

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #26
YOUGHIOGHENY VALLEY/OHIOPYLE STATE PARK**

**Phase I Conservation Plan
(Prepared By: Michelle Cohen; 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 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: Youghiogheny Valley/Ohiopyle State Park

Size: 37,877 acres (15,157hectares)

Ownership:

Public [Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) – Ohioopyle State Park, Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) – State Game Lands (SGL) No. 51 and No. 111] and private, including Bear Run Nature Reserve – Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

County/Municipality:

Fayette and Somerset Counties/ Henry Clay, Wharton, Dunbar, Springfield and Stewart Townships in Fayette County and Addison, and Lower Turkeyfoot Townships in Somerset County

Physiographic Provinces/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:

The IBA is within the Appalachian Plateaus physiographic province and the Appalachian Mountains Bird Conservation Region #28. The IBA is within the Youghiogheny River drainage basin and Allegheny River Watershed. The Youghiogheny River flows north to join the Monongahela River before entering the Allegheny River at Pittsburgh. Main subdrainage basins entering the Youghiogheny River in Fayette County include: Hall Run, Tub Run, Hen Run, Ramcot Run, Laurel Run, Cucumber Run, Jonathan Run, Bruner Run and Morgan Run. Main subdrainages basins entering the Youghiogheny River in Somerset County include: Braddocks Run, Casselman River, Laurel Creek, Lick Run, Rock Springs Run, Bear Run, Laurel, Run, and Aqueduct Indian Run.

Legislative Districts:

9th Congressional District, U.S. Representative Bill Shuster (R) – Somerset and Fayette Counties

32nd Senatorial District, State Senator Richard Kasunic (D) – Addison, Dunbar, Henry Clay, Lower Turkeyfoot, Springfield, Stewart and Warton Townships

51st House District, State Representative Lawrence Roberts (D) – Henry Clay, Springfield, Stewart and Warton Townships

52nd House District, State Representative James Shaner (D) –Dunbar Township

69th House District, State Representative Bob Bastian (R) – Addison and Lower Turkeyfoot Townships

Stewardship Adoption Status:

The IBA has not been officially adopted to date.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (3) The site provides habitat for state species of special concern. Rare occurrences of the state *extirpated* Olive-sided Flycatcher, *candidate-rare* Pied-billed Grebe and Northern Goshawk have been recorded at Ohiopyle State Park. The Northern Harrier, a state *candidate-at-risk* species is occasionally observed at the park during migration periods;
- (4a) Area sensitive species include the Black-throated Green Warbler, Acadian Flycatcher, Pileated Woodpecker, Wood Thrush and Ovenbird. The site represents unique habitat within the Allegheny Plateau physiographic province. The wooded hillsides of the Youghiogheny River gorge provide the specialized habitat for the Cerulean Warbler, a Bird Species of Concern [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. FWS), 2002] in the region. The thick understory along the hillsides of the Youghiogheny River gorge also provide suitable habitat for other Bird Species of Concern (U.S. FWS, 2002) such as the Worm-eating Warbler and Kentucky Warbler;
- (4b) The site contains extensive area of unfragmented forest, one of the largest forest blocks in the region;
- (5) The site is part of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology's Special Areas Project conducted by the Mountaineer Audubon Society.

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

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

Important Avian Habitats:

Youghiogheny River Gorge and surrounding riparian habitat of rocky banks and steep hillsides covered with eastern hemlock and thick groves of rhododendron and mountain laurel, diverse forest habitat in type and age class including, oak hickory forest habitat and second growth forest habitat; contiguous forest land containing forest interior habitat and open meadows

General Site Description:

The IBA is in southwestern Pennsylvania and is comprised primarily of the Youghiogheny River valley gorge, including Ohiopyle State Park and Bear Run Nature Reserve. The site is also contiguous with SGL No. 51 and SGL No. 111 and small portions of these three areas are within the IBA. The site encompasses an extensive area of forest habitat, representing one of the largest forest habitat blocks in southwestern Pennsylvania. The IBA is located along the southern border of Fayette County and Somerset County, and extends along the Youghiogheny River gorge from the Pennsylvania/Maryland state line north to the vicinity of South Connellsville. Ohiopyle State Park is comprised of 19,052 acres (7,710 hectares) within the IBA. Ferncliff Peninsula National Natural Landmark is located within the state park and represents an area of botanical diversity. The Ferncliff area contains species with a more southerly range but climatic conditions of the area provide suitable habitat for these species to survive. The Ferncliff site is designated as a State Park Natural Area.

Bear Run Nature Reserve is owned and managed by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. The entire reserve is within the IBA. The reserve encompasses a total of approximately 5,000 acres (2,024 hectares). The riparian habitat along Bear Run is comprised of rhododendron undergrowth and old-growth eastern hemlock forest.

The landscape surrounding the IBA is comprised of forestland and agriculture. Forbes State Forest and SGL No. 265 are in the vicinity of the IBA. Forest land within the IBA is primarily described as second growth forest and riverine forest habitat. Predominant forest types include mixed oak and northern hardwood. Red maple forest types are present to a lesser degree. Fallow fields occur in Ohiopyle State Park but comprise less than one percent of the landcover.

The IBA supports other nonavian species of special concern including the Allegheny woodrat and river otter. River otters were introduced to the Youghiogheny river within park boundaries from 1992-1994 and others have been released in the Youghiogheny watershed from 1989-1997 and in 2000.

Summary of Birds:

The extensive forest habitat and diversity of community types provides valuable habitat for many bird species during the breeding, migratory and wintering seasons. Waterfowl that use the river habitat, especially during migration include Canada Goose, American Black Duck, Mallard, Wood Duck, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Red-breasted Merganser. Typical breeding birds include: Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Blue Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Solitary and Red-eyed Vireos, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Black and White Warbler, American Redstart, Louisiana Waterthrush and Kentucky Warbler. Approximately 169 birds, including thirty-three warblers, have been recorded at Ohiopyle State Park.

Several State species of special concern have been recorded at Ohiopyle State Park, as listed above in the Selection Criteria section of this plan. In addition several species of birds also occur in the IBA that are considered Birds of Conservation Concern according

to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2002). Eleven birds of conservation concern have been identified within the IBA and include: Black-billed Cuckoo, Whip-poor-will, Red-headed Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Golden-winged Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler and Kentucky Warbler.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

The Ohiopyle State Park is part of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology's Special Areas Project monitoring program since 1995. The area is monitored by the Mountaineer Audubon Society. The IBA also contains a portion of the Breeding Bird Survey route (#72189). A Christmas Bird Count area (12-Ohiopyle Circle) is within the Ohiopyle State Park portion of the IBA.

Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

The opportunity exists within the IBA for education, recreation and ecotourism. The IBA includes a majority of public lands that offer numerous recreational activities. Ohiopyle State Park offers numerous recreational opportunities such as whitewater boating, bicycling, hiking, horseback riding, camping, fishing and hunting. Approximately 237 campsites and 41 miles (66.01 kilometers) of day trails are available to visitors. Snowmobiling, cross-county skiing, sledding are also available during the winter season. Facilities include a visitor's center, parking, restrooms, and playground and picnic areas. The park offers environmental education and interpretive programs such as teacher workshops, raptor programs and bird walks. Contact www.dcnr.state.us or the visitor's center at 724-329-0986 for additional environmental education opportunities. The park is visited by nearly 2 million people annually. Nearby SGLs offer hiking and hunting opportunities. More than 20 miles (32 kilometers) of marked trails are available for hiking at Bear Run Nature Reserve.

Management/Conservation Successes and Issues:

Potential concerns that could affect the quality of the habitat may include land use pressures (residential development and surface mining) within the vicinity of the IBA, recreational overuse and an overabundance of white-tailed deer. In addition the region where the IBA occurs has one of the highest acid deposition levels in precipitation in the United States. Although data is limited, a recent study published by Cornell University implicates acid precipitation in the decline of Wood Thrushes in North America (2002). Other land use practices in the area that could influence bird populations include the presence of wind turbines. Wind turbines are used by utility companies to generate electricity. Two turbines are located on Laurel Hill near Cranberry Glade Lake north east of the IBA and closest to the Bear Run Nature Reserve.

PA DCNR has a Resource Management Plan for Ohiopyle State Park that is supportive of the Important Bird Area program. One of the park's objectives is to continually improve habitat for game and nongame bird species. The park manages habitat for game bird species including Ruffed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant and American Woodcock. The park has recently partnered with the Ruffed Grouse Society to improve habitat for Ruffed Grouse. The PGC is also a partner with the park to assist in reverting fallow field areas

to meadow habitat. The park also maintains and monitors Eastern Bluebird and Wood Duck nest boxes and Osprey nest platform. The Osprey nest platform is located on an island in the Youghiogheny River. The platform has been in place since 2000 and has not had any use by Osprey to date (2003). White-tailed deer overabundance has affected the habitat within the Ferncliff Natural Area. The park has permitted hunting during archery season to reduce the population and will continue to evaluate the effects. The park through management guidelines attempts to balance natural resource values with human use activities. The Resource Management Plan for Ohio State Park is updated every four years and is scheduled for an update in 2004.

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has initiated development of a Master Management Plan for the Bear Run Nature Reserve. One aspect of the plan will emphasize forest conservation and management goals. The conservancy will assess forested habitats such as the conifer plantations, which occur in the reserve, to recommend management practices that would improve diversity.

Conservation Actions: *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing efforts** by the PA DCNR, PGC and Western Pennsylvania Conservancy:*

- DCNR maintains existing bird feeding station at the visitor's center as an environmental education tool
- DCNR's volunteer director to participate in bird habitat improvement and monitoring projects (maintenance and monitoring of nest boxes or Osprey nesting platform)
- DCNR provides environmental education programs related to bird identification and conservation
- DCNR is working with the Game Commission to reduce the white-tailed deer population to prevent further damage to the forested habitat
- WPC is protecting and management of the habitat within Bear Run Nature Reserve in accordance with the conservancy's Master Plan
- DCNR is developing useful tools from their biodiversity studies to facilitate habitat management for birdlife

*The following conservation actions are **proposed recommendations** for consideration by the PA DCNR, PGC, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and other interested organizations, agencies and groups for the maintenance and enhancement of habitat for birds, especially to optimize habitat value for IBA target species as well as to promote bird and wildlife habitat conservation in general:*

- Monitor bird occurrence in the park and update the "bird check list" as needed
- Conduct educational outreach programs, place IBA signs at public access points, distribute materials (IBA brochures) and conduct projects to promote bird conservation and the IBA program
- Establish a bird monitoring program throughout the IBA, and report findings to land managers
- Develop partnerships to conserve and protect land adjacent to the IBA through land acquisition or conservation easements

- Support PA DCNR, Bureau of State Parks, conservancies and other organizations in their efforts to conduct outreach programs within the IBA
- Support research studies to assess the effects of high acid deposition on birdlife
- Monitor the electric company's plans through the public review process

Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:

- Mountaineer Audubon Society, Allen Clark 724-437-2524
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) Douglas Hoehn, Park Manager and Barbra Wallace, Environmental Education Specialist, 724-329-8591
- Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) Tony Ross, 717-783-5759 and Barry Zaffuto, Land Management Supervisor, 877-877-7137
- Pennsylvania Society of Ornithology, Doug Gross, 717-542-2191
- Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS), Mark Banker, 814-867-7946
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) Charles Bier 412-288-2777

References:

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

Chu, M. and S. Hames. "Wood Thrush Declines Linked to Acid Rain." *Birdscope*. Autumn 2002 Vol 16 No. 4. 2002.

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Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, *Ohiopyle State Park Resource Management Plan*, April 2001.

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The Pennsylvania Code, Title 58, Subchapter B.BIRDS, Section 133.2.1. Classification of birds, as amended.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. *Birds of conservation concern 2002*. Division of Migratory Bird Management, Arlington, Virginia. 99pp. [Online version available at <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/reports/bcc2002.pdf>]

