

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #10  
PENNSY, BLACK & CELERY SWAMPS – STATE GAME LANDS 151 & 284**

**Phase I Conservation Plan  
(Prepared By: John Tautin; May, 2004)**

**Purpose of the Phase I Conservation Plan:** This phase I conservation plan is a preliminary document to: 1) catalogue the natural resources and built environment for each Important Bird Area (IBA), 2) identify site boundaries, 3) document the criteria for which it was selected, 4) describe the birds and wildlife habitat which occur on the site with special reference to the species for which the site was selected as an IBA, 5) identify any conservation issues or threats to the site, and 6) provide recommendations for conservation actions to conserve or enhance habitat for bird populations, especially for those species for which the site was selected as an IBA. This Phase I Conservation Plan is intended to update and expand the one-page site report contained in “A Guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania” (Crossley, 1999). The recommendations are presented from the perspective of bird and wildlife habitat conservation. It is acknowledged that not all the recommendations contained herein may be feasible or affordable. However, the plan is presented as an initial position from which to plan for and implement bird conservation on the site.

**Site Name:** Pennsy, Black and Celery Swamps (“The Swamps”), a.k.a. State Game Lands (SGL) No.151 and No. 284.

**Size:** 2,598 acres (1,052 hectares) (1,213 acres (491 hectares) in SGL No. 151, and 1,385 acres (561 hectares) in SGL No. 284).

**Ownership:**  
Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC)

**County/Municipality:**  
Lawrence County/Plaingrove and Washington Townships, and Mercer County/Liberty and Springfield Townships.

**Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:**  
The IBA is within the Glaciated Pittsburgh Plateau Section of the Appalachian Plateaus Physiographic Province. The IBA is part of the Lower Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Plain Bird Conservation Region (BCR) # 13. The IBA is within the Ohio River drainage basin. Neshannock Creek and Slippery Rock Creek watersheds drain the IBA. Neshannock Creek is a tributary of the Shenango River, which joins the Beaver River. Slippery Rock Creek is a tributary of the Beaver River. The Beaver River flows into the Ohio River at the town of Beaver.

**Legislative Districts:**  
3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District, U.S. Representative, Phil English (R) – Lawrence and Mercer Counties

50<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District, State Senator Robert D. Robbins (R) – Plaingrove, Washington, Liberty and Springfield Townships

8<sup>th</sup> House District, State Representative, Richard R. Stevenson (R) – Liberty and Springfield Townships

10<sup>th</sup> House District, State Representative, Fran Lagrotta (D) – Plaingrove Township

17<sup>th</sup> House District, State Representative, Rod E. Wilt (R) – Washington Township

**Stewardship Adoption Status:**

Bartramian Audubon Society (Bartramian) (<http://www.csonline.net/russs/bas/>) has adopted this IBA and has been active. Although it has not adopted the Swamps formally, Three Rivers Birding Club (TRBC) (<http://www.3riversbirdingclub.org>) of Pittsburgh has also has an interest in promoting birding and bird conservation at the site.

**IBA Selection Criteria:**

- (3) The IBA provides breeding habitat for Pennsylvania species of special concern including species with *candidate-rare* status; Pied-billed Grebe (B\*), American Coot (B), Marsh Wren (B 6± pair)
- (4b) The IBA contains extensive, diverse wetlands with emergent marsh and swamps, supporting Virginia Rail (B), Sora (B), Common Moorhen (B), Sandhill Crane (B 1 pair)

*Note: Numbers indicate single season maximum documented in recent years.*

\*SM= spring migration; FM= fall migration; B= breeding; W= winter

**Important Avian Habitats:** Emergent, scrub-shrub and open water wetlands.

**General Site Description:**

The Swamps are located in central western Pennsylvania, in Lawrence and Mercer Counties, in the vicinity of Mercer and Grove City. The landscape contains many glacial features and is poorly drained, creating an ideal situation for natural, shallow wetlands. The Swamps run as two series of linked wetlands, “Schollard’s Run,” Pennsy Swamp and Black Swamp on SGL No. 284, and Celery Swamp on SGL No.151. These wetlands are surrounded by a mix of forestland, active farmland inactive farmland reverting to brush and forest, and rural residential areas. Some large tracts in the area were strip-mined for coal during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and have been reclaimed as grass lands. The largest man-made feature in the immediate area, and a strong influence on local land use, is the very large Grove City outlet mall located three miles away at the intersection of State Route 258 and Interstate 79. I -79 traverses parts of SGL No. 151.

The Swamps qualified as an IBA because of their importance to marsh and aquatic birds. As the name implies, wetlands are the important habitats at this IBA. The wetlands consist primarily of emergent wetlands, shrub-scrub wetlands, wet meadows and some open water. The Swamps’ wetlands are high quality, and occur naturally in a flowage type situation, enhanced in places by beavers or PGC management. Cat-tail, Spadder-dock and Button Brush are the common plants in these wetlands.

### **Summary of Birds:**

The paucity of historic records from the Swamps area suggests that it was largely overlooked by early ornithologists in western Pennsylvania. In recent years, however, the avifauna of the Swamps has received considerable attention, especially from organizations like Bartramian and TRBC. Bartramian members have recorded data for Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology's (PSO) Special Areas Project (SAP). PGC staff observations and survey data add to the contemporary knowledge of the avifauna of the Swamps.

The status of King Rail, American Bittern and Least Bittern at the Swamps has been a frequent topic in recent years. One of the last confirmed breedings of King Rails in Pennsylvania was at SGL No. 284 in the 1980s (McWilliams and Brauning 2000). The 1992 Atlas of Breeding Birds of Pennsylvania (Brauning 1992) shows King Rail as a "Probable" and "Possible" breeder in the Swamps area. More recently, King Rails have been heard calling during spring migration and the early part of the breeding season on at least three occasions by separate observers, but no nests or young have been documented (Wagner, personal communication). Knowledge of the breeding status American Bittern and Least Bittern at the Swamps is similar: "Probable" and "Possible" breeders according to the Atlas, and continued calling heard in recent years, but no documented nests or young, according to Wagner.

PA species of concern Pied-billed Grebe (*candidate-rare*), Virginia Rail, Sora, American Coot (*candidate-rare*), Common Moorhen, and Marsh Wren (*candidate-rare*) have nested at the Swamps regularly or occasionally in recent years (Wagner, personal communication). Virginia Rail and Sora are believed to be common nesters.

Sandhill Cranes at the Swamps merit special discussion. Sandhill Cranes were so rare in Pennsylvania that Todd (1940) cited only two records from southwestern Pennsylvania around 1900-1902, and writing earlier, Sutton (1928) mentioned none. Today, however, a small number of Sandhill Cranes can be found annually in the vicinity of the Swamps. At least one pair has bred successfully since the early 1990s at or near SGL 151 (Wilhelm 1993, 1994). Sightings of migrants are no longer considered noteworthy, and a wintering population of 20-30 birds has become established (Wagner, personal communication; Fialkovich, personal communication).

Waterfowl are found year around at the Swamps. Canada Goose, Mallard and Wood Duck are common nesting species. PGC and cooperators maintain waterfowl nest structures and a Bluebird nest-box trail.

The *Checklist of the Birds of Pennsy, Black and Celery Swamps, PA*, compiled by Bartramian, lists 212 species of birds.

**Avian Monitoring Efforts:**

Birds have been monitored at the Swamps under PSO's SAP. Records from several years are available, largely through the efforts of Bartramian members. PGC monitors numbers and production of waterfowl.

**Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:**

Educational facilities are not available at the Swamps, but some college classes from Slippery Rock make field trips to the Swamps. Hunting, birding, fishing, and hiking are the most common forms of recreation at the Swamps. Waterfowl and Wild Turkey are the most commonly hunted birds. While not so popular as regional birding destinations such as Pymatuning, Presque Isle or Shenango Reservoir, "the Swamps" draw area birders throughout the year. Ecotourism in the area is not well developed, and opportunities appear limited.

**Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:**

The common watershed problems of non-point source pollution, siltation and other forms of residential and agricultural run-off affect the Swamps. Development and sprawl, stimulated in part by the proximity of the large Grove City outlet mall, continue to encroach on the area. Purple Loosestrife is present and currently the most threatening invasive species.

The area is rich in deposits of glacial gravel, and several mines operate around the Swamps, altering the landscape and threatening water quality. In an ironic, but likely beneficial arrangement in the long run, PGC is involved with gravel mining at the Swamps. In exchange for a mining easement on 30 acres of SGL No. 151, PGC received 200 acres of land to add to No. 151. The mined lands will be reclaimed as shallow wetlands.

While gravel mines have had some negative impacts around the Swamps, they have not had nearly the impact that massive coal mining operations had in altering the landscape at the end of the last century when large tracts adjacent to the Swamps were strip mined. In another irony, these strip mines, now reclaimed to grasslands, have become good habitat for grassland birds. Notable grassland nesters near the Swamps include Northern Harrier, Short-eared Owl (Pennsylvania endangered species), Henslow's Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Bobolink (Fialkovich, personal communication; Wagner, personal communication). Three pairs of Dickcissels (Pennsylvania threatened species) nested in 1996 (Fialkovich, personal communication).

If current plans come to fruition, PGC may acquire some of this reclaimed grassland for addition to SGL No. 284 via a mitigation action required of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. Other reclaimed acreage, some known locally as the "Volant Strips," is sometimes available (Wagner 2003). The availability of these reclaimed grasslands presents an opportunity to expand the scope of this IBA beyond wetlands and wetland species to include grassland species of concern. This expansion would buffer the wetlands from encroaching sprawl.

**Conservation Actions:** *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing** efforts by PGC:*

- Maintaining wetlands for aquatic birds with water control structures
- Maintaining open water areas for aquatic birds with mechanical cutting
- Maintaining nest structures for waterfowl and Bluebirds
- Management and controlling invasive species
- Periodic waterfowl surveys

*The following conservation actions describe proposed recommendations for consideration by PGC and other interested organizations, agencies and groups for the maintenance, improvement and enhancement of habitat for bird species especially to optimize habitat value for IBA target species as well as for the promotion of bird conservation through educational outreach:*

- Manage wetlands to optimize emergent vegetation for wetland birds
- Monitor gravel mining and restoration on SGL No.151, incorporate improvements into the restoration to benefit aquatic birds
- Acquire additional wetlands in the vicinity of SGLs No.151 and No. 284
- Acquire and maintain reclaimed grasslands in the vicinity of SGLs No.151 and No. 284
- Recruit a land trust partner to facilitate acquisitions
- Develop educational materials and programs promoting birding, and featuring IBA status of the site
- Develop an all-encompassing bird checklist for the IBA and update every five years.
- Place IBA signs at public access points
- Partner with Slippery Rock University to volunteer for habitat improvement projects or to conduct breeding bird surveys for state species of concern
- Make SAP data available to PGC land managers

**Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:**

- Bartramian Audubon Society (BAS), Linda Wagner, 724-657-0867
- Lawrence Conservation District (LCD) 724-652-4512
- Mercer Conservation District (MCD) 724-662-2242
- National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) Larry Holjencin, 814-834-6492
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS) 724-662-3740
- Pennsylvania Game Commission, SGL No. 151, Dale Hockenberry, Land Management Supervisor, 814-432-3187; SGL No. 284 James Deniker, Land Manager Supervisor, 814-432-3187
- Three Rivers Birding Club, Mike Fialkovich, 412-351-0456
- Waterfowl USA (WUSA) 803-637-5767

**References:**

Brauning, D.W., Ed. 1992. Atlas of Breeding Birds of Pennsylvania. Univ.of Pittsburgh Press. Pittsburgh, PA. 484 p.

- Crossley, G.J. 1999. A Guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Audubon Society. Harrisburg, PA. 219 p.
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- Sutton, G.M. 1928. An Introduction to the Birds of Pennsylvania. J. Horace McFarland Co. Harrisburg, PA. 169 p.
- Todd, W.E.C., 1940. Birds of Western Pennsylvania. Univ. of Pittsburgh Press. 702 p.