

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #7
CONNEAUT MARSH - GENEVA MARSH**

**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 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: Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh

Size: 5,559 acres (2,251 hectares)

Ownership:
Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC)

County/Municipality:
Crawford County/ Fairfield, Greenwood, Sadsbury, Union, Vernon Townships

Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed: The IBA is within the Glaciated Pittsburgh Plateau Section of the Appalachian Plateaus Province. The IBA is part of the Lower Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Plain (U.S. portion only) Bird Conservation Region (BCR) # 13. The IBA is in the French Creek watershed. French Creek, Pennsylvania’s 2003 River of the Year, is renowned for the abundance and diversity of its aquatic resources. Conneaut Outlet, the outflow of Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh joins French Creek 5 miles south of Meadville.

Legislative Districts:
21st Congressional District, U.S. Representative, Phil English (R) – Crawford County
50th Senatorial District, State Senator Robert D. Robbins (R) – Fairfield, Greenwood, Sadsbury, Union and Vernon Townships
5th House District, State Representative, John Evans (R) – Sadsbury Township
6th House District, State Representative, Teresa Forcier (R) – Union Township

17th House District, State Representative, Rod E. Wilt (R) –Fairfield, Greenwood and Vernon Townships

Stewardship Adoption Status:

The IBA has not been officially adopted yet.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (1a) The IBA supports a significant concentration of waterfowl during the spring and fall migration including: Ring-necked Duck (2,000+), Wood Duck (5,000), American Black Duck (2,000+), American Wigeon (2,000+), Hooded Merganser (2,700+);
- (1b) The IBA supports numerous shorebirds during the spring migration (SM* 300+);
 - (2) The site supports the federally threatened and state endangered Bald Eagle (B-4 pr; W-8+), state endangered Black Tern (SM-6+), state endangered American Bittern (B-3 pr), state endangered Least Bittern (B-4 pr), and state endangered Great Egret (FM);
- (3) The IBA supports Pennsylvania species of special concern including four species with candidate – rare status; Prothonotary Warbler (B- 5+ pr), American Coot (B-1 pr) and Marsh Wren (B- 400-500 pr);
- (4) The IBA is exceptional in size and diversity of wetland types, including emergent, scrub-shrub and forested.

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

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

Important Avian Habitats:

Extensive wetland habitats including open water, emergent, scrub-shrub and forested; mixed forestland and old fields

General Site Description:

Located about 7 miles southwest of Meadville, Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh, is a large (5,559 acre (2,251 hectares)) wetland complex running approximately 13 miles from the outlet of Conneaut Lake almost to French Creek. The Marsh is owned by PGC and managed as State Game Lands (SGL) No. 213. PGC began acquiring portions of the Marsh in 1946. Over time, with the assistance of organizations like the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, PGC was able to acquire almost the entire Marsh, and some adjoining uplands. The original marsh was formed by glacial outwash. Today, two low-level, roadway dams maintain water levels.

The most important avian habitats in the Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh IBA are the extensive wetlands that dominate the area. Approximately 1/3 of the site consists of Pennsylvania's largest remaining emergent marsh, covered by vegetation such as cat-tail and spadder-dock; 1/4 of the site is forested wetland; 1/5 is scrub-shrub wetland; and the remainder includes some open water, mixed forest and old fields reverting to forest. A number of rare plant species can be found in the Marsh. The view from the Interstate 79 bridge near Exit 141 gives one an appreciation for the botanical composition and extent of Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh.

Except for seasonally closed areas around Bald Eagle nests, SGL No. 213 is open to the public. It is a popular destination for waterfowl hunters, and increasingly, for birders. Interchange 35 on I-79 provides immediate access to from points north or south. Side roads lead to several PGC maintained parking areas, and to three boat launches. Foot travel in this wetland complex can be difficult because of water and dense vegetation. Consequently, hunters and birders often use canoes and kayaks to access interior parts of the Marsh. An excellent map of SGL No. 213 is available from the PGC website at <http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/land/maps/gameland/213.pdf>

Summary of Birds:

Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh is especially important to wetland birds. Early works by Sutton (1928), Todd (1940) and Grimm (1952) make frequent reference to the Marsh, and more recent works by Genoways and Brenner (1985), and McWilliams and Brauning (2000) document the Marsh's continued importance to some of Pennsylvania's rarer wetland birds.

Up to 10,000 waterfowl use the Marsh during spring and fall migration. Ring-necked Duck, Black Duck, Mallard, American Wigeon, Wood Duck and Hooded Merganser are common during migration. Mallards, Hooded Mergansers, and Canada geese are common nesters. Wood Ducks nest in large numbers, and were the subject of an extensive study during the 1950s (Decker 1959). A portion of the Southern James Bay Population of Canada Geese uses the Marsh at times during the year. This population is below population objectives set under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (USFWS 1998). American Black Ducks, another species well below population objectives (Wilkins and Otto, 2003), uses the Marsh during migration and the winter. The IBA also provides habitat during migration for other bird species including the state endangered Great Egret and *candidate-rare* Common Snipe.

A number of other Pennsylvania Breeding Birds of Special Concern (<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/pndi/fullvertebrate.asp>) occur at the Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh. Of these, Marsh Wren, Common Moorhen, American Bittern, Least Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail and Prothonotary Warbler are known to breed there. Black Terns have nested sporadically in the past, and a few are usually seen each year. The Pied-billed Grebe is thought to nest there, but was not confirmed in a 2002 survey (Bish personal communication). In 2003, 4 pairs of Bald Eagles nested in the Marsh, and several individuals can be found at other times of the year (Bish personal communication). Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh is a likely area for King Rail, but none was confirmed during a 2002 survey (Bish, personal communication) .

Shorebird use of the Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh is not well documented, but 300 individuals of several species are estimated conservatively to use the complex during migration.

The forested wetlands and shrub-scrub swamps adjacent to the open, emergent marsh host good numbers of many species of flycatchers, warblers, vireos and thrushes.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

PGC monitors waterfowl closely with a spring breeding pair survey, and a Mid-winter Waterfowl Survey. PGC also monitors Bald Eagle numbers and nesting success. A marshbird call-back survey is conducted every 5 years by PGC.

Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

On-site educational facilities are not available at Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh, but the proximity of emergent wetlands to roads makes the Marsh an occasional stop on conservation/education field trips. Hunters, especially waterfowl hunters, use the Marsh in season. The Marsh is one of the more popular birding destinations in western Pennsylvania, and is listed in various publications, e.g., Korber (1994). Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania <http://www.aswp.org/> sometimes posts notices of bird-watching outings at the Marsh.

Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:

As on other IBAs in northwestern Pennsylvania having significant wetlands, invasive plant species are a conservation issue at Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh. Narrow-leaf cat-tail has hybridized with the native cat-tail (Common cattail) and forms dense stands. Common reed, purple loosestrife, and multiflora rose affect significant acreages.

Left unchecked, both the exotic invasive and native wetland plants form dense stands, encroach on open water areas and reduce water to vegetation edges. Opportunities to manage water levels in this large marsh complex area are limited. Consequently, PGC resorts to using an aquatic vegetation cutter to maintain some open water areas.

Watershed protection is an issue at this IBA. The core of the Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh IBA is owned almost entirely by PGC, and thus is afforded long-term protection, but off-site conditions and activities could adversely affect the Marsh. The heavily developed Conneaut Lake area is at the headwaters of Marsh. Lake is eutrophic, and annual mechanical and or chemical treatments are required to control aquatic vegetation. The outflow from Conneaut Lake goes directly into Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh.

Another water conservation issue concerns the nearby Keystone Opportunity Zone. This former industrial site for manufacturing munitions had 17 deep water wells that may be redeveloped to stimulate economic development in the Zone.

The area surrounding Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh area is rich in glacial deposits, and gravel mining on the periphery of Marsh is a perennial threat.

An abandoned railroad runs through and along portions of the north side of SGL 213. French Creek Rails to Trails seeks to develop a biking and hiking trail along this line. The trail would connect to an existing trail coming west from Meadville, and terminate at Conneaut Lake. The proposed trail would increase recreational activity in this IBA. Adverse impacts on birds are unlikely, but birding opportunities and “Greenways” development would be enhanced.

PGC is currently developing a management plan for SGL 213. This presents an opportunity for PGC and partners to better address on-site issues (e.g., invasive species) directly, and to call greater attention to off-site issues such as water quality. PGC is also seeking support for a comprehensive survey to delineate habitat types on SGL 213.

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

- Periodic waterfowl, Bald Eagle and marshbird surveys are conducted
- Area closures around Bald Eagle Nests are implemented
- Some control of invasive species and aquatic vegetation is conducted
- Maintenance of open water areas by mechanical means is necessary and ongoing for waterfowl management
- Maintenance of early successional habitats
- Maintenance of grassland habitats

*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:*

- Expand research, inventory and monitoring efforts to include more non-hunted, non-endangered species;
 - Focus on documenting breeding species in conjunction with Breeding Bird Atlas
 - Focus on conducting regular surveys of shorebirds
- Increase efforts to control and manage invasive plant species
- Seek ways to better manage water levels in SGL 213
- Acquire adjoining habitats important to birds as opportunities arise
- Promote birding in the Conneaut Marsh-Geneva Marsh area
 - Develop a comprehensive species checklist, possibly in conjunction with Pymatuning, Hartstown area list
 - Develop an area birding “trail” and guide, possible in conjunction with Pymatuning, Hartstown area birding trail, and French Creek Rails to Trails
 - Distribute bird conservation materials at outreach programs and place IBA signs at public access points on future trail heads
 - Put in observation/photo blinds at select locations
- Incorporate the above recommendations in PGC’s management plan for SGL No. 213
- Monitor off-site developments and work with partners to maintain watershed quality

Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:

- Conneaut Lake/French Creek Valley Conservancy
- Crawford Conservation District (CCD), Lynne Sandieson, 814-724-1793

- Ducks Unlimited (DU), Chris Clouser, 814-832-4675
- French Creek Rails to Trails (FCRT) Thomas McNally, 814-724-6073
- National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) Larry Holjencin, 814-834-6492
- Northwestern Pennsylvania Duck Hunters Association (NPDHA) Bernie Pauley, 814-455-9392
- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) Freda Tarbell, 814-332-6816
- Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) A. Woomer, 814-755-3890
- Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) Jerry Bish, 724-927-2658
- Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA), John Tautin 814-763-734-4420
- Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) 412-262-4044
- Safari Club International (SCI) 520-620-1220
- US Fish and Wildlife Service (US FWS) David Putnam, 814-234-4090
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NCRS), Carl Pelino, 814-724-1852
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC), Todd Sampsell – 814-739-9991

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