

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #17
HICKORY CREEK WILDERNESS**

**Phase I Conservation Plan
(Prepared 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: Hickory Creek Wilderness / Hearts Content Natural Area

Size: Approximate area 8,663 acres (Hearts Content Natural Area 100 acres)

Ownership:
Federal (USDA, USFS Allegheny National Forest)

County/Municipality:
Warren County/Watson Township

Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:
Appalachian Plateau/BCR 28/East Hickory and Middle Hickory Creek drainage, Hickory Creek watershed

Legislative Districts:
3rd Congressional District, U.S. Representative Phil English (R)
21st Senatorial District Mary JoWhite (R)
65th House District Jim Lynch (R)

Stewardship Adoption Status: Has not been adopted yet.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (1e) 105 species have been recorded during the brief monitoring program in the Hickory Creek Wilderness / Hearts Content Natural Area;
- (3) Cerulean Warbler and Swainson's Thrush have been reported in the spring and summer. Further investigation will likely reveal breeding activity;
- (4a/4b) This area provides a wide variety of habitats including old beaver meadows, early successional stands resulting from wind events, mature second-growth timber, and stands of old-growth timber. Unlike other climax forest stands in the Allegheny National Forest, this area contains scattered mature White Pine in the old-growth classification. The roadless component of the area constitutes a unique characteristic within the high plateau region.

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

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

Important Avian Habitats:

Isolating individual habitats as important within this area is not as vital for the Hickory Creek Wilderness / Hearts Content area as it may be for IBA's comprised of a single unique habitat. The connectivity of these habitats across this landscape is the truly important avian habitat. The habitats include beaver meadows, gravel-bottomed second order streams with overhanging herbaceous vegetation, isolated aspen groves, sporadic overstory conifers, mixed hardwood second-growth stands, and old-growth conifer/beechn stands with White Pine the dominant overstory component.

General Site Description:

The Hickory Creek Wilderness is the only congressionally designated wilderness in Pennsylvania. East Hickory and Middle Hickory Creeks drain the area. The area is characterized by mature beech/maple forest type in the upper elevations, and hemlock or mixed hardwood/hemlock forest type in the lower elevations. Middle Hickory Creek flows through abandoned beaver meadows and isolated small bogs. Scattered large White Pines dot these open areas.

The tornadic activity of 1985 disturbed roughly 250 acres of the southern portion of the Wilderness Area. This area is naturally regenerating, and provides an important habitat component in a varied forested landscape. Portions of this area have experienced forest fires within the last ten years.

Hearts Content Natural Area is characterized by old-growth White Pine, Eastern Hemlock and American Beech. Hearts Content is beginning to develop a shrub layer of predominantly beech brush root-suckers.

Summary of Birds:

Wood Ducks and Mallards breed in the beaver meadows and along the wooded tributaries draining Hickory Creek Wilderness. Six species of diurnal raptors have been reported as well as four species of owls, including the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Transient American Woodcock have been observed in flights of as many as 20 birds along the meadow edges of the Hickory Creek Wilderness. An abundant breeding

population of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers occurs on this IBA, along with four other woodpecker species. Additionally the Common Raven has nested in the Hearts Content Natural Area, as well as six species of flycatchers.

The Tufted Titmouse is a common breeder in the Hearts Content Natural Area, and the more northern Red-breasted Nuthatch is a probable sporadic breeder, but common winter resident. The Brown Creeper, House and Winter Wren breed throughout the IBA, and the Carolina Wren is a resident. Ruby and Golden-Crowned Kinglets are common winter visitors, and the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nests in the encroaching aspen patches. Six thrush species can be found here in the spring and summer, including the Swainson's Thrush. Twenty species of warblers are currently listed as being found in this area. Some of the more interesting species include: Blue-winged Warbler (uncommon on the Plateau, due to lack of habitat), Yellow-rumped, Cerulean, Black-and-white and Mourning Warblers. The presence of old-growth White Pine and Eastern Hemlock supports nesting Purple Finches.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

There have been two point-count sites within this area. The Forestry Sciences Laboratory has only monitored both sites for two years. There is an Owl survey route conducted by ANF personnel, which approaches the access road to the Hearts Content Natural Area. The ANF also conducts informal stick nest searches within this area. These are usually in the form of field discoveries when crews are working with other projects in the area.

Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

The Hickory Creek Trail is the only major trail within the boundaries of the Wilderness. It is a loop trail approximately 11.1 miles long, and located in the center of the area. The larger Tanbark Trail briefly passes through the eastern tip of the area (approximately ¼ mile). There is an interpretive loop approximately 4.5 miles in length through Hearts Content with a brief history and species' identification information.

This section of the ANF receives more visitation than more northern sections. There is evidence of hiking and overnight use by backpackers and wildlife observers throughout this area. The streams are fished for both Brook and Brown Trout. Hunting is also permitted within the Wilderness Area. The access road to the Hearts Content area is dotted with many long-time seasonal hunting/fishing camps. The high use and easier access may afford a good opportunity for public education.

The Hearts Content Natural Area is the location of numerous long-term vegetative studies currently conducted by the Forestry Sciences Laboratory.

Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:

Forest health issues are the primary threat to habitat quality. Many of the American Beech are infected with beech bark disease, while herbaceous community diversity and stand replacement have been compromised through deer over-browsing.

Conservation Actions: *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing** efforts by the Allegheny National Forest:*

- Continue to conduct the existing bird point-counts in the Hickory Creek Wilderness/Hearts Content Natural Area to establish long-term data sets.
- Continue to collect deer population and impact information within this landscape scale site.
- Continue the current forest health and pest management practices.

*The following conservation actions describe **proposed recommendations** for consideration by the Allegheny National Forest 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:*

- Take advantage of the easy access to the Hearts Content Natural Area by promoting public field trips and offering educational presentations to schools, clubs, and other organizations.
- Establish adoption programs for the parking area and trails similar to those seen along many of the highways throughout the Commonwealth.
- Establish additional bird monitoring transects to represent the full diversity of habitats within this unique landscape.
- Alter the schedule of transect monitoring to include spring and fall migration, winter residents, and breeding-season evening hour activity.
- Reduce deer populations

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.
- Tom and Janet Kuehl, (724) 325-1918
- Jim and Flo McGuire (814) 755-3672

References:

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