

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #16
TIONESTA SCENIC AND RESEARCH NATURAL AREA**

**Phase I Conservation Plan
(Produced By: Linda Ordiway; 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, 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 augment 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: Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Area

Size: Approximately 4,131 acres (1,652 hectares); 2,018-acre (832 hectares) Scenic Area, and 2,113-acre (845 hectares) Research Natural Area

Ownership:

Federal (US Department of Agriculture, US Forest Service), Private mineral rights within the Scenic Area only.

County/Municipality:

Warren County/Sheffield Township; McKean County/Wetmore Township

Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:

Appalachian Plateau/Bird Conservation Region #28/South Branch of Tionesta Creek drainage (Cherry Run, Rock Run, West Fork Run, and East Fork Run tributaries)

Legislative Districts:

3rd Congressional District, US Representative Phil English (R)

65th Pa House District Jim Lynch (R)

21st Pa Senatorial District Mary Jo White (R)

5th Congressional District, US Representative John Peterson (R)

25th Pa Senatorial District Joseph B. Scarnati

Stewardship Adoption Status: This IBA has not yet been adopted.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (1e) Breeding forest bird diversity is high in this site with 74 confirmed species;
- (2) Yellow-bellied Flycatcher has bred in the Cherry Run drainage in three different years. Olive-sided Flycatcher has occasionally been reported during the spring and summer census periods within the blow-down area of Cherry Run drainage;
- (3) Northern Goshawk is a breeding bird within this area. Swainson's Thrush is a common bird during breeding season among the old-growth conifer stands of the Tionesta and along the forested ravines;
- (4a/4b) Tionesta is the largest area in Pennsylvania representing American Beech and Eastern Hemlock old-growth forest. It is also the largest such tract between the Adirondacks and Great Smoky Mountains;
- (5) The Allegheny National Forest has been conducting owl call-response driving transects for approximately 10-15 years, and walking breeding bird point-count transects within parts of the Tionesta for the past 9 years. The Forestry Sciences Lab in Irvine, PA has avian research data (point-count format) for the Tionesta for 7 different forest stands within the Tionesta.

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

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

Important Avian Habitats:

The most important avian habitats do not generally focus on the enormity of the trees, or species composition, but on the contiguous tract of deep forest. The presence of a closed coniferous canopy over much of the four drainages should be considered as a unique habitat. In 1985, approximately 1000 acres in a ½ mile wide swath were leveled by severe winds and tornadic activity. This left large diameter downed woody debris, numerous standing snags, and created a large naturally occurring early succession stand. The area was not salvaged, thereby impeding the flow of this portion of Cherry Run, creating small pockets of wetlands with bog characteristics throughout the disturbed area.

General Site Description:

The Tionesta is a tract of land within the Allegheny National Forest comprising the largest tract of old-growth forest in Pennsylvania. Its southernmost boundary is located at the four corners of Warren, McKean, Elk, and Forest Counties. Dominant species include Eastern Hemlock and American Beech, with Sugar Maple, Black Cherry, Red Maple, Tulip, and Cucumber filling the forest gaps left by wind-throws and death. Dead standing trees comprise roughly 5% of the forest. There is limited oil and gas management activity in the Scenic Natural Area only.

The Forestry Sciences Lab has records of Snowshoe Hare and Northern Water Shrew present in the Tionesta, and the area was the site of a fisher reintroduction release by Penn State University in 1997.

Summary of Birds:

Seventy-four bird species breed in the Tionesta. Six species of raptors and four owls nest in various locations, including the reclusive Northern Saw-whet Owl. The topless beech and hemlock snags provide natural nesting habitat for an abundance of Chimney Swifts, while the tornado swath provides optimal forage sites. Six woodpecker species have been recorded, and five have been confirmed as breeding (including high densities of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers). Seven flycatchers can periodically be found in the spring and summer, including Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (rare, periodic breeder), Olive-sided Flycatcher (rare spring migrant), and the Acadian Flycatcher (locally abundant breeder). The Tionesta supports the highest density of Blue-headed Vireos of any forested study stands within the ANF. Winter Wrens are locally common among the wooded ravines with adequate downed-dead woody material. Six thrushes, including Swainson's and Wood Thrush nest and are considered common in the Tionesta. Fourteen warblers nest in the Tionesta, including the uncommon Northern Parula. This area contains higher densities of Canada, Hooded, Black-throated-Blue, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian Warblers than many of the second growth stands in the ANF. Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are common breeders on the Tionesta. The Tionesta is one of the few deep-forested stands where Purple Finches are nesting. In nine field seasons, Brown-headed Cowbirds have never been reported on study sites within the Tionesta.

Tionesta may provide critical habitat for winter migrants and residents alike. Flocks of Evening Grosbeaks mixed with White-winged Crossbills have been noted, and it is not uncommon to observe Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, and Red-breasted Nuthatches periodically in winter.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

Currently there are seven point-count sites maintained by the Forestry Sciences Lab, and two monitoring sites supported by ANF. In 1994 J. Christopher Haney has researched Barred Owl nesting density associated with Eastern Hemlock. The ANF crews report to the district biologists any stick nests they encounter while working within the area.

Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

Currently there are two separate hiking trail systems within the Tionesta area. One is a portion of the North Country Trail system, and the other includes two loop systems which meander through an area known as the Scenic Circle. These trails have small interpretive plaques identifying tree species. The Scenic Circle is located off FR 133, between Ludlow, PA and Jo-Jo area outside Kane, PA, on FR 133E. There is no access to the area directly from paved roads. This isolation may inhibit the use of the area by many individuals and organizations. Trail impact is minimal, suggesting that the area is not widely used or explored.

There is a major pipeline running perpendicular to Cherry Run near the Scenic Circle area that provides direct entry to the area by foot. Hunting is permitted throughout the area, and some fishing for native Brook Trout occurs primarily along the East and West Fork drainages.

Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:

The most serious threat to this habitat is declining forest health. The Tionesta area has experienced Gypsy Moth and Elm Spanworm infestations in the mid-1980's and 1992-94 respectively. The American Beech in the area is under attack by beech bark disease, and Sugar Maple is exhibiting evidence of stress from sugar maple decline. Woolly Adelgid is not yet documented as occurring in the ANF, but as this insect expands, the Eastern Hemlock will be at risk. Over-browsing by white-tailed deer limits the success of the new regeneration in the large and isolated wind-throw areas. As a result, many of the smaller forest gaps created are occupied by beech brush in the form of root-suckers from the already diseased source tree.

The extraction of minerals within the Scenic Natural Area of the Tionesta could become a threat to the area's habitat quality as a result of road-building and the increase in the noise accompanied with such operations.

Conservation Actions: *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing** efforts by the US Department of Agriculture, US Forest Service, ANF:*

- Continue to work with the mineral rights owners in the Scenic Natural Area to limit the extraction and exploration of the site.
- Continue to run the point-count transects established by the ANF and the Forestry Sciences Lab to maintain the long-term data on breeding bird populations.
- Continue the current forest health monitoring and pest management programs.
- Continue to estimate the impact of deer densities on the herbaceous and woody regeneration communities.

*The following conservation actions describe **proposed recommendations** for consideration by US Department of Agriculture, US Forest Service, ANF, 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:*

- Establish new avian transects in different areas of the Tionesta. Suggested areas would include along the drainages for potential Yellow-bellied Flycatcher documentation, and through areas of historic disturbances.
- Designation of the Scenic Natural Area as a Wilderness area would aid in protecting the integrity of the habitat, but would limit the actions available for forest pest management.
- Establish avian monitoring projects to determine the use of the Tionesta during seasons other than breeding, and to focus on other communities of birds such as the raptors.
- Develop an easy reading, and aesthetically pleasing book available for purchase by the public as a source method of gaining support for projects used to generate the information.

Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:

- United States Department of Agriculture, US Forest Service, Allegheny National Forest. Brad Nelson, USFS (814) 723-5150
- Northeastern Forestry Sciences Laboratory, Old Route 6, Irvine, Pa. (814) 563-1040.

References:

Crossley, Gary, 1999. A guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Important Bird Areas Program, Pennsylvania Audubon Society, 211pp.