the roles they play in our ecosystem.

Whether it is showing people how to help a turtle cross the road, talking to a community about leaving a grassy area unmowed for nesting birds, or planting a stream bank of native trees to restore a habitat, we teach and are a voice for wildlife.

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The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a non-profit 501(c)(3) group of volunteers who share a common goal of protecting and perpetuating natural habitats for the benefit of both people and wildlife. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by the law.

The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Board meets the first Tuesday of each month. Board meetings are open to all current members. For more information, or to suggest topics for discussion at upcoming meetings, contact Nicole Hamilton.

Visit us at: www.loudounwildlife.org

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■ *A Word From the President, continued from pg. 2*

As you know, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is an all-volunteer organization. In order to offer speaker programs and field trips, monitoring programs, habitat restoration projects, advocacy activities and community outreach, we require a core group of

"If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around, does it make a sound?" Well yes.
"If LWC did not exist, in 20 years from now, would there be trees in Loudoun to fall?"
Hmmm.

members taking on leadership roles to serve as officers, committee chairs, coordinators, graphics designers, editors and more. I have no doubt that each of us would rather be out walking trails, taking in fresh air, and enjoying nature than planning a program or project, preparing the newsletter or a flyer, or writing a position paper. But in order to operate LWC and make a difference for Loudoun, we have to do these activities. Doing so, I believe, is one of the greatest acts of selflessness there is. It shows

dedication to a purpose and need beyond our own individual selves and lives, and it has an impact that will endure.

Knee-high in a muddy pond rescuing turtles, a friend mused over why he was standing there. "It's not for the fame or fortune," he said. Indeed, we do this because we have to...because someone has to...because the wildlife of Loudoun and, indeed, future generations need us to do this. As I was driving to work the other day, I saw a tree fall as a bulldozer pushed it over. I thought,

"If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around, does it make a sound?" Well yes. "If LWC did not exist, in 20 years from now, would there be trees in Loudoun to fall?" Hmmm. Maybe only a few. "Would there be grasslands with nesting meadowlarks or vernal pools with frogs that quack like ducks?" Maybe not.

I've been President of LWC for the past 3 ½ years and this coming May will be the end of my term. We've built a solid infrastructure to our organization and have grown tremendously. People know who we are and we're "out there." But to take LWC to the next level, we need more volunteers to take on more leadership roles – brainstorming ideas, working out plans, coordinating other volunteers. With you involved, we can preserve and protect the wildlife habitat that we have left. We can spread the song on which the birds soar to people across our county.

I call upon each of you reading this now to get involved with LWC. Email me today at nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org to learn about opportunities to become a leader for a committee or coordinator of an activity, to take the bull by the horns and help drive us forward, and to create opportunities for others across Loudoun so that they can learn and start getting involved with our organization. We are all busy, but in truth, time is our own, and we really do choose how we spend it. Certainly, our work for LWC is not for the fame or fortune — it is for something bigger than any of us, something absolutely priceless, something that is delicate yet given a chance is also resilient, something that today we have a chance to save.

Nicole

■ *Riparian Buffers, continued from pg. 1*

The Effect of Different Size Buffer Zones on Potential Reductions of Sediments and Nutrients from Field Surface Runoff

(from Lowrance, R., et al, *Water Quality Functions of Riparian Forest Buffer Systems in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed*, 1995)

Buffer Width Ft	Buffer Type	Sediment Reduction %	Nitrogen Reduction %	Phosphorus
15	Grass	61.0	4.0	28.5
30	Grass	74.6	22.7	24.2
62	Forest	89.8	74.3	70.0
75	Forest/Grass	96.0	75.3	78.5
95	Forest/Grass	97.4	80.1	77.2

Percent reduction = 100 x (Input – Output)/Input

As Air Cooler and Conditioner: The forest leaf canopy provides shade, keeping water cooler, which helps retain more dissolved oxygen. The shade in summer provides cooler, more even temperatures, especially in small streams where the canopy often entirely covers the stream. The canopy also improves air quality by filtering dust from wind erosion, construction, and farm activities.

As Wildlife Habitat: Not only are riparian buffers home to a multitude of plant and animal species, when they are wide enough they serve as invaluable and relatively safe travel corridors for a wide variety of wildlife. Furthermore, leaf and woody debris that falls into the streams provides food and shelter for small, bottom dwelling creatures that are in turn critical to the aquatic food chain.

Recreation and Aesthetics: Forested riparian buffers are especially valuable in providing attractive green screens along waterways as well as recreational opportunities for hiking, fishing, and camping.

The Right Buffer

Different circumstances require different widths and types of riparian buffers. Under natural conditions, riparian buffers provide a dynamic yet stable ecosystem along most rivers and streams, and are usually forested. Buffers vary according to where they are and what conditions exist in that location. Riparian buffers do not have fixed linear boundaries but vary in width, size, and character. Most experts agree that, of all the various kinds of buffer vegetation, forested buffers offer the greatest range of environmental benefits.

In the past, many jurisdictions, including



■ *Continued on page 4*

■ *Riparian Buffers, continued from pg. 3*

those in our area, have had a tendency to ignore smaller streams and floodplains, when, in actuality, they should have the greatest attention and protection. These smaller streams are often the headwaters for our larger streams and rivers, and to not protect the buffers that border them simply means that there will be more flooding and pollution runoff reaching the larger streams and rivers.

When restoring or enhancing an existing buffer, several factors have to be considered. Besides determining what its primary purpose should be, topography, hydrology, existing vegetation composition, and the type of soil all make a difference. Steeper slopes call for wider riparian zones, as do wetter soils and more intensive land use outside the buffer.

How wide a buffer should be maintained also varies. The basic, bare-bones buffer is 50 feet from the top of the bank, but every additional foot provides additional benefit. On smaller streams you can usually get by with the smaller buffers, but steeper slopes and less permeable soils require wider buffers. And while 100 feet of buffer will remove most pollutants, clay soils may require as much as 500 feet.

For cold-water fisheries, the stream channel should be completely shaded, while warm-water fisheries do not require this unless there are problems with algae blooms. In either case, a 100-foot buffer should be adequate, although the wider the buffer, the healthier the aquatic food chain.

Much greater forest buffer widths are needed for wildlife habitat purposes than for water quality purposes. Three hundred feet is generally accepted as a minimum, and larger animals and interior forest species generally require more. However, narrower widths are probably acceptable for travel corridors to connect larger areas of habitat.

Planning the Right Buffer

Most experts agree that a three-zone buffer, as shown in the illustration, is a good model for protecting, restoring, or enhancing riparian buffers.

Zone 1 is the portion of the buffer closest to the water and extends upland from the stream's edge. Ideally it should be undisturbed and include trees and shrubs. Some experts say it should never be less than 35 feet on each side of the stream; others say at least 50 feet. On smaller streams the tree canopy will meet and fully shade the water, providing maximum control over light and temperature. The roots of the trees and shrubs will reduce soil erosion, stabilize the stream bank, and keep sediment, excess nutrients, and pollution out of the water.

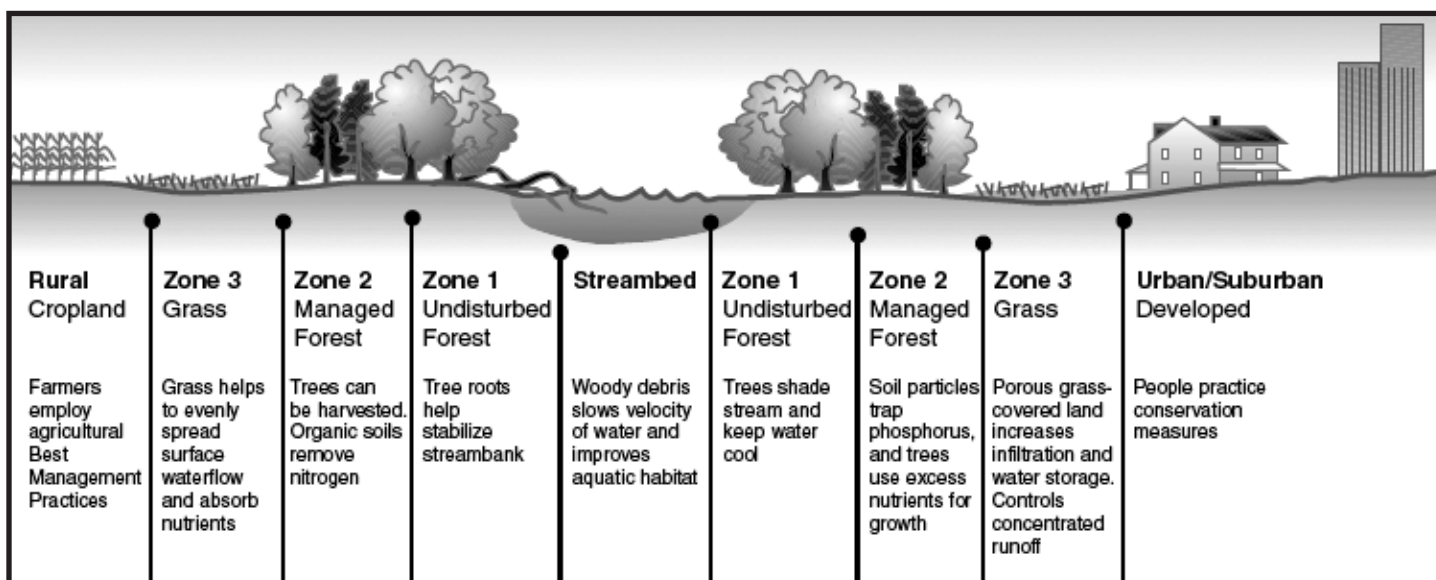
Zone 2 is managed forest and is immediately landward from the first zone and should be at least an additional 50 to 75 feet wide depending on the size of the stream, topography, and soil type. This zone protects water quality by removing, transforming, or storing nutrients, sediments, and other pollutants. It also provides food and shelter for hundreds of wildlife species.

Zone 3 of the buffer should be comprised of dense grasses and/or broad-leaved herbaceous plants and wildflowers or other control measures and will evenly spread surface water flow and absorb nutrients. This zone assists in slowing runoff, filtering sediments and pollutants, and allowing water to infiltrate the ground, minimizing flooding and recharging groundwater. As a result, both Zone 2 and 3 function more effectively. This zone can be as small as 20 feet.

All of these zones will vary in width according to factors outlined earlier, and while 35 feet may be satisfactory in some situations, 500 feet may not be sufficient in others.

Remember, the bigger the buffer, the more effectively it will protect both water and habitat quality.

■ *Continued on page 6*



From: www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/PDFs/FS724.pdf

Help Wildlife — Build a Brush Pile This Fall

by Emily Bzdyk

Autumn is approaching, and we all take notice as the weather turns cool and the leaves turn colors. As annual plants die back and leaves begin to fall, our local wildlife runs out of places to hide. Meanwhile, we may be wondering what to do with the fallen leaves and branches on our property. This year you can solve this problem and promote the survival of your wild friends by using natural debris to build a brush pile. You can set aside an area on your property and preserve wild habitat with a brush pile that provides cover and shelter for small wild animals. In many areas of our county natural shelter is scarce, and cover becomes even more critical in the wintertime. Wildlife like ground-nesting birds, reptiles and amphibians, chipmunks, rabbits, and other small mammals need shelter from weather and concealment from predators. A brush pile will also set up a means for seed germination and plant growth in the spring.



When deciding the placement of the pile, it is important to consider the needs of the animals you hope to attract and support. Pick a place where there is a lack of natural cover, like clearings, open fields, fencerows, or near woodland edges. It also helps to choose a site near other locations animals use, such as existing food sources, nesting areas, or water sources (like ponds and streams). Several piles are better than one, because animals can use them as a network, and you attract a greater variety of life. Avoid fire risks by keeping the pile away from buildings or trees.

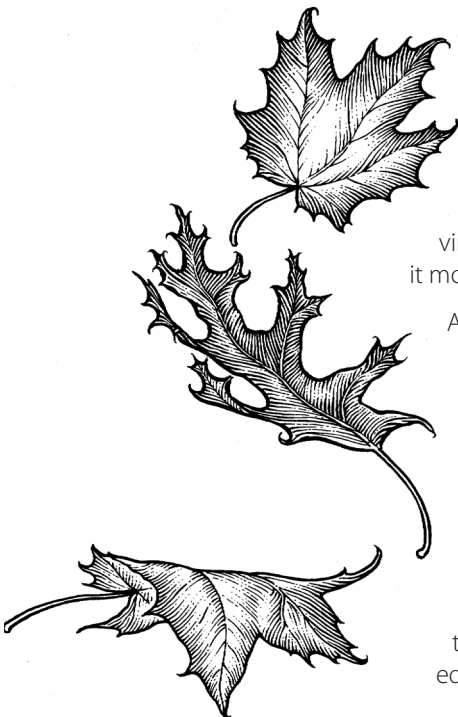
To build the pile, you can use wood and plant materials, or even stones or tires. You may want to coordinate the construction of the pile with some other fall landscaping activity like tree removal, brush control, pasture or cropland clearing, garden pruning, or fence repair. Brush piles can be arranged as a mound or teepee. Different-sized piles will attract a variety of wildlife. In general, the pile should be anywhere from 4 to 8 feet tall and 10 to 20 feet in diameter at the base. In the teepee design, untrimmed branches can be arranged

in a teepee/cone shape, freestanding or perhaps over a stump. In the mound design, use a strong bulkier material to create a sturdy base, or framework. Logs 6 inches in diameter or several large stones will do best. Oaks, locust, and other rot-resistant trees make durable bases. The log base is constructed like Lincoln logs or a pallet with limbs at right angles to each other. You could also use large stumps, fence posts, metal grills, or cinder blocks. First, nail the wood together or use wire to connect the base pieces. Then, add layers of smaller branches and materials as filler. Leaves and clippings can be added around the base, and old Christmas trees are also useful as filler. You can also plant native vines such as trumpet vine, Virginia creeper, or wild grape to hold the pile together and make it more attractive to wildlife and more pleasing to the eye.

As time goes by, the pile will naturally rot, which is certainly not a problem. The decaying process attracts insects, providing food for birds and other animals using the pile. As the pile loses stability, you can create another. The environment will benefit from your brush pile and you will be rewarded with the opportunity to witness more of the natural world in your own backyard.

Sources:

"Brush Piles 101." The Humane Society of the United States. 2007. 3 Aug. 2007 <http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/urban_wildlife_our_wild_neighbors/brush_piles_101.html>
Tjaden, Robert L., and Jonathan Kays. "Wildlife Management: Brush Piles." College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. 2003. University of Maryland. 3 Aug. 2007 <<http://www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/Publication.cfm?ID=564>>



Native Plant ID: Trumpet Vine, *Campsis radicans*

by Emily Bzdyk

I was sitting on my backyard swing the other day reading a book, when I heard a loud buzzing nearby. I looked up and found myself face to face with a small green hummingbird. It wavered back and forth, studying me, making sure I was no threat, before getting to the business it had come for. The reason for its visit was the plant that grew on the swing set from my childhood, a large woody vine with dense green foliage and large showy red/orange blooms. The flowers are shaped like trumpets, giving the plant its common name. The trumpet vine or trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*) is also known as "Cow itch vine," due to the irritating reaction it produces upon contacting the skin of some people.

This spot on my swing set is one of my favorite places because of the trumpet vine. Besides the hummingbirds, the plant attracts much activity. Ants bustle along its long dipping branches down to the blossoms at the ends, where bees and other flying insects also enjoy the nectar all summer long. Catbirds nest in the dense interior, with the emerald green leaves shielding them from sight. The large pods that follow the flowers produce hundreds of brown papery seeds. The trumpet vine is native to woodlands of the southeastern United States, and is also a popular garden perennial plant across much of the country, prized for its graceful growth, gorgeous blooms, and the wildlife it attracts. If you choose to cultivate the trumpet vine, you must be aware of its vigorous growth rate. The vine is fast growing and high climbing, reaching 40 feet tall. It uses aerial roots along its stems



to adhere to surfaces aloft. It will constantly send out horizontal branches in its quest for space and light, and its roots will send additional suckers up out of the ground. This is why the plant does best in woodland gardens and natural areas where it has space to grow. It will cover fences and structures easily, so it may take some effort to keep it in bounds. Pruning in the winter should keep the vine in check. Keep the vine away from small buildings or arbors if you don't want them taken over by this resilient vine. Our trumpet vine is slowly taking over the old swing set, along with a native honeysuckle and wisteria. But we don't mind surrendering the old structure, especially since the presence of the vine and all its customers and tenants bring us such pleasure.



Are You Missing the Monthly Email Announcements?

Around the first of each month, an email that lists our programs, activities and special announcements is sent to all LWC members. This includes programs or events that did not make it into the Habitat Herald, as well as the occasional action alert. If you are not on the distribution list but would like to be, please send an email to Nicole Hamilton at nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org. If you need to change your email address, please send corrections to Nicole at this same address.

■ *Riparian Buffers, continued from pg. 4*

Sources and Resources:

Introduction to Riparian Buffers, by the Connecticut River Joint Commissions of New Hampshire and Vermont, 2000. This publication is a concise and clear explanation of riparian buffers and is part of a series of publications on riparian buffers. See www.crjc.org for it and the CRJC's other fliers. It was the basis for much of the information in this article.

Riparian Buffers: A Closer Look (www.dof.virginia.gov/rfb/resources/1998-imp-plan-closer-look.pdf), from the Virginia Department of Forestry's Riparian Buffer Implementation Plan, 1998 at www.dof.virginia.gov/rfb/imp-plan-1998.shtml. Another valuable source of information.

Protecting Goose Creek's Watershed with Riparian Forest Buffers, by the Goose Creek Association, available through their website at www.goosecreekassn.org.

Riparian Buffer Management: An Introduction to the Riparian Forest Buffer, by Robert L. Tjaden and Glenda M. Webster, Fact Sheet 724, Maryland Cooperative Extension, University of Maryland.

Water Quality Rooted in Riparian Buffers, by the Chesapeake Bay Program and the USDA Forest Service. See www.chesapeakebay.net for more information.

Wildlife Group Completes Riparian Forest Buffer, a 1999 press release by Fred Fox, Vice President of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on LWC's first riparian buffer planting.

Butterfly Count Report

by Nicole Hamilton

The 2007 Butterfly Count was another success with 40 people participating as compared to 37 last year. This is the highest number of participants we've had in our 11 years of holding this count, and it allowed us to expand to six teams so we could cover more territory. August 6 proved to be a hot day with temperatures well into the 90s and humidity to match. While the teams all began at 9:00 a.m., many of us were wilted by early afternoon and called it a day, although a couple of teams were able to keep at it until about 4:00. Adding up the hours spent by each team, we counted for 26¼ hours.

In all, we identified 2,596 individual butterflies covering a total of 46 species. These numbers are just slightly higher than last year when we had 2,452 individual butterflies and 47 species. However, this is a sharp decline from 2005 when we identified over 5,000 individual butterflies. We expect this decline in populations is due to the drought. Count teams consistently reported that there were fewer nectar plants and host plants and the plants that they did see seemed stunted in their growth.

Notable this year was the increase in Spicebush Swallowtails with 259 sightings this year versus 77 last year. Notable declines include the Monarch for which we had 171 sightings last year and only 55 this year and Meadow Fritillary for which we had 112 last year and only 9 this year. If you'd like to look at the trends over the past 11 years of our count, the data can be found on our website at: http://www.loudounwildlife.org/Butterfly_Count.htm

Many thanks to all who participated on this very hot day: Bonnie Arnold, Joe Coleman, Bill Cour, Helen DeGroot, Linda Espejo, Elizabeth Evans, Mary Ann Good, Nicole Hamilton, Bruni Haydl, Betty Hedges, Doug and Allison Hubbard and their son Luke, Dee Leggett, Jon Little, Karen Lowe, Bob Lyon, Brian Magurn, Barbara McKee, Tina Ojala, Jeff Pfoutz, Jackie Phillips, Andy Rabin, Tom Raque, Eric Raun, Kathy Ruckman and her son David, Eric and Carol Scorlock and their four kids (Lindsey, Ashley, Brian, and Josh), Karen Strick, Diane Sylvester, Sheri Trossman and her two sons, Helen Van Ryzin, and Mimi Westervelt.



Insect ID: Dung Beetle

by Molly Darr

Most people maintain the classic image of these fascinating creatures dutifully rolling spherical balls of dung here and there. However, their responsibilities are not limited to this notable activity. The dung itself is used as food for both adults and larvae. The rolling itself takes place when the adult is hauling off the dung to bury, which is also used for brooding.

Dung beetles can be found throughout the world and across the U.S., with the predominance of species found in the southeast. Though there are a few native species of dung beetle in Virginia, a non-native dung beetle species has been introduced into the state as a means to help reduce the breeding habitat of dung-



Photo courtesy of wildlife-pictures-online.com

breeding flies, including the horn fly and face fly, which are perilous pests to cattle and cost farmers millions of dollars in insecticides and veterinarian fees. By introducing species with greater potential to bury cattle dung, the fly population can be reduced.

Due to the diversity of dung beetles, some species feed on the dung of only one species of animal, while others do not discriminate. Habitats can include anything from grasslands to forests and from sand to clay-based soils. Overall, dung beetles are between ½ and 1 inch long and many are an incongruous lovely metallic blue-green and copper. The front of the head is flattened and shieldlike (clypeus) and is golden bronze. The male of some species has one or two horns on the head or thorax, while the slightly larger female has a smaller tubercle. The legs are modified for digging and rolling.

These insects play a crucial role in nature by greatly reducing fecal matter. This yields a significant decline in the spreading of infectious diseases through flies, by reducing the prevalence of their breeding grounds. Additionally, by burying and consuming the dung, they improve nutrient cycling in soils. A truly indispensable creature, the dung beetle silently toils out of sight to improve our quality of life on a daily basis. It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it.

Primary sources:

<http://insects.tamu.edu/fieldguide/bimg146.html>, article by Drees, B.M. and John Jackman.
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/ent/clinic/Bugofwk/970081/dungbeet.htm>, article by M.J. Munster
<http://www.answers.com/topic/dung-beetle-2>
<http://www.iowabeefcenter.org/pdfs/bch/03810.pdf>

Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count — December 28, 2007

For three weeks every Christmas season, thousands of people spread out all over North America to count every wild bird they can find. The information from these and other bird counts occurring in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and parts of Central and South America, is sent to the National Audubon Society (NAS). Working with the Cornell University School of Ornithology, NAS creates a database of the sightings. This data has been collected since 1899 and has become invaluable in monitoring bird populations and is the largest example of citizen science in the world. But these bird counts are not only science, they are also fun. People explore both the country's natural areas and not-so-natural areas. The counters share their wonder of the wild and the beauty of feathered creatures with like-minded people, and sometimes they even find a truly rare bird. And while finding rarities is one of the most exciting aspects of these counts, there is no doubt that a wealth of helpful knowledge comes from all the data collected.

Join us on the **Eleventh Annual Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count on Friday, December 28** as we participate in this North American annual event. Our count-circle has a 15-mile diameter and covers 177 square miles of Loudoun's countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. The circle includes a number of very special natural areas such as Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, Dulles Wetlands, Beaverdam Reservoir, Morven Park, Ball's Bluff, several large private estates, about five miles of the C&O Canal and Potomac River in the vicinity of White's Ferry, and much of still rural western Loudoun County. Everyone is welcome — both beginners and expert birders (amateurs are teamed with experienced birders). If you are interested in participating for the whole day or just a part of the day, contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

A \$5 fee for adult participants (over 18) helps offset the cost of preparing this database and its publication in the CBC issue of American Birds.



Conservation Issues

by Joe Coleman

Beginning with this issue of the Habitat Herald, a page will be devoted to conservation issues in Loudoun County, and we are looking for someone to regularly report on these. If you think you might be interested please contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org or 540554-2542.



Opening Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve: Loudoun County's citizens persuaded the Board of Supervisors to establish Banshee Reeks as the county's first public nature preserve in 1999. Since then we have worked with many others to preserve and protect this wonderful place.

Unfortunately, few people in Loudoun County are aware of the preserve, and even fewer have had the opportunity to visit it since it is rarely open to the public (one weekend a month and an occasional special event). Since most other similar places in the Washington area are open to the public from dawn to dusk, even

when there is no staff on site, discussions began in the spring on exploring ways to do the same with Banshee Reeks. Staff from the Loudoun County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services (PRCS) and several stakeholder organizations reached agreement on a way to accomplish this at a meeting in June (see www.bansheereeks.org/ for more details).

On September 4, Diane Ryburn, the PRCS Director, informed us that she plans to implement an interim, pilot program to open the preserve more hours through the end of this December. Beginning sometime in September, Banshee Reeks will open to the public with staff support from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on the first and third weekends of the month, and without staff the same hours on the second and fourth weekends of the month. Furthermore, groups will be allowed access at other times by submitting a request for a permit to the preserve manager.

In November, Ms. Ryburn plans to bring the PRCS staff and the stakeholder organizations together again to evaluate the new hours and procedures and recommend changes for the time period beginning January 2008.

While it is disappointing that the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve will still not be open as many hours as similar facilities in our area, this is a positive beginning and will hopefully lead to more hours in the near future.

■ Continued on page 9

■ Conservation Issues, continued

O'Connor Tract High School Site: It appears that the Loudoun County Public School System is going to acquire the O'Connor Tract, just north of Leesburg, for a new high school. The headwaters for Big Springs Creek, the last remaining stream in Northern Virginia where wild trout are found, is on this tract. Over the years, local citizens, numerous organizations including the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, and state agencies have worked together to protect and restore habitat along Big Creek. Not only have riparian buffers been planted to maintain the cold water that trout require, but also VDOT was exceedingly careful to not damage the stream during its construction on Rte 15 in that area.

At a recent meeting of the School Board, the Town of Leesburg, the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, and a number of organizations and individuals spoke in favor of the schools acquiring the site. However, in addition, they made a number of recommendations emphasizing the need to carefully site and build the new school on the property so that it not only does no harm to the stream but also enhances it. LWC has sent a letter to the School Board supporting those sentiments and asking the school system to view Big Springs Creek as a wonderful opportunity for an invaluable outdoor classroom that the students and the public can work together to restore and protect.

Revisions to the Zoning Ordinance: In August, extensive revisions to the Zoning Ordinance were presented to the Board of Supervisors for their consideration and adoption. Because many of the critical components of the *Revised Comprehensive Plan* (passed by the last Board of Supervisors) that protected the environment are either missing or administratively reversed in the proposed *Revised Zoning Ordinance*, LWC sent out an action alert on its inadequacies.

The Comprehensive Plan calls for protections for stream and riparian buffers that are missing from the *Revised Zoning Ordinance*. The River and Stream Corridor Overlay District (RSCOD) was thrown out by the courts on a technicality, but the current Board of Supervisors has not done anything to re-implement it. The *Revised Zoning Ordinance* was an opportunity to correct this mistake, but this did not happen. Also missing are strong protections for our mountains and steep slopes and for the parts of the county where limestone predominates. If these areas are damaged, the environment will become even more degraded, and all of us will end up paying millions for the damage caused.

Additionally, the requirements for Conservation Design and the requirements that developers identify valuable environmental features/resources have been weakened despite the fact that they are critical components of the County's *Revised Comprehensive Plan*. There are also several modifications that would allow the amount of impervious surfaces to increase. Numerous studies show that when this happens, there is a direct link to a lessening of water quality because

stormwater runoff increases as the amount of impervious surfaces increases. All the pollutants and sediment that the stormwater runoff carries reach our waterways. And, with the loosening of regulations that require retention of existing trees and vegetation, riparian buffers will be degraded and will lose much of their effectiveness.

This fall the Board of Supervisors will be debating the merits of the *Revised Zoning Ordinance*. Because it omits some environmental protections and allows means to bypass those protections in other places, we believe that the *Revised Zoning Ordinance* should be sent back to the drawing board.

A Platform for the Future: The Campaign for Loudoun's Future, a partnership of concerned citizens and community-based nonprofit organizations from all over Loudoun County, has pulled together a *Platform for Loudoun's Future*. As a member of the Campaign, LWC made several suggestions for inclusion in the document. We are pleased to see that the platform emphasizes the importance of the environment and the need to preserve and protect healthy ecosystems for both us and the county's wildlife. The platform not only calls for the County to make sure that all of us have clean air and clean water, but it also emphasizes the importance of wild natural places. Additionally, it points out that too much development near streams causes rapid stormwater runoff, as well as the scouring of stream banks, and severely reduces the ability of the land to retain ground water during droughts.

The platform can be found in its entirety at www.loudounsfuture.org. Please take a few minutes to read it — we think you will be pleased with its content.





Programs and Field Trips

Space is limited for many of these programs and field trips. Please call the designated program contact for further information and to reserve your spot.

LOUDOUN WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY BOARD MEETING–

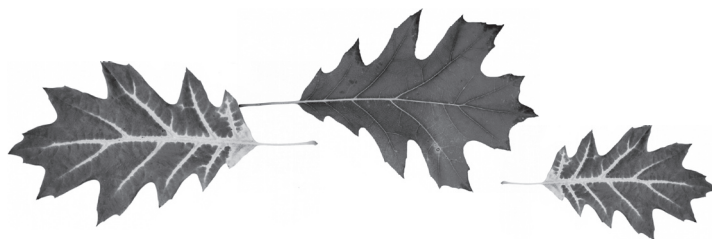
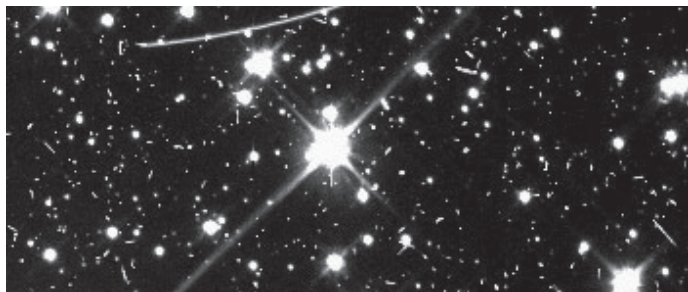
LWC's Board normally meets the first Tuesday of every month at ANS's Rust Nature Sanctuary. All LWC members are welcome. Pre-meeting discussion begins at 7:00 p.m., with the meeting itself beginning at 7:30 p.m. *Contact Nicole Hamilton (540-882-882-9638 or nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org) for additional information.*

EXPLORING WETLANDS – Saturday, October 6, 10:00 a.m.

– 1:00 p.m. **Registration Required.** During this field session, we will explore the different types of wetlands in our area and what they are. Jeff Wolinski, Consulting Ecologist, will show us the different soils, plants, and conditions that comprise wetlands. He will also explain why wetlands are so important and what we can do to protect them. The field-class location, close to Leesburg, is still to be determined – check our website for more details. If time permits, we will also visit nearby man-made wetlands. **To register for this free field session, sponsored by the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.**

BIRDING BANSHEE – Saturday, October 13, 8:00 a.m. Join the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and the Friends of Banshee Reeks at the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve for the monthly bird walk. Because of its rich and varied habitat, this part of the county is a birding hot spot. Please bring binoculars. *Questions: contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

STAR GAZING – Saturday October 13, 7:30 p.m. (Rain date October 20) Join the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship as we learn about constellations and planets with astronomer Kevin Boles of Morgan County Observatory in Berkeley Spring. Bring a reclining lawn chair and, if you have them, your telescope or a good pair of binoculars. Kevin will have an 8" reflector telescope and star charts to help guide us on this interstellar journey. *Questions: contact Ginny Lane at 540-668-7640 or glane@blueridgecenter.org.*



EXPLORING FALL – Sunday, October 14, 10:00 a.m. – noon.

Join Phil Daley as he leads an autumn exploration of the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship. During this free family hike, we will look at how plants and animals prepare for winter. Also, come and enjoy the fall foliage in this heavily forested preserve. The Blue Ridge Center comprises 900 acres of field, forest and mountainside on the west side of Harpers Ferry Road in northwestern Loudoun County. Meet at the Neersville Volunteer Fire Station on Rt. 671 at 10:00 a.m. **Questions: contact Phil Daley at 540-338-6528.**

MID-WEEK NATURE WALK – Wednesday, October 17, 8:00

a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Join the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on the second of our new, mid-week birding trips. Joe Coleman will lead as we drive some of the dirt roads between Bluemont and Upperville looking for migrants and other signs of fall. Meet at the Snicker's Gap Hawk Watch parking lot where we will car pool. *Questions: contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

FAMILY STREAM DAY – Saturday, October 20, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

The 6th annual "Exploring Our Streams Day," planned by Loudoun Watershed Watch, will offer exploration of a local urban stream, hands-on discovery of smart landscaping, storm-water and erosion control, games for children, wetland habitat information, water conservation, stream assessment and monitoring, and the many ways you can help your local streams and environment. Location: Harper Park Middle School, 701 Potomac Station Drive, Leesburg, VA. For more information and directions http://www.loudounwatershedwatch.org/subitem4_6.html

SUNDAY IN THE PRESERVE – Sunday, October 21, 1:00 p.m.

Join Phil Daley of the Friends of Banshee Reeks and the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a free informal, family walk around the preserve. Search for the many natural wonders that make this such a special place. **For information call the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve at 703-669-0316.**

IDENTIFYING HAWKS: A CLASS AND A FIELD TRIP TO WAGGONER'S GAP, PA. October 23 and 28. Registration Required. Each autumn, hawks migrate south along the Blue Ridge. On Sunday, October 28, Liam McGranaghan, an experienced falconer, licensed bander of raptors and educator, will lead a field trip to Waggoner's Gap in PA, about a 2.5 hour drive. Waggoner's Gap is one of the premier hawk-watching sites in our area. If the weather cooperates, we should see a wide diversity of birds of prey. On Tuesday, October 23, Liam will teach an evening class at 7:00 p.m. on how to identify hawks and other birds of prey in the field. The trip to Waggoner's Gap is free, and one does not need to take the class to go on the field trip. However, there is a fee of \$10 (\$15 for non-members) for the class, and priority for the field trip will be given to those taking the class. **Registration is required (\$10/member or \$15/non-member fee for the class) – contact Laura Weidner at lweidner@loudounwildlife.org or Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 to sign up.**

BIRDING THE BLUE RIDGE CENTER – Saturday, October 27, 8:00 a.m. On the fourth Saturday of each month (except December), the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy leads a free bird walk at the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship. This beautiful 900-acre preserve is located on Harpers Ferry Road, Rt. 671, in northwestern Loudoun County. Only a few miles south of Harpers Ferry and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, the property includes meadows in the valley and heavily forested slopes on the Blue Ridge. Meet at the Neersville Volunteer Fire Station on Rt. 671 at 8:00 a.m. *Questions: contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org*

STREAM MONITORING PROTOCOL PRACTICUM – Sunday, Oct. 28, 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. Benthic macroinvertebrates (bottom-dwelling boneless creatures) are important indicators of

stream health. Master the skills of habitat assessment and fine tune your techniques for capturing stream organisms. Learn how to identify these fascinating creatures and the specific collecting methodology used in our Water Quality Monitoring Program. **Sign-up for this free session, sponsored by the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and the Audubon Naturalist Society, is required: Call Cliff Fairweather at 703-737-0021 to sign up.**



BIRDING BANSHEE – Saturday, November 10, 8:00 a.m. See the October 13 listing for details.

BIRDING CENTRAL LOUDOUN – Sunday, November 18, 8:00 a.m. – noon. Join Joe Coleman and Laura

Weidner on a half-day birding trip to explore several birding hotspots in central Loudoun County, including the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, the Dulles Greenway Wetlands Mitigation Project, and the Beaverdam Reservoir. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Banshee Reeks Visitor Center. After a few hours of walking at the preserve, we will drive to the wetlands and the reservoir looking for local resident birds, migrating waterfowl, and wintering raptors. This free birding trip is sponsored by the Audubon Naturalist Society and the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. *For more information contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

SUNDAY IN THE PRESERVE – Sunday, November 18, 1:00 p.m. See the October 21 listing for details.

BIRDING THE BLUE RIDGE CENTER – Saturday, November 24, 8:00 a.m. See the October 27 listing for details.

BEGINNER BIRD WALK – Saturday, December 1, 9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. This walk is for bird-watching beginners and is led by experienced birder and naturalist Phil Daley. Learn about what to look and listen for and get tips on identification and the best tools for doing so. Meet at the Audubon Naturalist Society's Rust Nature Sanctuary in Leesburg and bring binoculars if you have them. *Questions: contact Phil Daley at 540-338-6528.*

BIRDING HOTSPOTS IN LOUDOUN COUNTY – Sunday, December 2, 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Pre-registration required. Join Joe Coleman on a daylong search for sparrows, hawks, waterfowl, and other seasonal birds at some of Loudoun County's richest birding destinations. The group will meet at ANS's Rust Nature Sanctuary in Leesburg and then proceed to Beaverdam Reservoir, Banshee Reeks, and the Dulles Wetlands, before ending the day at Lucketts. All levels of birders are welcome. This program is co-sponsored with the Audubon Naturalist Society. Pre-registration required: Members (ANS & LWC): \$28; Nonmembers: \$39. To register contact ANS at 301-652-9188 x16.

BIRDING BANSHEE – Saturday, December 8, 8:00 a.m. See the October 13 listing for details.

SUNDAY IN THE PRESERVE – Sunday, December 16, 1:00 p.m. See the October 21 listing for details.



■ Continued on page 12

■ *Programs and Field Trips, continued*

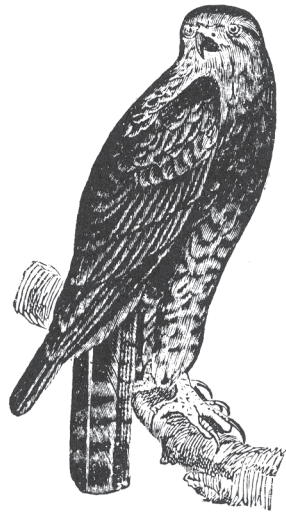
ANNUAL CENTRAL LOUDOUN CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

– **Friday, December 28.** Join us as we participate in the National Audubon Society's Annual Christmas Bird Count. Started in 1899, these surveys are held all over the country. The results are used to better understand bird populations and their health and dynamics. Our count-circle has a 15-mile diameter and covers 177 square miles of Loudoun's countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. This part of Loudoun County includes areas that have both beautiful scenery and plentiful birds. Everyone is welcome, both beginners and expert birders (amateurs are teamed with experienced birders). *If you are interested in participating for the whole day or just part of the day, contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudoun-wildlife.org.*

CALMES NECK CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT – Saturday, January 5.

There are several Christmas Bird Counts in Loudoun County besides the Central Loudoun CBC. The Calmes Neck Christmas Bird Count, which includes much of far western Loudoun County, is scheduled for January 5. The count area includes a wide variety of habitat ranging from mountain forests to rural subdivisions to old farm fields and meadows, with the Shenandoah River running through the area. *If you would like to join the Calmes Neck Christmas Bird Count, please contact Margaret Wester at 540-837-2799 or margaretwester@hotmail.com. (Both Joe Coleman, jandkcoleman@erols.com or 540-554-2542 and Phil Daley, pedaley@verizon.net or 540-338-6528, are sector leaders for the Calmes Neck CBC. Phil's area includes Round Hill and north, and Joe's area includes Bluemont south to Bloomfield. If you are interested in joining either of them, please contact each directly.)*

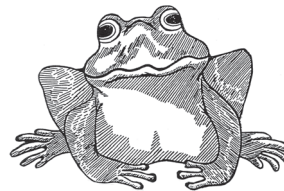
BIRDING BANSHEE – Saturday, January 12, 8:00 a.m. See the October 13 listing for details.



SEARCHING FOR BIRDS OF PREY – Saturday, January 19, 2:30 p.m. Registration Required. Join Liam McGranaghan on a winter raptor search sponsored by the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. After meeting at the ANS's Rust Nature Sanctuary in Leesburg, we will drive the back roads of Loudoun County with frequent stops to find and identify the many hawks and an owl or two who winter over here. **Registration is required:** contact Laura Weidner at 540-554-2747 or lweidner@loudounwildlife.org

SUNDAY IN THE PRESERVE – Sunday, January 20, 1:00 p.m. See the October 21 listing for details.

BIRDING THE BLUE RIDGE CENTER – Saturday, January 26, 8:00 a.m. See the October 27 listing for details.



Questions about the above programs? Contact Laura Weidner at lweidner@loudounwildlife.org or 540-554-2747.

For up-to-date information on our programs check our web site at **www.loudounwildlife.org**

Time to Renew Your Membership for 2008



It's time to renew your Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy membership for 2008. By renewing now, you will continue to help us make a difference in promoting the preservation and proliferation of healthy wildlife habitats.

Your membership and donations make it possible for us to offer free programs and field trips, publish the quarterly Habitat Herald and other publications on the wildlife of Loudoun County, speak out for wildlife, and educate people on the importance of preserving wildlife habitat in Loudoun, one of the nation's fastest growing counties.

To renew, please use the form on the back page or go to **www.loudounwildlife.org/Join.htm**

Programs and Field Trips Sponsored By Our Partners



Discovering nature.

Audubon Naturalist Society Rust Nature Sanctuary
802 Children's Center Rd, Leesburg, VA 20175
703-669-0000

Come and enjoy the Rust Nature Sanctuary anytime from dawn to dusk, seven days a week, any day of the year. Our 68 acres encompasses meadows, forests, and ponds where you will find a variety of wildlife and plants. You might encounter nesting songbirds from the tropics in our oak-hickory forest, a fox hunting in the meadow, or colorful dragonflies darting above our pond.

Audubon School Programs: Explore nature with your students!

Bring your class to the Rust Nature Sanctuary for a hands-on field trip experience, or let us come to you with our Naturalists in the Classroom program! All of our programs are correlated with the Virginia Science Standards of Learning. Our school program catalog with complete information is available on our website www.audubonnaturalist.org; for programs at our Rust Nature Sanctuary call 703-669-0000.

Fall programs at Rust:

Discovery Hunt; Seasons of Change; Small Creatures for Small Hands; Birds of a Feather; Growing Green; The Producers; Who Needs a Backbone; Animal Habitats; Life Cycles; Survival; Geology Rocks; Web of Life; Pond Exploration; Stream Science

In-School Programs:

Exploring Your Schoolyard; Wonderful Worms; Feathered Friends; Reptile or Amphibian; Survival; Geology Rocks; Stream Science

Scout Programs: Looking for a wild place to earn your scout badges?

We offer a variety of programs for scouts designed to help them earn their nature and wildlife-related badges. Explore our pond, meadow, and forest and experience nature up close! Programs are offered at our Rust Nature Sanctuary and can be custom designed for your group. For more information and to register for programs at Rust call 703-669-0000.

Girl Scouts:

Daisies

Nature related petal programs

Brownie Try-Its

Eco-explorer, Water Everywhere, Watching Wildlife, Animals, Plants, Earth and Sky, Senses

Junior Badges

Science Discovery, Water Wonders, Your Outdoor Surroundings, Wildlife, Earth Connections, Wildflowers and Plants, Doing Hobbies

Cadette and Senior Girl Scouts

All About Birds, Wildlife

General Patches

Water Drop Patch

Boy and Cub Scouts:

Wolf Cubs

Elective 13: Birds

Bear Cubs

Achievement 5: Sharing your World with Wildlife

Webelos

Naturalist, Forester

Boy Scouts

We can lead nature hikes focused on your area of interest: birds, insects, amphibians, etc.

Bird Seed Sale at the Sanctuary on Nov. 2, 3, & 4 – contact Cliff Fairweather at cliff@audubonnaturalist.org or 703-327-0021 for more information.



Claude Moore Park Fall Nature Programs

Visitor Center: 21544 Old Vestal's Gap Rd., Sterling, VA 20164
www.loudoun.gov/prcs/parks/claude.htm

Visitor Center/Discovery Room: Daily 9:00A-5:00P

Park Hours: Daily 7:00A-Dusk

Enjoy the change of the seasons as you explore the forests, meadows and ponds at Claude Moore Park. Preschoolers can discover nature up close. Scouts can earn badges on the trails and in Frogshackle Nature Center. Call 571-258-3704 for

■ Continued on page 14

■ Programs and Field Trips Sponsored By Our Partners, continued

information about these and other activities or to register. Here's a sample of the park's naturalist-led programs:

Nutty Squirrels

(Ages 3-6) Nests and nuts and furry tails--explore squirrels' homes, food and climbing ways. Play a nutty game and sing a squirrelly song.

Monday 10/22, 9:30AM-11:00AM or 12:30PM- 2:00PM, \$10.50/child

Fall Nature Discovery Camp

(Ages 6-9) Discover nature in the fall as you explore the trees and forests, experiment to learn how leaves change colors, play a tree game, and make a leaf craft.

Tuesday 11/6, 9:00AM- 3:00PM, \$42/child

Autumn Owl Prowl

(Ages 5 & up) Explore the dark woods looking for owls. Learn to walk the nighttime trails without lights, spot bats, call owls, identify insects and other night animals during this naturalist led walk through the forest.

Saturday 10/13, 7:00PM- 9:00PM, \$5/person

Exploration & Campfire: Fall Harvest

(All ages) Celebrate the harvest of fruits, nuts and seeds during an early evening walk; listen to Native American stories and songs around the campfire. Then toast the marshmallows we provide.

Saturday 11/17, 5:00PM- 7:00PM, \$5.00



Ospreys frequently pass over Snickers Gap during migration.
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

Snickers Gap Hawkwatch 2007

We extend an invitation to all able-bodied, stalwart souls able to assist with monitoring the hawk migration at this site.

Location: Snickers Gap, Virginia is a cut in the eastern-most ridge of the Appalachian Mountains west of Washington, D.C. The hawkwatch is located on Route 7 about twenty miles west of Leesburg on the Loudoun County/Clarke County line. It is one link in the chain of hawk-monitoring sites along the eastern U.S. mountains.

History: Since the early 1990s Snickers Gap volunteers have recorded birds of prey flying south over this site. Fifteen species of raptors have been observed at Snickers and a good number of other birds can also be seen in migration. Loons, swans, and thousands of songbirds have been noted here. September is a great month to see Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Monarch Butterflies migrating. The specialty of the site is, of course, the raptors. One year, 19,000 Broad-winged Hawks flew over in one day. The middle of September is the best time of the year to view this phenomenon. We also see Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Golden Eagles, and Goshawks, to name a few of the more sought after birds. The average total hawk migrants counted each fall is 12,000 birds. We count from early September through late November.

Interests: At Snickers Gap, many people come by to get their first looks at birds of prey. The fact that the site is located right off of a well-traveled road has prompted many long time passers-by to stop in, ask a few questions, and in some cases, evolve into one of our regulars. The site is friendly, parking is abundant, and there is a direct link to the famous Appalachian Trail, right from the parking lot. Most locals are familiar with "The Bear's Den," a group of huge west-facing boulders on the trail. The Bear's Den sits high over the valley to the west, and affords a beautiful western view of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Information: If you want to learn more about different species of hawks and other raptors and would be interested in helping us monitor some of our most fascinating species of birds, please consider a visit to the site and consider assisting the count. If the idea seems a bit intimidating, please feel free to call Joan Boudreau or Bob Abrams at 703-734-1238; we'll give you confidence and further information. Field trips through LWC, MOS, ANS, and VSO tend to be scheduled in September and October, if that introduction is more appealing. Perhaps you'll be hooked after your first visit. We welcome all ages and are willing to work with you to try to arrange for co-counting partners, if desired.

Supplies: Binoculars, a spotting scope, a comfortable folding chair, and food are some of the highly recommended supplies to bring with you for a relaxing day of birding. Warm clothes are also good to have along. The weather at 1100 feet can be quite different from the warmer valleys below.

Directions: The Snickers Gap Hawkwatch is located in a parking lot on the south side of Route 7 at the junction of Route 7 and Route 601. Take Route 7 west from Leesburg for twenty miles. At the top of a long hill, just past Bluemont, Virginia, turn left onto Route 601 South. Take an immediate right into the Snickers Gap Hawkwatch parking lot. If you see people with binoculars and scopes, you have found us. We generally count from 9am to 5pm. Over the years, we have sometimes heard from individuals who don't find counters when they come up to visit. We apologize but try to man the site as much as possible. We are all volunteers and most of us have other lives, so we are only able to cover the site one day a week at most. Please let this be an inspiration to you to join us and help.

Reflections on the American Kestrel

by Gerry Hawkins

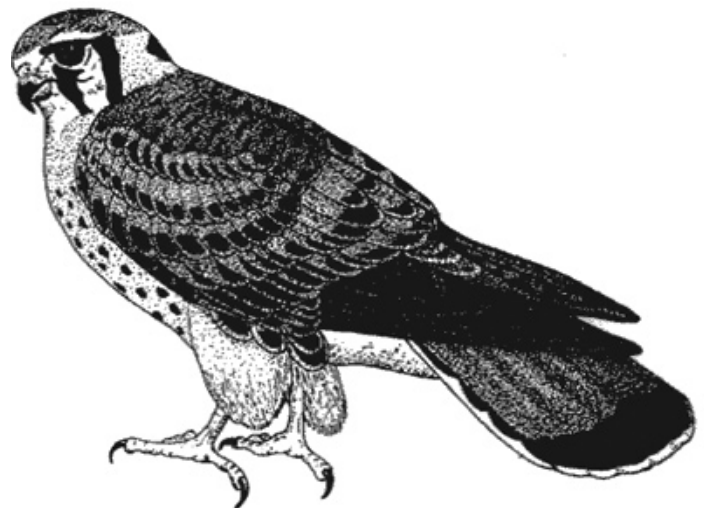
The American Kestrel, a small, open-land falcon which often may be seen perched on a telephone pole or wire, is perhaps the most common diurnal raptor in North America. The population of the American Kestrel is thought to be stable overall, but it appears that there have been significant decreases in populations of this species in some areas in recent years, particularly in the Northeast. The many birders who covered still largely rural Loudoun County on International Migratory Bird Day on May 12, 2007, reported seeing six Kestrels, mostly in the southwestern part of the county, as compared to nine on the same day last year. Although valid conclusions cannot be reached on the basis of one day or even a season of birding and the American Kestrel is still a fairly easy bird to find in appropriate habitat, many suspect that it is similarly undergoing a long-term decline in northern Virginia and elsewhere in the region.

Although the causes of the American Kestrel's decline in the Northeast are not known, it is suspected that the loss of open habitat from human development and the natural reforestation of former agricultural areas have had an adverse effect, both through a loss of habitat and a resulting increase in populations of and predation by the Cooper's Hawk. The latter factor is suggested by the numbers of these birds recorded at the Cape May, New Jersey, Hawk Watch in recent years and anecdotal testimony regarding the predatory activities of Cooper's Hawks at American Kestrel nest boxes. As to the former, 2004 produced a new all-time high for Cooper's Hawks and a new all-time low for the American Kestrel at the Cape May Hawk Watch. Numbers of the American Kestrel increased there in 2005 and decreased again in 2006 to a number which was still significantly above the 2004 level but nevertheless more than 40% below the 30-year average, while numbers of the Cooper's Hawk continued to set new records in both 2005 and 2006. Another potential cause of the decline of American Kestrels is pesticides. There is, however, no evidence of a current widespread contamination threat to the American Kestrel from pesticides, although some harm to it may result from efforts to control insects, a principal part of its summer diet. Factors relating to the density of small rodents, another principal source of prey, also must be considered, although it is unlikely that this factor would result in a long-term, as compared to cyclical, decline in numbers. Populations of the American Kestrel also may be affected by a scarcity of nest sites. The Kestrel is a secondary cavity nester which nests in holes in trees, rock cavities, and crevices in cliffs, as well as artificial nest boxes and even small spaces in buildings. The number of suitable breeding cavities limits the breeding density of the American Kestrel, and the availability of secondary nest sites thus must be considered in an evaluation of the decline in the population of this species. A final consideration is the effects of West Nile Virus, which has had adverse impacts on the populations of several species of birds.

It is hoped that some information about the reason(s) for the decline of the American Kestrel in the East will result from a study recently started by the Delmarva Ornithological Society. This study will attempt to estimate the current population of the American Kestrel in Delaware, identify reasons for its declining numbers there, and develop strategies, such as increased placement of appropriate nest boxes, to stabilize or increase the population.

If, as suspected, the decline of the American Kestrel in the Northeast is in fact significantly due to increased predation by Cooper's Hawks, it is apparent that one little-known plumage feature of the American Kestrel is not serving its presumed purpose very well. Both sexes of the American Kestrel are of course easily identified by the thick, vertical black streaks behind and in front of their white cheeks, or "mustache" marks, but they also have a much less noticeable black spot behind each back mustache mark, toward the rear of the rufous nape. These black spots resemble a pair of eyes (ocelli, or false eyes) when the bird is viewed either from the rear or from the front when the head of the bird is bent over working on prey. (For a good depiction of this plumage feature of the American Kestrel, see Plate 35 on page 87 of *Hawks of North America – Peterson Field Guides* (2nd ed. 2001).) Similar neck spots are present on the Northern and Ferruginous Pygmy Owls, and there are hints of such spots on the neck of the Elf Owl. These neck spots are similar to the prominent white spots on the back of the ears of tigers, which can similarly resemble a pair of eyes.

It has long been theorized that these neck spots might function as false eyes which deceive potential predators and prey as to which way the animal is facing. The American Kestrel's habit of bobbing its head may help make its neck spots look even more realistic, except perhaps to a voracious Cooper's Hawk which has otherwise identified it by its prominent "mustache" marks or otherwise!





Yes, I want to become an LWC Member!

Membership Benefits include:

Subscription to Habitat Herald • Classes and Workshops
Volunteer Opportunities • Regular Monthly Meetings and Programs

**Mail this form along with your payment to: Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy,
PO Box 2088, Purcellville, VA 20134-2088**

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: (H) _____ (W) _____ E-mail _____

Please indicate your membership level:

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$10 Student * | <input type="checkbox"/> \$20 Individual * | <input type="checkbox"/> \$30 Family * | <input type="checkbox"/> \$75 Corporate * |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$200 Individual Lifetime | <input type="checkbox"/> \$300 Family Lifetime | <input type="checkbox"/> Additional Donation \$ _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Renewing Member | <input type="checkbox"/> New Member | (* membership runs from January 1 - December 31) | |

Join online: www.loudounwildlife.org



Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy
P.O. Box 2088
Purcellville, VA 20134-2088

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