

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #27
MARSH CREEK WETLANDS – “THE MUCK”**

**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: Marsh Creek Wetlands - "The Muck"

Size: Approximately 2,677 acres (1,083 hectares)

Ownership:

Public – Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) / Private

County/Municipality:

Tioga / Delmar and Shippen Townships

Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:

The IBA is situated within the Appalachian Plateau Province, and is part of the Appalachian Mountains Bird Conservation Region #28. Marsh Creek flows through the IBA, which is on a watershed divide. A majority of the IBA is within the Pine Creek watershed. Pine Creek, a Pennsylvania Scenic River, flows into the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. Several tributaries join Marsh Creek, including Canada Run, Straight Run, Dantz Run, Smith Run, Heise Run, Wolf Run and Horse Thief Run. The northeastern portion of the wetland flows into Crooked Creek and then the Tioga River (Susquehanna River watershed).

Legislative Districts:

5th Congressional District, U.S. Representative, John E. Peterson (R) – Tioga County
25th Senatorial District, State Senator, Joseph B. Scarnati (R) - Delmar and Shippen Townships

68th House District, Representative, Matthew E. Baker (R) – Delmar and Shippen Townships

Stewardship Adoption Status:

The Tiadaghton Audubon Society has officially adopted this IBA.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (2) The IBA supports the state *endangered* American Bittern (B* - 1 pair) and Least Bittern (B - 1 pair). The state *threatened* Osprey is known to feed within the IBA along Marsh Creek;
- (3) The site provides habitat for Pennsylvania species of special concern including species with a *candidate-rare* status; Pied-billed Grebe (B - 1 pair), Marsh Wren (B - 12 pair), Green-winged Teal (B – 12+ pair), American Coot (B) and Wilson’s Snipe (B - 12 pair). The Northern Harrier (W), a *candidate at-risk* species in Pennsylvania, uses the wetland during the winter season;
- (4a) The site contains important wetland habitat classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a high-priority conservation area. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) considers the wetland habitat of the IBA as *exceptional value*. The wetland provides habitat for one of Pennsylvania’s largest Great Blue Heron colonies (B – 30+ pair). Other important bird species indicative of the IBA’s extensive wetland habitat include the Alder Flycatcher (B - 6+ pair), Virginia Rail (B - 3 pair) and Sora (B - 3 pair).

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

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

Important Avian Habitats:

Extensive emergent wetlands, with pockets of open water, riparian, fallow field and cultivated fields.

General Site Description:

The IBA is located in north-central Pennsylvania. The IBA is located north of Wellsboro. The IBA primarily includes the extensive wetland habitats along Marsh Creek extending north of the Route 6/Route 287 junction to Niles Valley on Route 287 and west along Route 6 to the town of Ansonia.

The Marsh Creek IBA is comprised of a combination of lands in public and private ownership. State Game Lands (SGL) No. 313. comprises 277 acres (112 hectares). The North-central Pennsylvania Conservancy (NPC) has been instrumental in the protection of the wetlands within the IBA. The NPC has assisted in the purchase of lands for transfer to the PGC’s SGL No. 313 system to ensure future protection. The PGC primarily manages the wetland for waterfowl and other wetland species.

The Muck IBA is comprised of an extensive area of emergent wetlands in the Marsh Creek Valley, extending for a length of approximately 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) and width of half a mile (0.8 kilometers). The wetland is bisected by the Wellsboro and Corning

Railroad. An old dike resembling a railroad grade extends directly across the marsh in the vicinity of the junction of Dresser Road (off Route 287) and the Wellsboro and Corning Railroad. The wetlands were created as a result of glacial advance and retreat, which deposited layers of soil and silt on the valley bottom. Water flows slowly through the area due to the shallow topographic slope in the valley. The soils of The Muck are classified in the Carlisle series, rich in organic content. Due to this highly organic soil, much of the wetland was drained for lettuce and celery farming. However, farming eventually became unprofitable due to competition from California and Florida, rising labor and transportation costs, increased water level within the wetland and greater wetland protection laws. As a result the farmlands were retired and converted back to a natural state.

The Marsh Creek IBA site is designated a high priority conservation site by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service "National Wetlands Priority Plan".

Summary of Birds:

The IBA provides valuable habitat for nesting and migrating birds, particularly wetland birds species. One hundred-fifty three species of birds have been documented within the IBA, according to records maintained by local bird enthusiasts (especially Bob Ross). The emergent wetland provides ideal breeding habitat for wading birds such as American and Least Bittern, Green Heron, Great Blue Heron, Sora, Virginia Rail and Cattle Egret. The IBA contains a large Great Blue Heron colony, with over thirty (30) nests. The colony has been present since the early 1990's. Other wetland bird species include the Alder Flycatcher, Swamp Sparrow, American Woodcock, Wilson's Snipe, Marsh Wren and American Coot. The Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs were noted as new species to the site in 1999. The wetland habitat offers breeding and migratory habitat for waterfowl. Mallard, Wood Duck, American Black Duck breed on the IBA. The PGC maintains and monitors Wood Duck nest boxes. The IBA represents an important stopover site during migration for Tundra Swans and Canada Geese. Other migratory species include the Blue-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead and Red-breasted and Hooded Mergansers. Raptors, including Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Harrier, Great Horned Owl, and American Kestrel, forage in the wetland. The state-threatened Osprey utilizes the area for feeding.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

Marsh Creek is a Special Area Project with the Pennsylvania Ornithological Society. Additionally, local and visiting birders monitor the area irregularly. The PGC monitors use of the waterfowl nesting structures annually.

Education/Recreation /Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

The opportunity for education, recreation and ecotourism exists. Part of the wetland is within public ownership as part of SGL No. 313. A plan to facilitate public access to "The Muck" occurring on SGL No. 313 for educational and outreach purposes has been proposed. The plan would include an observation blind, trail and boardwalk with interpretive signs through the wetland system. The PGC is supportive of the project and has issued a permit for the project. The project construction is expected to begin in 2004.

Visitors using the existing Pine Creek Rail Trail could also easily access the proposed trail and blind.

Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:

Encroachment from development, increased subdivision of land and draining and filling practices threaten the wetland habitat. However, opportunities exist to conserve the IBA wetland system through land protection measures and public education. The NPC, a nonprofit organization established to protect natural and historic habitat in the north-central Pennsylvania region has been an important partner in land conservation and educational outreach within the Marsh Creek watershed. The organization has initiated the Marsh Creek Watershed Protection Project, with the goal of the project to protect over 1,000 acres (405 hectares) of Marsh Creek wetlands within the IBA. The Marsh Creek Watershed Protection Project was funded by grants from the World Wildlife Foundation, Sweet Foundation and the NPC membership. As part of the organization's conservation effort a 68-acre (28 hectare) parcel was purchased and turned over to the PGC to be part of the SGL No. 313 system. The NPC is continuing efforts to encourage landowners within the Marsh Creek watershed to participate in conservation easements. Additionally, education and outreach is an important objective of the NPC's Marsh Creek Watershed Protection Project.

Other ongoing efforts to educate the landowners within the IBA about the importance of the wetland in terms of natural and cultural values may contribute to conservation objectives within the IBA and Marsh Creek watershed. The privately proposed educational and outreach project for an interpretive trail, boardwalk and observation blind is an important project that would promote the values of the wetland. Additional outreach efforts should educate landowners in adjacent developments of the potential impacts from herbicides and pesticides upon the wetland system and offer alternative recommendations or practices that limit the use of chemicals. Outreach programs should also focus on providing landowners within the Marsh Creek watershed with practices (e.g. planting) that reduce erosion to prevent sedimentation of the downstream wetlands. A local watershed group may consider monitoring the wetland for increased sedimentation or pollution in order to avert any problems.

Conservation Actions: *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing efforts** by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and other interested conservation organization:*

- Partner with the PGC, NPC and other similar organizations to promote land conservation through conservation easements or fee-title transfers
- Continue to support and implement the boardwalk, interpretive trail plan
- Continue to work with the landowner to protect the Great Blue Heron colony and to explore other means to protect the colony in the future

*The following conservation actions described are **proposed recommendations** for consideration by the Pennsylvania Game Commission 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:

- Educate landowners and developers within the watershed to use conservation practices that limit the use chemicals and minimize erosion (plantings, stormwater controls)
- Promote bird conservation through interpretive signs, programs and distribution of informational literature; place a sign on-site at a public use area denoting its IBA status
- Update the bird checklist periodically
- Monitor bird use through the IBA program and provide data to the PGC and other interested conservation parties or landholders
- Consider a partnership with Mansfield University to assist in bird monitoring, conservation and research on the IBA

Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:

- Mansfield University (MU) David Slesch, Chair Biology Department 570-662-4531
- Northcentral Pennsylvania Conservancy (NPC), Stephanie Radulski (717) 323-6222
- Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC), Northcentral Region, Steven Gehringer 877-877-7674
- Robert Ross, Ecologist, 570-724-3322
- Tiadaghton Audubon Society (TAS), Jeff Holbrook 607-974-7864 (w), 607-936-5059 (h)

References:

Crossley, Gary J. 1999 “A Guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania” Pennsylvania Audubon Society

Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory database. Available online at:

<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/pndi/pndiweb.htm>

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