

Grouse Populations | Studying Climate Change | Turkey Tag

NEW YORK STATE

Conservationist

OCTOBER 2010

Color Country

Adirondack
Leaf Peeping

Owls in the City

Conservationist for Kids!
See new issue inside

Get *Outdoors* This Fall

Five Rivers



Susan Shafer

Reinstein Woods



Charles Bartolotta



Susan Shafer



Susan Shafer

Rogers

The air is crisp, the biting insects are gone, and autumn is in its glory at DEC's four environmental education centers: Reinstein Woods, at Depew in Western New York; Rogers, at Sherburne in Central New York; Five Rivers, at Delmar in the Capital District; and Stony Kill Farm, at Wappingers Falls in the mid-Hudson Region.

Stony Kill Farm

Whether you explore the trails on your own or as part of a guided program, it's a great way to get outside and enjoy time with family and friends, or on your own. Each environmental education center's program is unique, reflecting the features that make their site special.

Visit DEC's events calendar at www.dec.ny.gov/public/48977.html for a complete listing of guided programs taking place at the centers.



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Richard Ettlinger

October 2010 Volume 65, Number 2

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“Hoo’s”



great horned owl

in the CITY? Owls of New York City

By Robert DeCandido PhD, and Deborah Allen

Owls are awesome. Where we live in the Bronx, kids say owls are “bad,” which in their parlance means owls are good. In many cultures, owls were considered omens of bad luck and even death. But to the ancient Greeks, owls were associated with wisdom, and a symbol of the goddess Athene. Today, in this age of Harry Potter, owls remain symbols of a wise life, and in at least one Manhattan high school, to receive the “Order of the Owl” is to be bestowed high honors for scholastic achievement.

Yet if we travel back in time to old New York, it is easy to find some of the ire that owls once inspired. In 1900, William Braislin, M.D. recorded an incident in his journal regarding a crowd of school boys armed with stones that had gathered in a vacant lot in Manhattan. In a tree above them was a sleepy barred owl. The boys begin spewing epithets at the bird. According to Braislin, “...even the presence of a policeman had little effect in restraining the boys. In spite of much persecution the owl remained in the



Angel Cardenas

vicinity for several days more, but the commotion and excitement produced by his presence led to his premature end. Various missiles aimed at the owl by the crowd during the day became a menace to the windows and heads, and led the householders to consider the bird a rather unwelcome visitor.” The owl was soon shot by the police.

Through the next half-century, the public’s perception of owls did not change much. A news story in the *New York Times* in 1947 describes a “monkey-face” owl that was “observed by a group of men planting the Stuyvesant Town’s first oak tree, near Avenue C and Fourteenth Street. A crowd collected. Small fry threw pebbles at the bird and hooted derisively. The owl blinked in the sun, then took off. This time it halted on the eleventh floor of one of the development’s unfinished buildings near Fifteenth Street.” Fortunately for this barn owl, it was captured and given to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and presumably released at a later date.

Now fast-forward to October 2000. On a night walk sponsored by the Central Park Conservancy to look for owls in Manhattan's Central Park, more than 100 people gathered, armed only with binoculars. Our footsteps rattled on the dry autumn leaves, alerting any owl to the approach of this curious army. But while we had no luck that night, on subse-

Why do owls find the New York City night life so cool? The answer is simple: abundant food and diversity of habitats.

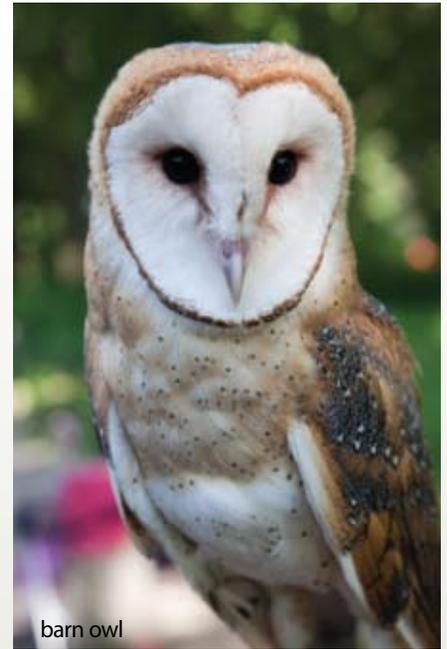
quent night walks we have found eastern screech-owls, barn owls, long-eared owls, great horned owls, saw-whet owls and even a boreal owl. Why do owls find the New York City night life so cool?

The answer is simple: abundant food and diversity of habitats. Through the years, we have learned that New York City is a veritable fast-food joint for birds of prey. The barred owl that was shot in 1900 was roosting by day in a tenement courtyard, feasting by night upon sleeping house sparrows. Today,

our New York City owls, such as the Central Park screech-owls, consume anything that moves, including small to mid-sized mammals and birds, non-native Asian earthworms, moths, lightning bugs, crayfish and even fish. At least 11 owl species (of the 12 that occur in New York State) have been found in New York City since the late

1850s, and three species still nest here. Some, such as the snowy owl, spend November to March hunting non-native ring-necked pheasants at Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx and western black-tailed jack rabbits at Kennedy Airport in Queens. Others, such as the diminutive saw-whet owl, specialize in capturing small rodents such as mice, voles, shrews and young rats.

Each autumn, several New York City parks regularly host groups of up to five long-eared owls. They arrive in mid to late



barn owl

Robert DeCandido

October and remain until early March. Dan Beard, one of the co-founders of the Boy Scouts of America, wrote about their food habits in 1906 in Flushing, Queens: "They breed here, and this last season they wintered here...I have examined a number of their pellets and found in them nothing but the remains of mice with now and then the bones of an English sparrow...The birds roost in the thick foliage of an evergreen tree, but when watched too closely do not hesitate to leave the tree and fly about in broad daylight, and the manner in which they dodge obstructions when approaching their former perch, makes it evident that their eyesight is very good even in daylight." In the past, up to 37 have been counted at one winter roosting site in the Bronx (January 1962). The long-eared owl last nested in New York City on Staten Island in 1947.

The great horned owl has increased in number in the past century, and is the most formidable raptor that nests in our parks. Each year in December, their breeding season begins. At dusk, we have seen the male and then the female fly to adjacent lamp posts in parking lots of city parks. Here they begin hooting back and forth to one another in an eerie duet. By late January some pairs have

Robert DeCandido



saw-whet owl

Eleven species of owls have been seen at one time or another in New York City.

Three of these species—barn owl, eastern screech-owl, great horned owl—still nest here. Two other species—long-eared owl and northern saw-whet owl—are relatively common in the city. The remaining six species are considered rare in the city, with snowy, barred and short-eared owls spotted occasionally, and northern hawk,

boreal and burrowing owls considered extremely rare.

For natural history information about New York's owl species, check out DEC's pamphlet *Owls of New York State* at www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/4791.html and Cornell's *All About Birds* on-line bird guide at www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/search.



great horned owl

Deborah Allen



short-eared owl

Deborah Allen

laid 2-3 eggs, and the first fledglings leave the nest in early April, often before they can fly. Walking by day along woodland paths in the Bronx, we have observed these fledglings. Adults keep watch over them, each night bringing food ranging from rabbits and squirrels to mallard ducks.

Besides the abundant prey base that owls exploit here, there are different habitats that compose New York City; fields, woodlands, salt marshes and even vacant lots are hunted by different owl species. However, these habitats have changed significantly since 1900, benefitting some owl species, while hurting others. For example, the short-eared owl was formerly more abundant when grasslands, open fields, salt marshes and active landfills were scattered throughout the city. However, as many of these areas were developed for housing, or matured into deciduous

woods, this owl became less common, though they are still occasionally seen flying over abandoned landfills in the outer boroughs during winter.

Another owl affected by habitat change is the barred owl which has disappeared as a breeder—it prefers riparian woodlands, a habitat that is uncommon in the city today. On the positive side, barn owls seem to be holding their own despite changes in “natural” areas throughout the city. These owls tolerate human activities by day, and have even nested in openings in the walls of the old Yankee Stadium. By night, they hunt abundant Norway rats in and around apartment complexes in the Bronx and upper Manhattan. Because their food supply is rarely in short supply, barn owls can be found nesting in every month of the year (fledging young even in December-January). The barn owls of the Jamaica Bay (Gateway) National

Recreation area can be found roosting in many of the owl boxes constructed for them. At night, they hunt the salt marshes and remaining fields.

Owls have served as ambassadors of conservation in New York City. In 1929, Grace Coit Meleney, a high school science teacher in the Bronx, wrote that, “Early in the morning of October 31, 1930, a janitor discovered a barn owl, and put it in a scrap basket with a cardboard cover. The owl was banded at a meeting of the Science Club that afternoon and was liberated from the roof by the members. It is not the return records as interesting as they would be to which I look forward in handling these birds, but the excitement and interest that accompany each visit when birds invade our school building. It is the stimulation of the imagination in discussions of banding for scientific purposes, and the idea that some of the

students may later find pleasure in bird-banding and in securing scientific results, or may even bring in reports of banded birds, that seems to me their greatest value.”

Today, a conservation research program is underway to understand how the saw-whet owl, the city’s most common owl in some winters, utilizes an urban park. Saw-whets are present in widely varying numbers; as many as 15 have been found in one large urban park in December, with up to nine roosting in the same small grove of young white pines by day. Trudy Battaly and Drew Panko are leading a team of field biologists from early October to mid March, using radio telemetry to track these owls in order to answer questions that will help ensure saw-whets will always winter here. Questions being investigated include: How long do individual owls stay? Do the same individuals return each year? What are man-made threats to overwintering owls?

A similar conservation-oriented owl program began in Central Park in 1998. In late summer that year, a group of six eastern screech-owls were banded and released into the park, where they had not been seen in more than fifty years. An additional 33 screech-owls were released in subsequent years; the result: owls have bred and raised young once again in Central Park. More importantly, impressive numbers of people turn up with their children at dusk to look for the screechers on “owl prowls.” The public’s interest comes just in time for the screech-owl. It bred in every borough—five different nests were once found in one park alone—but is now only hanging on by a prayer in the city, and is only common, but declining, on Staten Island.

The take-home message is clear: people and owls can co-exist even in busy cities. However, we must take care in the way we use rodenticides in our parks, and leave some hollows in trees

for owls to nest. As observers, we can also inform those in decision-making positions that owls are important to us. There is one thing we have learned through the eastern screech-owl reintroduction project in Central Park: it is much easier to preserve and protect native species already living in our parks than to try and re-establish them once they are gone.

Call them what you will, but we think New York City owls are way cool. That, in kid speak, really does mean awesome.

Robert DeCandido, PhD has been studying owls in New York City since 1982. He is responsible for the eastern screech-owl restoration project in Central Park, and leads owl walks at night and bird walks by day when he is in the city. He is currently a consultant to the wind power industry.

Deborah Allen is a wildlife photographer specializing in birds. Her images of North American, European and Asian birds have appeared in *Natural History*, *Birder’s World*, the *New York Times* and many other magazines and books. She is currently working on a field guide to the birds of Central Park.



Larry Fischer

Because of changing habitat, barred owls no longer nest in New York City.



Colors of Fall

By Bernadette LaManna

Leaf Peeping at Prospect Mountain

When my older brother and I were kids, it was considered an accomplishment to climb Prospect Mountain. We didn't refer to it as "hiking." For his efforts, my brother was rewarded with a commemorative coin. Several years later, I became the proud holder of a signed and dated, wallet-sized card to attest to the fact that I, too, had "scaled the mountain." We had achieved our respective feats during summertime, when we spent much of our school vacation at family camps in Lake

of choice, if for no other reason than because of all the publicity it received—deservedly or not—for having the most glorious colors of all. I've since visited the Adirondacks in all seasons, and, in autumn, the foliage is every bit as beautiful as in our neighbor state, particularly from the vantage point of Prospect Mountain.

Access to Prospect Mountain by motor vehicle is via the Veterans Memorial Highway, renamed from

space, visitors are asked to leave their vehicles at the third lookout on the mountain. From there, you can either take the continuously running "view-mobile" up to the bucolic summit, or hike on the trail—described as a 10-15 minute challenging walk. For serious hikers, there's a marked trail that begins on the western edge of Lake George Village and crosses the Northway (I-87) on a screened-in bridge, eventually ending near the summit.

On a clear day, the 100-mile view from Prospect Mountain's summit encompasses five states.

George. By now, the coin and the card are long gone, but the mountain and our memories remain.

Back then, our family cleared out of the north country by Labor Day, and I never even glimpsed the Lake George area in any other season until I was a young adult. When it came to viewing fall foliage, Vermont was the destination

Prospect Mountain State Parkway after a long and contentious debate. The roadway opens in late May and closes around Columbus Day in mid October, well beyond peak foliage time in the Adirondacks. For a small fee, motorists can make the nearly six-mile drive to access the summit, which stands 2,030 feet above sea level. Due to limited

On a clear day, the 100-mile view from Prospect Mountain's summit encompasses five states. It also includes Lake George Village with the backdrop of Black Mountain; New York's Adirondack High Peaks; Vermont's Green Mountains; New Hampshire's White Mountains, and, on a VERY clear day, the Laurentians of Canada.



Visitors to the summit can also view remnants of the world's largest cable railroad and the fireplace of the long-gone Prospect Mountain Hotel (successor to a previous facility that also burned to the ground). The hotel was built by Dr. James Ferguson of Glens Falls in the late 1800s. Accessible only by horse-drawn carriage, the location of the hotel was popular with wealthy nature lovers and people who had respiratory problems, such as tuberculosis. Although the hotel burned down only a few years after its construction, it was quickly rebuilt.

By 1895, a Mr. William Peck had become the new owner of the property. He and the Horicon Improvement Company arranged for the Otis Engineering Company (of elevator fame) to build a cog railway, known as the Prospect Mountain Incline Railway, on the mountain.

About 30 years later, it was rumored that the hotel would become a gambling casino. Disturbed by this prospect, George Foster Peabody, who had acquired the mountain in 1904, gave it to New York State for public use.

Fred Pabst, Jr.—founder of what is now known as the Bromley Ski Resort in Vermont and whose father established Pabst Blue Ribbon beer—built small, “J-bar” ski areas throughout the Northeast, including on Prospect Mountain in 1938. Some people familiar with the mountain are unaware that, at the time, it had the



© Scott Thomas Photography

Visitors can take the continuously running "viewmobile" from the third lookout to the summit.

only overhead cable lift in New York State, which may also have been the longest one in the country. Although the ski area closed

Wally Haley



Prospect Mountain is just one place to enjoy the spectacular fall foliage found in New York State. A number of mountains known for their winter attractions offer fantastic vantage points for viewing nature's spectacle. For information about possible gondola and

lift tours, leaf peepers should check out the websites for Swain Mountain (western New York), Bristol Mountain (Finger Lakes), Whiteface Mountain (Adirondacks), and Belleayre and Hunter mountains (Catskills).

Swain Mountain
www.swain.com

Hunter Mountain
www.huntermtn.com

Whiteface Mountain
www.whiteface.com

Bristol Mountain
www.bristolmountain.com

Belleayre Mountain
www.belleayre.com

around the time of WWII, another one was operated during the 1950s, but little is known about it.

Decades after the Prospect Mountain House burned down a second time and a steel fire tower was erected in its place, proposals and plans for the area waxed and waned until 1954, when Governor Tom Dewey signed legislation to build a highway up the mountain. Finally, Governor Nelson Rockefeller made funds available for this purpose by signing the necessary legislation in 1964. Five years later, the Veterans Memorial Highway opened.

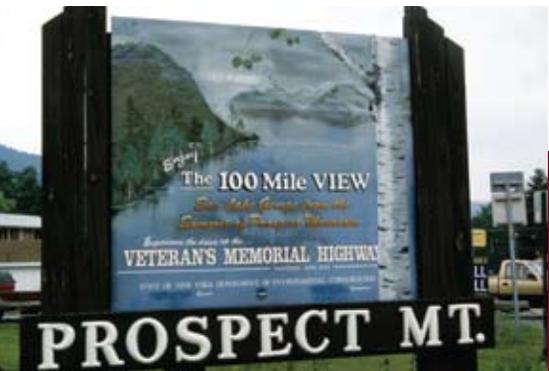
Now, everyone can enjoy spending time on Prospect Mountain. So pack a picnic and your camera, gather family or friends, and practice your “oohs” and “ahhs” for the spectacular fall colors you’ll see on and around the mountain.

Bernadette LaManna is a contributing editor of *Conservationist*.



Lake George Village

Robert M. Goodwin



NYS DEC

Visit the Mountain

summit also offers a large picnic area and, on clear days, the aforementioned 100-mile view as well.

Hikers – There is no fee for hikers. The red-marked 1-5/8 mile Prospect Mountain Hiking Trail leads to the summit of the mountain. To reach the trail from Lake George Village, turn west on Montcalm Street (away from the lake) to Smith Street; turn south 1/2 block to the trailhead sign. The trail crosses I-87 on an elevated and “caged” walkway. Although there are a few strenuous spots along the way, climbing to the summit is not considered difficult for people in reasonably good shape. Part of the trail follows the road bed of the former railway that served the once-thriving hotel on the mountain.

The free “viewmobile” offers round-trip transportation to the summit from the last of three lookouts/parking areas, or hikers can cover the remaining distance to the top on foot.

Visitors are encouraged to explore the summit area; enjoy views of Lake George and the High Peaks (visible from a rock outcropping on the northwest portion of the summit), and note the historic remains of the hotel and railway.

For more information on Prospect Mountain, visit www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9176.html and www.adk.org/trails/ProspectMountain.aspx, or call 518-668-5198.

Drivers – The Veterans Memorial Highway is open daily from Memorial Day through mid to late October. There are different fees for different types of motor vehicles; for cars, the fee is \$8.

Take the Adirondack Northway/Route I-87 (which cuts across the bottom of a former ski slope) to Exit 21. Go one mile north on Route 9, and turn left at the entrance to the Veterans Memorial Highway, also known as NYS Route 917A. Within about ten minutes, this 5+ miles two-lane highway leads to a parking lot, where there is a large picnic area. The

FADING DRUMS

Does hunting play a role in the decline of ruffed grouse in New York?

By Megan Skrip

On this bright October afternoon, the woods are ablaze with autumn color; the crisp air fragrant with the smell of fallen leaves. Also on the breeze—the deep rhythmic beating of a grouse drumming on his stage. For ruffed grouse in New York, dispersal season has reached its peak.

Grouse drum primarily in spring, to attract females to their territory and intimidate competing males. However, they may also be heard in autumn—dissuading wandering juveniles from usurping an already occupied patch of forest. The dispersers that this particular male may be warding from his territory represent the surviving young from the nesting and brooding season, and next year's potential breeders. But lingering on the air, in the drumming male's echo, is a question: How many will survive until spring?

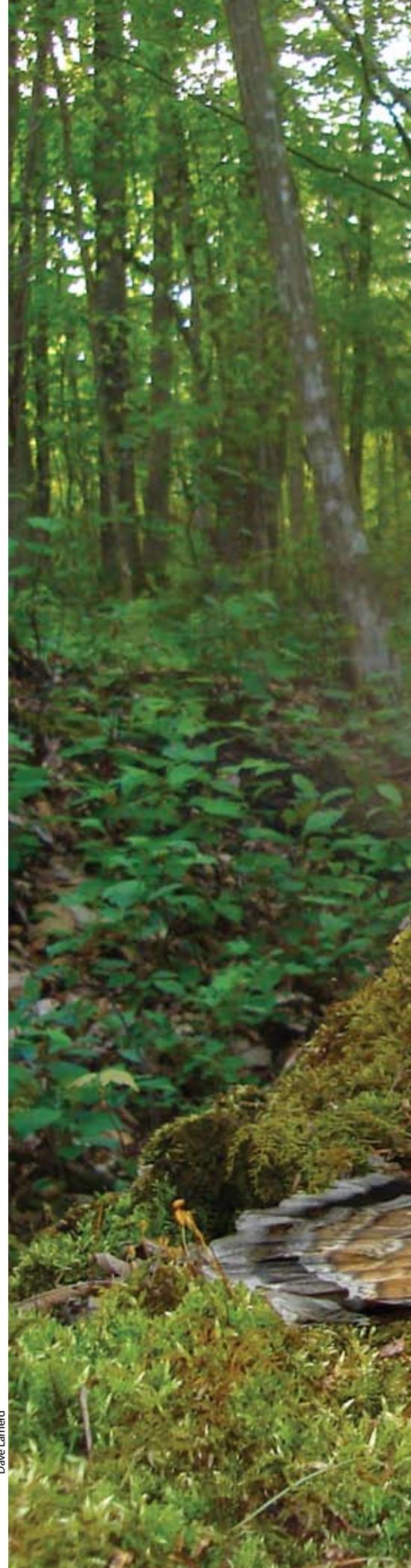
On this particular day, my field crew is out to find some answers. By trapping, banding, and radio-marking dozens of ruffed grouse in New York, and tracking their survival through the hunting season, we aimed to address an even broader question: Could hunting be contributing to the statewide decrease in ruffed grouse abundance?

According to the Breeding Bird Survey (an international effort coordinated by the federal government's Office of Migratory Bird Management), ruffed grouse numbers in New York fell by an average

of 5% per year between 1966 and 2007, with a particularly steep decline of 16% per year since 1980. Forest maturation is the widely accepted explanation for the decline, because ruffed grouse rely on very young forests for their food and cover. While species like wild turkey, bear and pileated woodpeckers benefit from aging forests, grouse may suffer. But how does forest maturation reduce grouse abundance? Are grouse in older forests simply more vulnerable to hunting because low-quality cover leaves them more visible?

Ruffed grouse have the widest range of any native non-migratory game bird in North America, but they require very specific habitat: early successional (or young) forest. In fact, grouse reach their highest densities in forest stands that are about 5 to 30 years old. Areas covered by small tree stems and shrubby undergrowth are particularly important as they provide protective cover from predators.

Over the years, changes in New York's landscape have likely played a large role in the availability of young forest. In the early twentieth century, for example, the state experienced widespread abandonment of farmland. As trees reclaimed these uncultivated lands, young forests emerged. This extensive regeneration of forest created a boom in the number of grouse. Since the late twentieth century,



Dave Larned



however, grouse have become scarcer in the state's woods, as the forests themselves have grown older.

Despite declining numbers over the past several decades, ruffed grouse remain a highly popular game bird in New York, second only to wild turkey. DEC wildlife managers wondered if hunter harvest could be contributing to the population decline, and they wanted an answer to the question: Are grouse more susceptible to harvest as forests grow older?

To find out, DEC began a cooperative research project in 2007 with the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) in Syracuse. It was the first study of ruffed grouse harvest mortality in New York in more than 50 years. I served as the project's graduate student, conducting fieldwork and analyzing data. Our goal was to determine the survival



Jennifer Burton

The author removes a grouse from a trap.

rate of ruffed grouse during the hunting season under different forest conditions, and to assess the importance of mortality caused by hunting. If the data indicated

that hunter harvest was a large component of winter mortality, and survival was lower in older forests, biologists would consider new management strategies.

We chose two sites to conduct the study—Fort Drum Military Installation

are different. Fort Drum is dominated by early successional forest (aspen, birch, cherry) of varying ages; Partridge Run exhibits older, later successional forest (elm, ash, maple) with some thick coverts and overgrown apple orchards.

Our goal was to determine the survival rate of ruffed grouse during the hunting season under different forest conditions, and to assess the importance of mortality caused by hunting.

in Jefferson County and Partridge Run Wildlife Management Area in Albany County. Both have high hunting pressure, but their forest compositions

In the fall of 2007 and 2008, we trapped grouse at both areas and fit each bird with a leg band and radio-transmitter. Catching ruffed grouse is thrilling work. After locating “grousy” patches of young woods or ferny edges, we set traps—50-foot lengths of chicken wire fence with lily-pad-shaped enclosures at each end. Interestingly, when grouse encounter the 18-inch-high barrier while walking on the forest floor, they will not fly over the fence, but rather follow it to the funneled entrance of the trap. Like a lobster trap, the trap's door is narrower on the inside, and so, once inside, the grouse is reluctant to attempt an exit.

Hours, or even days may pass before the trap catches one of our quarry, but when it does, the occupant is unmistakable. Flapping about to free itself, a ruffed grouse will hop and mew as we approach. Unclipping the soft fabric mesh at the top of the trap, we gently press the bird's wings tight to its body, lift it out, and place it in a handling bag.

Captured grouse were outfitted with a necklace-style radio-transmitter.



Megan Skipp



Megan Skrip

Radio-transmitters enable biologists to track grouse movements.

Safe in the bag, a grouse is surprisingly docile, allowing us to outfit it with a uniquely numbered leg band and necklace-style radio-transmitter. We weigh each bird, examine the feathers to determine age and gender, and after the customary brief photo-op, release the grouse at the trap site. Kneeling on the ground, we loosen our grip around the sturdy warm body and open the handling bag. Like a feathered rocket, the grouse takes to the air in a flurry of wings, clucking in reproach as it makes its escape deep into the forest. Although the grouse may no longer be visible, we will find it again and again throughout the winter thanks to the transmitter it now wears.

Over two autumns, we captured and followed 169 ruffed grouse this way. We monitored their survival to the end of the hunting season, using telemetry receivers to listen for the unique signals emitted by the radio-transmitters. When the signal from a transmitter doubled its pulse rate, we knew that the bird with that particular frequency had been stationary for

several hours—a sure sign that mortality had occurred.

When we detect a mortality signal, we hike into the woods to recover the transmitter and any remains. Holding an antenna aloft in the cold winter air, we listen to the steady “beep...beep...beep” of the radio-transmitter, made audible by our receiver unit—weak in one direction, strong in another—and walk in the direction of the strong signal. Over a snow-covered ridge and into a pine-shaded covert, the signal grows stronger, until it comes from all directions. There on the ground are the remains of our radio-marked grouse. We examine the remains to determine the cause of death, paying careful attention to any clues left behind by the predator—“Avian CSI” we call it. Here, on crusted snow, lie grouse feathers—lots of them—in a neat little heap. Nearby, the transmitter itself lies unscathed beside some crusted streaks of frozen white, dull against the snow—raptor whitewash. This grouse, like so many others, was killed by a hawk or owl.

To account for grouse taken by hunters, we enlisted the help of the hunters themselves, asking them to notify us if they harvested any radio-marked birds. The project was publicized at the study areas, and each radio-transmitter and leg band was inscribed with a phone number and message encouraging the finder to report the kill.

Most of the grouse that died at our study areas were taken by predators, predominantly birds of prey. Each year, about half of our monitored birds did not survive to the end of the hunting season in February. Such a mortality rate—about 50%—is typical across the grouse’s range and, notably, was similar at both of our study areas despite differences in forest age and composition. Overwinter survival was no different in the older forest of Partridge Run than in the younger forest of Fort Drum. We found harvest to be a surprisingly small component of overwinter mortality—accounting for up to just 11% of the total birds monitored.



male ruffed grouse

Warren Greene

So despite earlier concerns that hunting might limit grouse populations in New York, our research didn't show hunting to be a driving factor of overwinter deaths. Therefore, reduced season lengths or bag limits don't appear to be necessary. In addition, our research showed that the proportion of grouse taken by hunters was similar to that reported in New York during the 1930s, and less than the proportion of harvested grouse in stable grouse populations in other parts of the country, indicating that restricting grouse hunting would probably not affect winter survival.

But if fall/winter mortality, and more specifically hunting, do not limit New York's grouse population, then what does? We now think the answer lies in nest and brood survival.

While fall/winter survival rates may not differ across the state, areas with more successful spring production appear to be able to sustain higher grouse numbers. And

those are the areas most likely to continue to have grouse in the future. As grouse disappear from New York forests, they likely do so in a far subtler way than experiencing high fall/winter mortality—they may simply fail to produce enough chicks in the spring to maintain a stable population. Management efforts to restore early successional habitats that grouse need for nesting and brood rearing may help sustain populations of this popular game bird.

In the end, for the autumn drummer on his stage, beating his wings in filtered sunlight, more juveniles may mean more intruders to fend off. Yet for the New York population as a whole, higher productivity means more juvenile grouse on the landscape, hopefully finding forest of their own in which to rear young come spring.

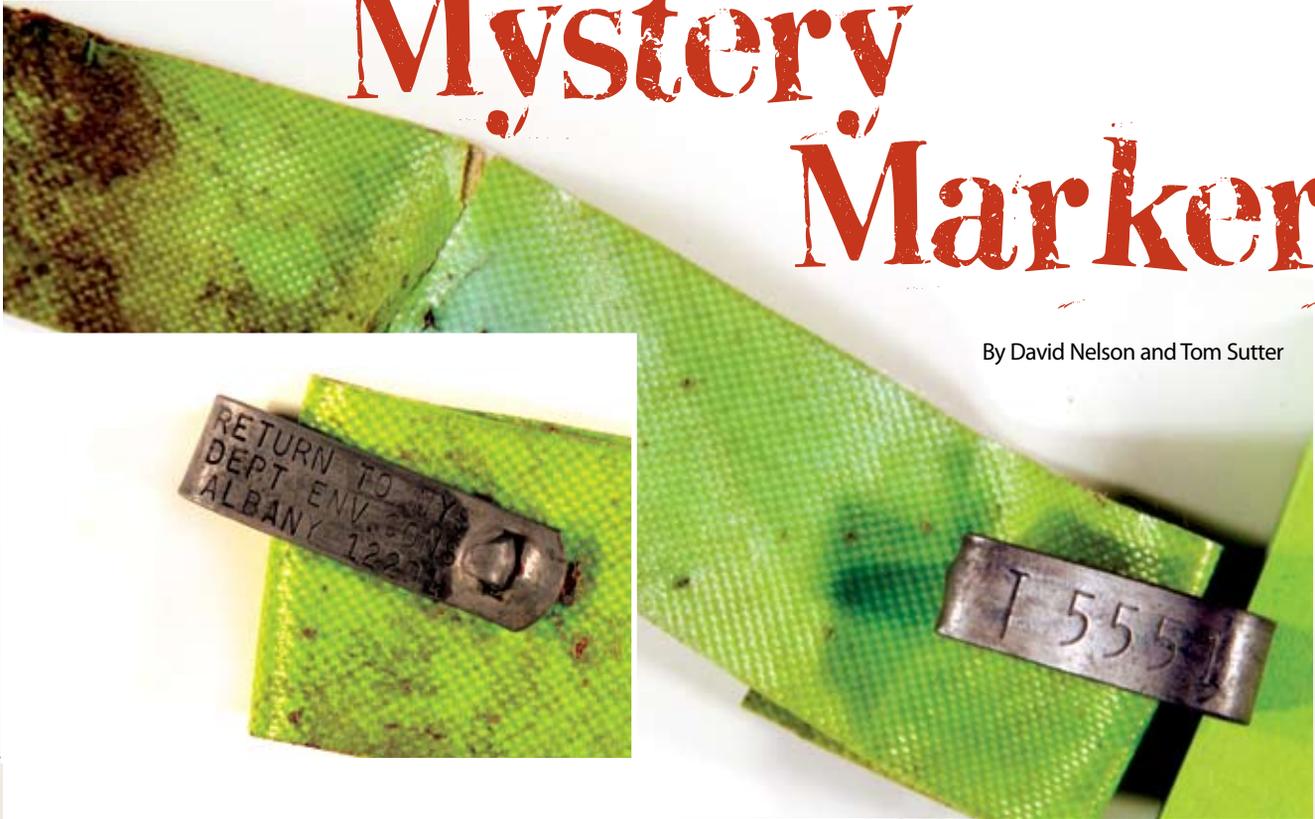


Jennifer Burton

Megan Skrip graduated from SUNY-ESF with a Master of Science in Ecology in May 2010. She is now pursuing her PhD in Massachusetts.

Mystery Marker

By David Nelson and Tom Sutter



James Clayton

Out for a casual stroll in a woodlot near her home last year, Rensselaer County resident Lynn Rowley found a piece of bright green material in the duff on the forest floor. At first, it looked like just a bit of litter. On closer inspection, she noticed a crimped aluminum band attached to the plastic material. Inscribed on one side was: RETURN TO NYS DEPT ENV. CONS ALBANY 12201. The other side simply said "T5551."

Curious about the find, Ms. Rowley sent an e-mail to DEC, which went to Tom Sutter, a principal fish & wildlife technician in Albany. Tom was intrigued and asked Ms. Rowley to send him the item so he could do a little research. After talking with several former employees and digging through some old data, Tom determined the band was a wing tag used years ago in DEC's trap & transfer program to re-establish wild turkeys throughout much of New York.

But to find out more, Tom had to search DEC's warehouse where he was able to locate a handwritten ledger containing the original banding records for the project. According to those documents, on September 12, 1974, three adult female turkeys and eight poults were captured in Allegany State Park in Cattaraugus County. They were tagged, and then transported and released in the vicinity of Hicks Pond in the Town of Poestenkill that very day. Interestingly, this was the same area in which Ms. Rowley discovered the tag nearly 36 years later.

All of the turkeys trapped and released in this group received two sequentially numbered tags and colored Tyvek streamers. The tag Ms. Rowley found would have been on a turkey that also sported wing tag #T5552. Tom noted that one of the immature birds from this same release was recovered in the Horsford Pond area near North Rd. in East Poestenkill in the fall of 1974, with both sets of wing tags and streamers.



John Goerg

Ms. Rowley thanked Tom for taking the time to solve the puzzle and keeping her family informed. In her words, "My boys enjoyed knowing the history of the mystery tag. Now we know where all these turkeys came from."

DEC encourages anyone who finds a bird band or a wing tag to report the discovery either using the address listed in the hunting and trapping regulations guide, or better yet, in an e-mail to: fwwildlf@gw.dec.state.ny.us.

For more information on DEC's historic turkey trap and transfer program, see *Conservationist for Kids* in this magazine.

Dave Nelson is Editor of the *Conservationist*. Throughout his 30-plus year career with DEC, **Tom Sutter** has worked on myriad wildlife projects, including wild turkey management and waterfowl banding.



OPERATION DEEPWATER HORIZON

A DEC ECO'S FIRSTHAND
ACCOUNT OF WORKING ON
THE GULF OIL SPILL

BY MIKE ST. JEANOS

SATURDAY, JUNE 11TH;
EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER,
PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI

I arrived in New Orleans nine days ago, a few days after being recalled to active duty by the U.S. Coast Guard. In my full-time job I serve as a Police Captain with New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation Division of Law Enforcement, overseeing enforcement efforts in a nine-county area surrounding the Capital Region. In my spare time I serve as a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve. This is my second activation in five years.

A couple of weeks ago I was relaxing by our swimming pool and looking forward to the summer when my wife Laurie came outside with the phone. It was a Coast Guard warrant officer telling me they were activating reservists for deployment to the Gulf of Mexico. The Guard needed reservists to help with their oil spill response, officially dubbed Operation Deepwater Horizon.

The officer asked if I had ever served on a buoy tender (a type of Coast Guard cutter), to which I explained that while I had served on a wide range of ships, I had never served on a buoy tender. He said that was close enough and I was going.

Getting off the plane in New Orleans a few days later, I filed onto a shuttle bus with dozens of young men and women with short haircuts and carrying sea bags, who I assumed were fellow "Coasties." We spent the next few days processing in—several hundred men and women, both active



U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Stephen Lehmann

(Above) The oil slick was bright orange and covered several hundred square miles.
(Facing page) The author inspects an area where some oil has washed ashore.

duty and activated reservists, engaged in a somewhat controlled chaos.

Today, I flew over the Gulf in a U.S. Army airplane to get a firsthand look at the spill. I've been assigned as a liaison officer for Jackson County, Mississippi. My job is to interface with the local elected and non-elected leadership, to

help address their concerns. Because of the enormity of this environmental disaster, as well as the enormity of the response efforts underway (we will eventually have approximately 50,000 military and civilian responders involved, as well as several thousand vessels) it's important to get a good operational

picture. Although I was out on the water surveying the local area by boat a couple of days prior, the overflight affords me a much broader view of the situation.

On the way out to the site of the rig explosion (about 40 to 50 miles out in the Gulf, south of Louisiana), everyone was looking out the windows to try and catch a glimpse of oil in the water. Spotting some kelp and menhaden, we incorrectly thought it was an oil slick. But when we eventually did fly over a slick, there was no mistaking it—it was bright orange and covered an area of several hundred square miles.

The former rig site was an ominous picture. There were numerous ships on scene, several burning off gas and being cooled by fire boats, and others trying to capture at least some of the oil. During our flight we also observed hundreds of miles of protective boom placed around sensitive coastline areas. The overflight reinforced the magnitude of the spill, as well as the scope of the response. While Mississippi's waters and coastline have not yet been directly affected by the oil like Louisiana and Alabama's have, from the size of the slicks it appears inevitable that they will eventually get hit.

JUNE 12TH-JUNE 25TH

It's been a feverish pace to get assets in place to protect the coastal communities in Jackson County, Mississippi against the approaching oil. There is a finite supply of skimming vessels and protective boom available though, and their deployment has to be prioritized. To further complicate matters, anyone handling oil needs specialized hazardous materials training, which also restricts our current response capabilities. We are operating under the Incident Command System, and decisions regarding where to place resources are made under a Unified Command. This system provides for a collaborative approach for the involved entities, agencies and municipalities. The Unified Command has placed the



Jackson County Emergency Response, Butch Loper

bulk of the available skimming resources in Louisiana and Alabama, which are both being hit hard with oil. This causes concern among the local municipalities in my area of responsibility, as they are worried that they do not have enough

THE OVERFLIGHT REINFORCED THE MAGNITUDE OF THE SPILL, AS WELL AS THE SCOPE OF THE RESPONSE.

resources on hand, and that when the oil does hit it will be too late. Regardless, they work to deploy protective silt fencing and additional floating boom, to prepare for the worst.

SATURDAY, JUNE 26TH

This morning I was back up in the air in an Army helo, attempting to verify unconfirmed reports regarding the fast approaching oil slicks. We've found the only good way to spot oil is from the air, and the Mississippi Army National Guard makes dozens of flights each day. The local leadership is concerned that oil will hit the beaches soon and that we're still not fully prepared; the overflight confirmed that a significant quantity of emulsified oil is right offshore. The reality is that despite all our

efforts, some oil will probably enter the "back bay" area and hit land.

A resident asked me today how things were going with the spill response. My answer was that despite our ever-improving efforts, with the ruptured

well continuing to discharge fifty to seventy thousand barrels of oil each day, we're simply not making great headway. The well needs to be capped. There are a number of protective measures we have employed including floating boom, oil skimming vessels, and fabric fencing, but all have limitations and we'll probably be faced with the need for shoreline cleanup.

I empathize with my local coastal communities. Although they haven't had oil wash onto their shores yet, their bayous, bays and beaches are integral to their way of life and livelihoods, and they're extremely worried. They have already suffered a significant economic blow, as commercial and recreational fishing have been completely shut down, and tourism has taken a terrible hit. Just five years ago

Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc here, and despite the almost unbelievable progress they have made in rebuilding, this disaster has stretched their resolve. Many of the BP employees who I come into contact with are affected as well, for despite having no direct involvement in the spill, they still feel a sense of personal responsibility. I am very impressed by the people of Mississippi, as they are simply some of the friendliest, hardest-working, and resourceful people I've ever met. At a recent meeting, a local commercial fisherman, now out of work, was close to breaking down while describing the financial stress he and his family are suffering. It's heartbreaking to see good people having to deal with this.

SUNDAY, JUNE 27TH

Our work schedule is somewhat daunting. I haven't had any days off yet. The days run from early morning until evening, often 14-16 hours long, and almost everything I'm involved in is problematic. It's hard to complain

though because all of our people are in a somewhat similar situation. There's simply an overwhelming amount to do. As a reservist you come to expect this, for we're usually called in during disasters. Even so, this schedule is hard to maintain.

I'm exhausted and was planning to work a few hours in the morning and then take the rest of the day off. I got up at 0600, participated in the daily morning conference call, sent in my morning written pre-brief for the day, reviewed and disseminated some of the enormous volume of e-mailed data concerning the spill (trajectories; shoreside, inshore, nearshore response efforts; booming ops; etc.) and then knocked off. About an hour later, the phone rings and I'm informed that oil has washed up on the shores of one of our local communities. It's the first time my area has been hit. A short while later my boss called, telling me that I need to meet with the mayor of the affected community. After reaching the affected

site to observe the impact firsthand (the oil is a heavy, sticky, emulsified mess, orange in color and similar to tar in consistency), I traveled to a marina where the local mayor was waiting with her staff. They were not happy, which is an understatement, as they felt we did not have adequate resources deployed in their area. In addition, a newspaper reporter walked up and placed a micro-cassette recorder on the table...not a good sign. No day off today.

THURSDAY, JULY 1ST

Today, my boss, another commander and I met with an aide to the under secretary for homeland security to discuss what we've observed to date, and talk about possible solutions. We already provide daily teleconference briefings to the deputy secretary of homeland security or one of her top assistants. While excellent experience, the briefings can be quite stressful, largely due to the number of ranking personnel involved. Simply put, you don't want to mess up



U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Prentice Danner

Manually removing oil and tarballs can be difficult, tedious and filthy work.

and be embarrassed on a White House conference call. Today's face-to-face meeting allowed for an even greater degree of direct input, and we provided a frank assessment of what we need to improve our local response efforts.

With any large scale response, there are going to be missteps, and this one is no exception. I can honestly say though, that almost every day of the response sees improvement, and our own leadership has moved quickly to ensure that the issues being brought forth from the local communities are addressed to the greatest extent possible. Almost immediately after today's meeting, greater local operational control was put into place, more resources such as skimming vessels were secured, and a streamlined command and control system was set up, which will allow us to respond to issues in a more timely fashion. (We see drastic improvements over the next few weeks.)

SATURDAY, JULY 3RD

My boss dispatched me to our local waterside staging area where many of the skimming vessels are located, to get a handle on what's available for deployment and what we may still need. We've been given a green light to acquire more assets and needed to gather information quickly. My petty officer and I first stopped at a local warehouse to view a new prototype skimming vessel that separates water from skimmed oil. It has promise, so we took several photos to include in our report. We then toured the staging area, viewed several new "weir" type skimming vessels that use a collection system similar to a pool skimmer, and also looked at several drum-style skimmers not currently deployed, but which can be put into service within a day or two.

Our oil cleanup capabilities include a wide array of resources, from mechanized skimming type vessels to workers manually removing tar balls and patties with dip nets, which can be difficult

and filthy work. There are also shoreside assets involving work crews of hundreds, manually removing tar balls and patties in hundred-degree heat and oppressive humidity, or rescuing and cleaning injured wildlife. (Although we have encountered spill-related wildlife mortality, it has fortunately been somewhat limited.) The use of mechanized beach cleaning gear has also been deployed.

We reported our findings back to our chain of command. We are in a liaison function, but are frequently called upon to assist in a wide range of operational issues. (Within the next few weeks, the Gulf response goes from approximately 100 to 750 skimming vessels, not including thousands of support vessels. We're starting to gain momentum.)

SUNDAY, JULY 4TH

I finally got part of a day off and used it to talk to my family. Being in the Reserves can be tough on your family and employer, because you have to go when you're needed. I'm fortunate that both are very supportive. My wife Laurie and I were especially concerned for our two children, Christine and Michael, as we are a very close family. But regardless of the length of my work days, I've been able to call home and speak with them each day, and through the use of a recently purchased webcam, we are able to see each other. It's a big help and provides them comfort to know that I'm okay and vice versa. It makes me think of our servicemen and women. I mean, I'm only away for a couple of months; I can't imagine how hard it must be for military families who have someone gone in the Middle East for a year or more.

THURSDAY, JULY 7TH

Today we met with Four Star Admiral Thad Allen, recently retired commandant of the Coast Guard, and national incident commander for the Gulf oil spill response. My boss and I accompanied the admiral on an

offshore supply vessel into the Gulf. He wanted to observe firsthand the operations in our area and help us make improvements. We spent several hours with the admiral who provided us with keen insight. What a great experience. Although Admiral Allen gave us input, he also solicited our input, and it forced us to be on our game.

THURSDAY, JULY 15

The well has been temporarily capped! This is a huge morale boost, even if it's only a temporary solution. Over the past few weeks we have seen significant improvement in our response efforts. It's heartening to me that after a somewhat



U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Brazzell

For more information on animal rescue and cleanup efforts associated with the Gulf oil spill, check out the following links. These are just some of the many organizations involved.

Audubon Society
www.audubon.org

National Wildlife Foundation
www.nwf.org

The Nature Conservancy
www.nature.org

World Wildlife Fund
www.worldwildlife.org

The Institute for Marine Mammal Studies
www.imms.org



U.S. Coast Guard Commander Chris Fahy

First Lady Michelle Obama meets with a number of Coast Guard responders, including the author (far left) during a visit to the area.

rocky start we're starting to make real progress. I've been able to glean some of the engineering issues that they have faced in "killing" this well. Although it can appear simple in the news, it's in fact an incredibly complex evolution. This is a big victory. Over the past several days they had to let the well discharge oil unabated, while the new cap was being fitted. We had an armada of skimming vessels on scene to capture the extra outflow. Again, things are improving.

FRIDAY, JULY 23RD

Last Saturday I was planning to take a half day off when I got a call that a White House advance team would be contacting me. No time for a day off. Over the next several hours, I met with the team who was planning for the arrival of First Lady Michelle Obama to christen a new Coast Guard cutter in Pascagoula, Mississippi the following week. She also wanted to spend some

time with local Coast Guard responders. Over the next week I worked closely with the advance team, all top-notch people and a pleasure to deal with.

Today, we met with the first lady, and Secretary for Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. It was a great and unique opportunity to interact in a small and somewhat private setting. Both the first lady and Secretary Napolitano were fantastic to us; warm, caring and engaging, and it was a great way to conclude my tour of duty. I have to say that although the Coast Guard is incredibly demanding, it also provides unparalleled opportunities like this one.

SATURDAY, JULY 24TH

I'm heading back home next week. My replacement has arrived and I'm working to get him up to speed. We're also watching a storm developing in the Caribbean which might hit the coast. It's easy to forget about the potential

for natural disasters while dealing with a man-made one, but we have to be prepared. This deployment has been exhausting, but incredibly enriching for me. I am grateful I was able to play a small, but positive role in helping to respond to our nation's largest environmental disaster. I'm proud that my team was able to leave things better than when we arrived, and my hopes and prayers are with the residents of the Gulf Coast that they overcome this catastrophe; I'm confident they will.

Mike St. Jeanos is the law enforcement captain in DEC's Region 4 (Capital District area). He has served with DEC since 1996.

Note: The views expressed herein are the author's and not necessarily those of the U.S. Coast Guard.



to a Future Climate

It's mid afternoon in late May, crazy hot for this time of year (upper 80s), and we are sloshing our way through Spring Pond Bog, the largest open bog in the Adirondacks. The weather has brought the black flies out in full force, loving the heat and humidity, and loving us even more. I'm with a colleague of mine from Cornell, plant ecologist Jonathan Comstock, and we are being led by the legendary Adirondack naturalist, Jerry Jenkins. Jerry knows this state park—from its soaring peaks to bog wilderness areas—probably better than anyone else alive, and he's taking us to see some of the areas that are most vulnerable to climate change.

Swatting at flies, I stare down at my feet to keep my balance as we make our way through the wet, soft, and uneven terrain of hummocks and swales. Suddenly the “slurp-slurp” of Jerry trudging just ahead of me stops and I almost bump into him. The three of us emerge from our hiking trance to take our first good look at the vast expanse of sphagnum carpet interspersed with clusters of dark green spruce trees. We are sweaty, breathing heavy, and our faces and necks are covered with tiny bloody splotches where the black flies have been feasting. Smiling, we laugh at ourselves because crazy as it seems, we love this! We have two whole days away from e-mails, phone calls and report-writing to

enjoy the Adirondacks and talk ecology. What could be better? Black flies come with the territory, and one could argue they keep the crowds down. Besides, later I can show off the dozens of welts as evidence of the “mountain man” in me.

While we are enjoying this, we remain aware of why we have come. After spending so much time going over data about the projected effects of climate change, we feel we could all benefit from a firsthand visit to some of the Adirondack's identified hot spots. And who better to guide us than Jerry, “expert panel reviewer” for our climate change project funded by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA)



The author's companions check out several habitats along their trip.

Exploring climate change in the Adirondacks

By David W. Wolfe, PhD

to identify major vulnerabilities of New York ecosystems (see sidebar), and author of a newly published book about the potential impacts of climate change on the Adirondacks. Jonathan and I are also involved with the “Climate Action Plan” currently being developed by the state. The aim of the plan is to find ways to cope with climate change and meet greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. This trip into the Adirondacks will give the three of us a chance to exchange ideas and discuss what, if anything, we can do about the inevitable changes ahead.

For bogs like the one we are in, their fate will largely depend on future rainfall patterns, as it is rain, rather than

inflowing creeks or groundwater, which keeps them wet. Although most climate models indicate that annual rainfall might not change much in our region, there is much less certainty about this than there is about future warming. We do know that more of our rain is coming in heavy downpours, and some models suggest we will have more rain in winter and less in summer. As we walk around the bog we discuss how this summer (2010) seems to be an example of what could become the norm for this region—the growing season started almost three weeks earlier than the historical average, and temperatures have remained above normal. If rainfall is not sufficient to compensate

for greater water use by vegetation, the bog could easily suffer from late-summer drought. Jerry explains that researchers in Alaska and Canada, where the effects of climate change are more apparent, have found that warmer soil temperatures in bogs like this make soil nitrogen more available to plants. This favors shrubs and trees, and can lead to less open bogs.

On our way to our lodging for the night we stop for a quick hike into one of the treasures of the Adirondacks—an old-growth forest near Ampersand Mountain. There are more than 300,000 acres like this within the park where you can find “grand” trees, including 350-year-old hemlocks, red spruces up

to three feet in diameter, and wonderful untouched stands of beech, yellow birch and sugar maple. We talk about how recent analyses suggest that by mid to late century, the New York climate will no longer be suitable for these species, and oak, hickory and pine may replace them. Of course, this is assuming the new seeds can make it north and establish themselves because oak seedlings are a favorite food of white-tailed deer, whose populations are increasing, in part due to less snow cover in winter, which exposes more vegetation for browsing. The conversation then turns to pests and invasives—another issue these areas face. Hemlocks, for example, are threatened by the hemlock woolly adelgid, a tiny insect pest that is moving northward with climate change and has already wreaked havoc on hemlocks south of New York. With so many

discussing the natural history of this area and identifying birds and their calls, I am a student again. At one point we go ashore to explore an area rich with bog laurels, cotton grass, shrubs, trees and thick sphagnum undergrowth. A palm warbler, its yellow-orange and brown colors brilliant in the morning sun, chirps and hops from branch to branch. There are many bird songs in the air and I see Michaele turning and tilting her head to listen. Later, while having lunch, I sum up the birds I saw on the trip: palm warbler, gray jay and belted kingfisher. I ask Michaele what she heard, and she rattles off the names of 13 different species—a reminder I need to work on my bird song recognition.

I think about how climate change is already affecting bird populations with earlier spring arrivals of migrants, and shifts northward in species ranges.

High-elevation plant and animal species are particularly vulnerable to climate change...

variables, we conclude, it's very difficult to predict exactly when and how our natural landscapes will change into new configurations as the climate warms.

Next day we get up early and launch canoes at Osgood Pond for a trip up the river channel and through bogs. We are joined by Michaele Glennon, a bird expert who, like Jerry, works for the Wildlife Conservation Society. It's a little breezy, making canoeing a bit challenging, but there are no black flies! Between Jerry identifying tree species, and Michaele

“Specialists” with very narrow preferences for food or nesting habitat will be most at risk from climate change. Mountain breeding populations of Bicknell's thrush, gray jay and blackpoll warbler are considered vulnerable.

Our last mini-adventure involves an afternoon hike up Whiteface Mountain, the fifth highest peak in the Adirondacks. High-elevation plant and animal species are particularly vulnerable to climate change because once they've reached the mountaintop, they can't move higher to escape rising temperatures. Survival requires a “jump” to a higher peak nearby. In this way, mountain peaks are like islands in their isolation from each other. Recent findings suggest that by the end of this century the climate in the Adirondacks will no longer be suitable for spruce, fir, and alpine tundra plant communities. We wonder what will replace them and how the replacement species will get here. We admit among ourselves that we don't have the answers, but that we must do all we can



Appalachian fir moss

As temperatures warm, alpine tundra plants, like Appalachian fir moss pictured here, may disappear from the Adirondacks.



palm warbler

Jeff Nadler

ClimAid

As part of a multi-disciplinary project called ClimAID, a team of scientists is assessing possible effects of climate change on issues important to New York State, including agriculture, ocean coastal zones, communications infrastructure, ecosystems, energy, public health, transportation, and water resources. Supported by NYSERDA, the project will present a number of options for adapting to a changing climate and identify areas where more research is needed. A final report is scheduled for later this year.

For more information on ClimAID, contact Amanda Stevens at ads@nyserda.org. If you'd like to be informed when the report is released, sign up for the listserv at www.nyserda.org/programs/Environment/EMEP/listserv.asp.



raven

to keep the avenues for species dispersal open to facilitate nature's adaptation to rapid climate change. This means minimizing fragmentation of habitats by roads and other developments where possible, and protecting and expanding streambed zones, which are corridors for species movement.

Despite the heat and our concerns about the future of this area, our spirits are lifted by the panoramic views of verdant rolling mountains below and the

brilliant azure sky above. The higher we go, the more dwarfed the spruce trees become, until they are only knee-high and look like bonsai plants. We take lots of photos and get down on our hands and knees as Jerry shows us some of the small wonderful alpine and sub-alpine plants native to this habitat.

Approaching the summit, we decide to avoid the tourist crowd and turn back for our descent. The others are a bit ahead when a raven glides majestically and

silently by me, just beyond the cliff edge where I am standing. It comes remarkably close, and I catch an ephemeral flash of sword-blade blues reflecting off its jet-black wings. Having talked earlier about birds as seed dispersers to these mountains, I shout to Jerry who is clambering down the trail, "Maybe the ravens will save the mountaintops, if we can't do it." At first he does not respond and I think he has not heard me, but then, without turning he calls back, "They know... they know what their job is." If resting the fate of this national treasure on the wings of birds sounds a bit desperate, it is. We can hope climate change occurs at a pace we can manage, but if it does not, the integrity and function of places like the Adirondacks may not be up to us, but to other species.

David W. Wolfe, PhD is Professor of Plant and Soil Ecology in the Department of Horticulture at Cornell University. He is a leading authority on the effects of climate change on plants, soils, and ecosystems, and chief author of both the Agriculture and Ecosystems chapters of the NYSERDA-funded ClimAID report.



View of Lake Placid from Whiteface Mountain



Deer and Bear Hunting

With opening day in the northern zone just around the corner, New Yorkers anticipate another safe and successful deer hunting season this fall. Hunters took about 223,000 deer in each of the past two years, of which about 102,000 were antlered deer in 2009, and 106,000 in 2008. Hunters should expect the statewide deer take to decline slightly in 2010, consistent with management goals to reduce antlerless harvest a bit in many wildlife management units. For the 2010 deer hunting season forecasts, visit www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/37304.html.

The 2009 bear take was the second-highest ever recorded in New York State. Hunters took 1,487 black bears last year, 15% more than the year before. This increase was principally due to a strong surge in bear harvest in the Adirondack bear area. In the southern bear hunting areas, bear takes were also the second highest on record. Bowhunters are especially important in these areas, accounting for more than a third of the bear take in the southeast, and almost 50% of the bear take in the central-western area. For information about deer and bear hunting, visit www.dec.gov/outdoor/7857.html.



Pheasant Plan

In January, DEC adopted a ten-year management plan for ring-necked pheasants. The plan is the third in a series of pheasant management plans developed with input from sportsmen, and includes goals, objectives, and proposals for both wild and captive-bred pheasants. Some highlights include: longer pheasant hunting seasons, more areas that allow the taking of hen and cock pheasants, increased adult pheasant production, and establishment of a focus area in western New York to concentrate habitat improvement efforts for wild pheasants. You can view the complete plan at www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7273.html.

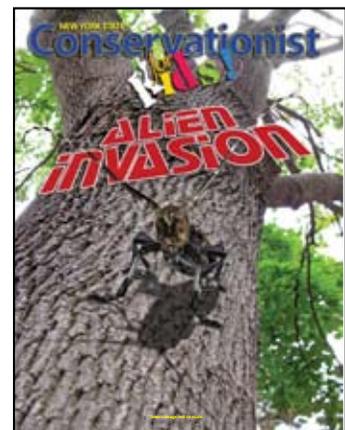
Invasive species continue to be in the news, especially as emerald ash borer has now been found in the Catskills and is no longer limited to western New York. The “Alien Invasion” issue of *Conservationist for Kids* has proven to be an excellent educational tool for DEC staff, youth group leaders and classroom teachers seeking to inform youth and their families about invasive species and what people can do to limit their spread. *Conservationist* subscribers receive *Conservationist for Kids* three times a year in the magazine.

James Clayton



Congratulations!

The Association for Conservation Information recently recognized DEC, awarding the agency second place in the Education and Outreach category for their 2009 National Awards, for the fall 2009 “Alien Invasion” issue of *Conservationist for Kids*.



Hatchery Redesign

Rome Fish Hatchery is being updated. Located approximately 2.5 miles outside Rome, the hatchery has been providing fish to New York State waters for more than 75 years. Brown and brook trout are currently raised here, with more than 1,700,000 fish produced just this year. But the aging facility needed a facelift and so the old hatchery building, built in 1932, is being replaced with a new energy-efficient “green” building. A big addition is a new visitor center that will demonstrate how fish are raised and the role hatcheries play in fishery management. Inside, a new aquarium will show species of fish raised at the hatchery. Archives of records and older equipment may also be displayed. The new facility is expected to be fully operational by the end of this fall. Rome Hatchery is open to the public 365 days a year for self-guided tours. Visit www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7742.html for more information.

Helping Hand

Recently staff from a number of central New York DEC offices collaborated on a project that saved a lot of money. The Operations Division needed a 1,000-square-foot storage barn for its Kirkwood facility, but couldn't afford to buy lumber. So, staff contacted the Division of Lands and Forests to see if they could use trees



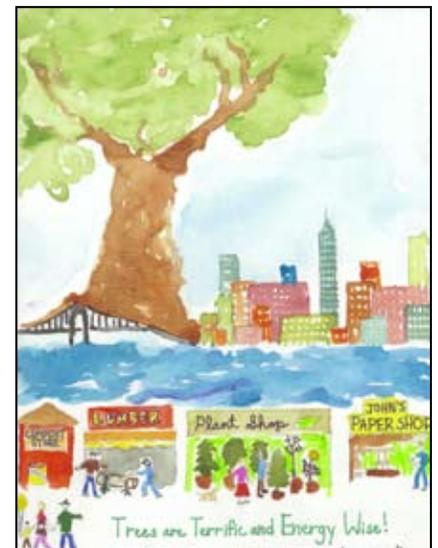
Rome Hatchery

from state land. Sherburne Supervising Forester Bob Slavicek had noticed that several trees on the Rogers Environmental Education Center property in Sherburne were diseased, rotten, in danger of falling, or encroaching on electric lines. After looking at the trees with Bob, Center Director Marsha Guzewich readily agreed to their use. Once the trees were removed and milled, the lumber was transported to Kirkwood where a crew will build the barn this fall and winter.

Poster Contest

Fifth-grade students across the state are invited to take part in the “Trees are Terrific” Arbor Day Poster Contest. Previously co-sponsored by the National Arbor Day Foundation, DEC is pleased to continue this contest, which is a great opportunity for teachers, students and parents to increase their knowledge about the importance of trees in our lives. Teachers can download the packet from DEC's website to use in the classroom, and students are encouraged to design a theme-based poster and submit it to DEC. The winning artwork is featured

on New York's Arbor Day bookmark, distributed to schools and libraries all over the state, and distributed by International Paper to clients worldwide. The deadline for poster submissions for the 2011 Arbor Day poster contest (theme: “Take the challenge...Be a tree hero.”) is January 13, 2011. For more details, visit www.dec.ny.gov/education/25420.html.



2010 winning poster by Lawrence Kwong

Big Headache

My friend John Brush, an avid birdwatcher and general wildlife enthusiast, found a full set of deer bones, including this skull, just off a road in Suffolk County's Southold Town. It wasn't until later



that he noticed the broadhead stuck in the skull. It appears a bowhunter's arrow had lodged above the eye socket of this mature deer. Notice

the healing growth around the wound site and the misshapen antler—clues that the deer survived for at least a year after the injury. Unfortunately, the deer wasn't so lucky in what we believe to be a later encounter with an automobile. Southold Town has some of the greatest deer densities in the state, and car strikes are common. The town is working with DEC to reduce deer numbers by increasing access to town properties for hunting and encouraging use of DEC's Deer Management Assistance permits.

Nonetheless, it is disappointing to see this type of wound. The broadhead clearly tells of a frontal impact. This is a terrible shot; certainly a mistake. Perhaps this deer wandered under the tree stand of an inexperienced hunter, who underestimated the difficulty of this kind of shot. Or maybe the deer turned his head suddenly and received the unintended strike.

However it played out, time spent afield offers opportunities to see and discover new things. My friend and I get out there every chance we get. You never know what you'll find.

Jack Becht
Southold, Suffolk County

Thanks for sharing a fascinating find—and an important message about hunting ethics—with our readers.

—David Nelson, Editor

Happy Ending

I thought your readers would enjoy this photo of a barred owl. The owl was discovered entangled in barbed wire and then taken to Ravensbeard, a rehabilitation center for injured wildlife located in Ulster County. After months of care, it was deemed ready for release, and transported to Knightower in West Hurley. Upon being placed on the railing, it flew away, much to the delight of an awe-struck audience.

Barry Knight
Hurley, Ulster County

What a great photo of a happy occasion. Each year, injured or orphaned wildlife like this owl are cared for by dedicated wildlife rehabilitators across the state. Licensed by DEC, these volunteers have the experience, expertise and facilities to successfully treat wild animals, and then hopefully release them back into the wild, where they belong. You were very fortunate to be part of this owl's successful release. Thanks for sharing.

—Eileen Stegemann, Assistant Editor



(Note: check out www.dec.ny.gov/animals/261.html for more information about sick and injured wildlife.)

Cat Family Portrait

These trail camera photos were captured by Richard Sills along Steuben County Route 119—the river road from Addison to Hornell.

R. Spencer & Janie L. Ferguson
Cameron Mills, Steuben County

Wow—awesome shots! Your friend photographed a family of bobcats, which is rarely seen. Just as important, though, is the difference in appearance of the adult female in the two shots. Take a good look—in the close-up shot, she is very clearly a bobcat. But in the other shot,



the bobcat's shape and posture look a bit like a mountain lion, except of course for the bobbed tail. We don't have wild mountain lions in New York, but thanks to your friend's photos, our readers can see how people might mistake a bobcat for a mountain lion!

—David Nelson, Editor

Schoolyard Surprise

The students at the Orleans/Niagara BOCES Meadow School in North Tonawanda were recently surprised with a visit from an eight-point buck. The deer spent the morning on the playground, allowing lots of time for all the students to look and learn.

Diane Schena
Lockport

Not many people have the pleasure of seeing such a nice buck so closely or for so long, so those students were quite lucky. Thanks for sending the photos and sharing your story. Nature is all around us and it's always nice to hear when it presents valuable learning opportunities to our youth.

—Jenna Kerwin, Staff Writer



Ask the Biologist

Q: Why does DEC prohibit the use of baitfish in many ponds in the Adirondacks? I regularly fish ponds for brook trout and sometimes the fish are pretty skinny. Wouldn't it help to introduce some minnows for them to eat?

A: Brook trout have evolved in the numerous, small, isolated ponds and lakes in the Adirondacks with few competing fish species. Although larger brookies will on occasion consume other fish and aquatic animals, for the most part they eat aquatic insects and invertebrates. When other fish species are added to a brook trout water, they compete directly with brookies for food, and may even eat their eggs and fry. In the Adirondacks, brook trout have been pushed out of much of their original range due to the introduction of competitive fish species, most likely via a bait bucket.

DEC regularly monitors brook trout pond populations and adjusts stocking rates and/or regulations as necessary, to ensure optimal growth and survival. Keeping brook trout populations in balance with their preferred non-fish food supply is the only way to improve their condition. Adding minnows for them to eat will do nothing to improve their condition, but instead will likely destroy the brook trout population in the pond.

—Ed Woltmann, DEC Fisheries Biologist



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Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

The Tree by Louis Avosso

At precisely 7:30, the old man carefully climbed the hill behind the cabin. Looking through the trees to the cornfield below, he knew it was only a matter of time before a nice buck would appear and another deer season would end in success.

For most of his adult life, opening day found the old man in the hardwoods of upstate New York, always taking one deer, two if the law allowed. It seemed the rest of the year existed to discover new areas, collect more equipment, read more books, and plan new strategies for opening day. He had been a dedicated and passionate deer hunter, but since retiring and moving to his south Florida home, he hadn't hunted. His passion grew dull from endless days of sunshine and "early bird" specials. The man did not realize he had grown soft, more in will than body. Although his desire to hunt had not flagged, his desire to take a deer had. In turn, he no longer had the ability to execute quick decisive moves necessary at the right moment. It was a prelude to failure and failure is exactly what happened.

Eight-thirty came and went and his mind began to drift back to his college days. He found himself remembering the silly things he did and the serious things he failed to do.

A twig snapped...a shiny black nose and white muzzle poked through the thicket...

Some thoughts were so familiar that they quickly bored him; others were too delicate to entertain for long. In the midst of his daydreams, he suddenly noticed the tree.

It was a red oak of enormous proportions; the circumference at the base was probably seventeen or eighteen feet. It was big enough, he thought, to be 150 years old, maybe more. He wondered if, when it was young, many bucks polished their antlers on it. Just how many insects, woodpeckers, loggers, beavers, lightning bolts and other assorted insults had it survived? To him the tree was sentient and its mysterious history consumed his consciousness.

By now it was 9:30 and the man began to amuse himself by asking the tree trivial questions like, "How many acorns have you made?" and "How many cords of firewood could you produce?" As he pondered the answers, he realized that in all the seasons in which he patiently waited for deer, he was never bored. The antics of red squirrels, a nervous weasel or a plodding porcupine sometimes made him briefly question the purpose of his presence, but a tree capturing his imagination gave him pause.

James Clayton



A twig snapped, and his focus returned with a rush.

First, a shiny black nose and white muzzle poked through the thicket, only fifteen yards away. The head followed, with six or eight tines. The old man's heart began to pound; he felt flush and uncertain. With two recent heart procedures, he knew this physio-

logical response wasn't good. He commanded self-control. Like an old friend, the rifle came firmly to his shoulder. He switched the safety off and all seemed to go well—it was almost mechanical. The buck froze and glared at the hunter. The hunter knew he had been "made." The old man thought, "Should I snap shoot, or wait?" He had mere seconds to decide. Too late; the buck was gone. The man hesitated and failed.

Somewhere above the eastern United States, a flight attendant asked the old man if he wanted something to drink. He did not hear. His mind was adrift, thinking about the tree. Only 24 hours ago he questioned his resolve, his passion for what he once loved. He sat deep in thought, planning next year's hunt. He knew exactly where his tree stand would be.

Louis Avosso is a professor emeritus from Nassau Community College. Although he enjoys living in Florida, each November he returns to the Catskills to renew his spirit and hunt white-tailed deer.

2009 Big Buck Club Awards

The New York State Big Buck Club, Inc. is a private organization that maintains records of large deer and bear taken in New York. Each year since 1972, the Big Buck Club has recognized the hunters who take the largest trophy bucks in the state. The winner in each category receives an original painting by renowned artist and former *Conservationist* art director Wayne Trimm.



Largest Archery Deer:

Taken in: Suffolk County

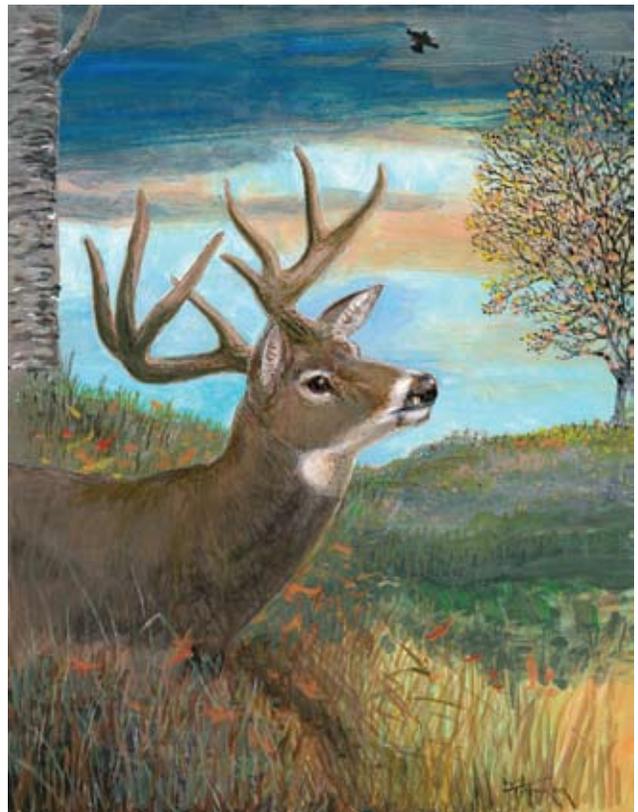
Score: 202-5

Non-typical

Points: 20

Taken by: Bjorn Houliubar

(Note: this is the second largest bow, non-typical deer ever entered in the Big Buck Club)



Largest Gun Deer:

Taken in: Cayuga County

Score: 166-4

Typical

Points: 9

Taken by: Jeremy Parsons

For more information write to: NYSBBC, Records Office, 360 McLean Rd., Kirkwood, NY 13795
Or visit their website at: www.nys-big-buck.org



See page 12

John Burrows

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