

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA # 28  
PINE CREEK GORGE NATURAL AREA**

**Phase I Conservation Plan  
(Prepared By: Doug Kibbe; 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:** Pine Creek Gorge Natural Area

**Size:** Core Boundary 31,790 acres (12,716 hectares)

**Ownership:**

State (21,523 acres) and private (10,267 acres); state-managed acreage (68%) includes state forest and state parks.

**County/Municipality:**

Tioga/Shippen, Delmar, and Morris Townships

**Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:**

Deep Valleys section of the Appalachian Plateau Province/Bird Conservation Region #28 Appalachian Mountains/Pine Creek and tributaries, which flow into the Susquehanna

**Legislative Districts:**

5<sup>th</sup> Federal Congressional District: John H. Peterson (R), 202-225-5121

25<sup>th</sup> State Senatorial district: Joseph Scarnati III (R) 814-726-7201, Delmar, Morris, and Shippen Townships

68<sup>th</sup> State Congressional District: Matthew Baker (R) 570-724-1390, Delmar, Morris, and Shippen Townships

**Stewardship Adoption Status:**

This site has been officially adopted by the Tiadaghton Audubon Society (based in Wellsboro).

**IBA Selection Criteria:**

- (2) Bald Eagle (B\*), Osprey (large numbers use the area during SM and FM);
- (3) Swainson's Thrush (B), and Northern Harrier (W and B);
- (4b) Exceptional representative of a characteristic habitat – Large area of mature, contiguous northern hardwood forest with substantial coniferous and old-growth components; unusual deep canyon/gorge habitat.

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

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

**Important Avian Habitats:**

The site contains some 28,385 acres upland forest habitat (23,572 acres Deciduous Forest, 3,944 acres of Mixed Forest, and 869 acres of Evergreen Forest). The extensive deciduous/mixed forest provides habitat for a large number of forest interior birds. Northern Saw Whet Owl, Swainson's Thrush, and Red Crossbill have all been documented as breeding within the forest. The vast acreage of relatively unbroken forest is good habitat for passerines that prefer forest interior habitat for nesting.

Pine Greek Gorge IBA contains 343 acres of open water habitat that is utilized by a large number of birds. Bald Eagles have successfully nested adjacent to Pine Creek. More than 25 Osprey have been documented, during spring and fall migration, utilizing the open water areas for foraging habitat. Onsite wetland habitats, dominated by riverine wetlands, are also used by a large number of avian species.

There is also 1,669 acres of herbaceous habitat and open fields (1,112 acres of Perennial Herbaceous, 557 acres of Annual Herbaceous, and 26 acres of Barren habitat), which is used by several important bird species. Common Nighthawk and Northern Harrier are confirmed breeders that utilize these habitats.

**General Site Description:**

This site is a uniformly forested canyon with Pine Creek serving as the central artery. Pine Creek Gorge was designated in 1968 as a registered National Natural Landmark. The site is mostly Tioga State Forest lands (95%); Leonard Harrison State Park (585 acres) on the east rim, Colton Point State Park (368 acres) on the west rim. Abundant rock outcrops are found throughout the steep canyon walls. Numerous tributaries feed into Pine Creek. The forest contains a mixture of Red and White Oak, northern hardwoods, White Pine, and hemlock. The area offers seclusion and habitat important to species such as the Eastern Wood Rat, as well as the River Otter and Fisher, which have been reintroduced to the area.

Leonard Harrison State Park is 585 acres with hundreds of acres of upland forest and other important bird habitats. The mixture of mature hardwoods and conifers in the

upland areas provides good habitat diversity which is reflected in the breeding bird community. This state park was given to the state in 1922 by Mr. Leonard Harrison, and was further developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the mid-1930's. In the late 1940, additional lands were added to the original 121 acres. Numerous outdoor recreational activities are available and an extensive trail system links all habitats to the State Park.

Colton Point State Park is 368 acres with habitat similar to that of Leonard Harrison State Park. This state park was developed by the Civilian conservation Corps (CCC) from 1933 to 1936 and was opened to the public in 1936. The park became a National Historic Landmark Park in 1988. Numerous outdoor recreational activities are available and an extensive trail system links all habitats to the State Park.

### **Summary of Birds:**

128 species of birds are listed as occurring in the area according to the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas. Bald Eagles have been observed displaying breeding activity in this area since 1996. Ospreys have also been documented as spring and fall migrants in numbers of 25 or more.

Along the water, Belted Kingfisher, Common Mergansers, Wood Ducks, Green and Great Blue Heron, Hermit Thrush, Black-throated Blue Warbler, and Scarlet Tanager can often be seen. Populations of Pine and Blackburnian warblers are supported by the onsite conifers. Other species breed in the area and the presence of large tracts of relatively undisturbed state forest lands, adjacent to the site, provide additional habitat for substantial populations of most forest dwelling birds.

### **Avian Monitoring Efforts:**

A breeding bird census route has been established along the West Rim Drive of Pine Creek Gorge. The 50 survey points, spaced at half-mile intervals, extend from the northern terminus of the West Rim Trail to the West Run Vista pull-off, a distance of 24.5 miles. In addition, there are four USF&WS breeding bird survey routes in Tioga County, two of which traverse portions of the site.

### **Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:**

Bird watching continues to be one of the most rapidly growing nature based activities in America (Cordell 1998). The classification of the site as National Historic Landmark Park in 1968, a State Park Natural Area in 1993 and its inclusion in the Pennsylvania Scenic River Program in 1992 exemplifies the potential for the area to serve as a showcase for natural history, including avian research and popular activities such as hawk watching and general birdwatching. The region is readily accessible to recreational enthusiasts from central Pennsylvania and New York State. Birding potential is good throughout the year and during the breeding season the site offers exceptional opportunities to view many species more typically found many miles to the north. The state park already maintains an active web site and could further enhance the attractiveness of the IBA to the general public by creating an integrated wildlife-watching program that varies on a seasonal basis. The site currently lists upcoming popular events

but does not include naturalist programs or natural history outings that might attract additional visitors to the site.

The site has considerable potential for outdoor oriented recreational usage for non birders including: fishing, whitewater boating (seasonally), hunting, horseback riding, primitive camping and mountain bicycling. Winter visitors may cross-country ski and snowmobile (in designated areas). Backpacking, picnicking and sightseeing are potential warm weather activities throughout the area. Several camping areas offer rustic camping opportunities. There are many miles of hiking trails in the immediate area and a former railroad line is gradually being converted for hiking the length of the gorge. The gorge that is over 40 miles long and some 800 feet deep is a spectacular vista which earned it the title of "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania." McWilliams and Brauning (2000) list the area as one of 85 significant birding sites in the state. The region is easily accessed from I 80 (exit # 26 to Pa. Rt. 390 south) and offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities for the birder and non-birder alike.

#### **Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:**

The park has not developed a resource management plan. Wildlife would benefit from such an assessment, which would permit the formulation of active projects that benefit avian populations. Basic issues which could benefit from such a management plan include 1) maintain a healthy, diversified native wildlife population in proper balance within the park environment, 2) monitor the Canada Goose population, 3) provide education on the effects of feeding wildlife, 4) encourage planting of native trees and shrubs beneficial to wildlife, 5) improve awareness of potential invasive species problems 6) develop information on wildlife ecology, studies, life habits at the park environmental education and interpretive programs, and 7) maintain protection of bald eagle nesting efforts.

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

- Monitoring of Canada Goose population
- Controlled hunts for white-tailed deer
- Monitoring of Bald Eagle nesting efforts
- Environmental education and interpretive programs
- Naturalist lead field trips
- Active volunteer program

*The following conservation actions describe **proposed recommendations** for consideration by state officials 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:*

- Incorporation of birds into brochure material available to the public
- Develop a bird-finding habitat map and checklist for the area

- Additional surveys of the breeding bird populations
- Identification of special habitats harboring rare species
- Active program to control invasive plant species
- Development of resource management plans for the state parks and state forests
- Provide nest boxes for Common Mergansers
- Ensure that wildlife guides and brochures are made available through the state park
- Coordinate forest harvesting practices on the adjoining state forest land with site land management practices to ensure that large intact forest systems are maintained
- Encourage local private landowners to implement active wildlife management programs and habitat management practices on their properties

**Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:**

- Colton Point State Park, Harry “Chip” Harrison, Leonard Harrison State Park, 4797 Route 660, Wellsboro PA 16901-8978, 570-724-3061  
[leonardharrisonsp@state.pa.us](mailto:leonardharrisonsp@state.pa.us)
- Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Merlin Benner, Wildlife Biologist 570-724-8140
- Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Roy Siefert, District Forester, Tioga State Forest, One Nessmuk Ln., Wellsboro PA 16901, 570-724-2868, [fd16@state.pa.us](mailto:fd16@state.pa.us)
- Leonard Harrison State Park, Harry “Chip” Harrison, Leonard Harrison State Park, 4797 Route 660, Wellsboro PA 16901-8978, 570-724-3061  
[leonardharrisonsp@state.pa.us](mailto:leonardharrisonsp@state.pa.us)
- Pine Creek Headwaters Protection Group, Ron Comstock 570-724-3796
- Tiadaghton Audubon, Phil Krajewski, (Pres.) 570-324-2492, [krajewsk@epix.net](mailto:krajewsk@epix.net)

**References:**

Cordell, H.K. 1998. *Outdoor recreation in American Life: A National Assessment of Demand and Supply Trend*. In: Shafer and Choi 2004, *Nature-based Tourism Policy*. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania 16p.

Ford, P. 1995. *Birder's guide to Pennsylvania*. Houston Gulf Publ. Co.

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