Shopping Green | Winter Camping | Deer Feeding

NEW YORK STATE
Conservationist
DECEMBER 2008

Air Traffic
THE NEW BREEDING BIRD ATLAS

Paw Patrol
A DIFFERENT KIND OF K-9

Dear Reader,

Winter brings unique opportunities to explore and experience New York State's spectacular outdoors. Whether your idea of cold weather fun is snowshoeing, snowboarding or just strolling through the neighborhood (or maybe even winter camping, which you can read about inside this issue…) winter is a great time to connect with nature. So grab a hat, some gloves and a warm pair of boots and enjoy all that New York State has to offer!

During this season of celebration and gift-giving, I hope you'll consider giving the gift of nature by sending a child to one of DEC's Environmental Education Summer Camps. For more than 60 years, DEC Summer Camps have provided unique opportunities for children to learn, explore and challenge themselves while having fun outdoors. To send a child to a week-long overnight adventure at one of DEC's four camps, just visit **www.dec.ny.gov** and search the phrase "environmental education camps." When given as a gift, each sponsored child will receive first priority of the camp of his or her choice, subject to availability. Remember, when you send a child to camp, you encourage a lifelong appreciation of nature.

I wish you all the best in the season's adventures and a happy, healthy, adventurous 2009!

Happy Holidays,

Commissioner Pete Grannis

NEW YORK STATE **Conservationist**

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David Paterson, Governor of New York State

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James Clayton

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Land's BEST FRIEND

By Keith Isles

We are all familiar with police dogs fighting crime, but there's a different kind of law enforcement canine—one that makes its career protecting nature and preserving our environment.

© Mountain Dweller Images

It was the day before New York's southern zone big game season when Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) Jim Volker of Greene County requested a K-9 to respond to a citizen's complaint. The citizen heard a rifle shot earlier that morning and thought that an unscrupulous hunter might have taken a deer prior to the season. ECO Volker knew that it would be difficult to locate evidence, and so was depending on a K-9's keen sense of smell to locate any deer that may be hidden.

When K-9 handler Keith Isles and his K-9 "Blitz" arrived on the scene, they were ready to work. Taking advantage of ECO Volker's knowledge of his patrol area, the ECOs traveled to surrounding camps. At one, they found several vehicles, and ten men eating breakfast. While Jim engaged the men in general conversation, Blitz and his handler went to work with his venison detection skills. Blitz immediately showed interest in an ATV, which had fresh deer hair and blood on the back rack, but quickly moved off to a nearby shed. He put his nose to work at the corners of the doors, stopped, cleared his nostrils, and gave his unmistakable alert by scratching at the locked door. No doubt there was a deer inside. Isles radioed ECO Volker and informed him of the find.

Knowing they were caught, the camp owners gave consent for the ECOs to search the shed. Inside was not one, but three white-tailed deer illegally taken prior to the season.

Scenes like this aren't new to DEC's Division of Law Enforcement's (DLE) K-9 Unit, which has 30 years of experience detecting evidence, tracking people and apprehending violators.

It all started in 1977, when ECO Richard "Dick" Matzell, of Colton, St. Lawrence County, recognized the need for a tool that could assist ECOs in locating wildlife evidence possibly taken illegally and hidden by poachers in camps, cars and barns. Dick had a long interest in sled-dog racing and dogs in general, and knew the world's police agencies had long used dogs to find evidence, such as drugs and explosives. It occurred to him that using a process similar to police dog training, a dog could be trained to find venison and other wildlife. Dick approached then director of Division of Law Enforcement Robert VanBenschoten with this idea. The director recognized the opportunity and gave Dick approval to begin training the first K-9.

At the time, the New York State Police were in the process of expanding their relatively new K-9 Unit, and were planning their first K-9 Handler Basic School. After a few discussions, ECO Matzell was accepted into the school to begin training with his new K-9 partner, Paws. In 1978, ECO Matzell and Paws graduated as a certified K-9 team, and Paws became the nation's first certified venison-detection dog. And so DLE's K-9 Unit was born.

Today's K-9 Unit is comprised of eight German shepherds trained in a variety of disciplines, ready and able to assist ECOs and other agencies in their investigations. The K-9s use their superior scent detection abilities to locate evidence of violations, such as spent shell casings, firearms, and wildlife. They are also trained to track human scent.

K-9 handlers are selected based on the DEC's need. When a K-9 team would be an asset to a region, a handler is selected from a long list of applicants. The potential handler must have an impeccable service record with the division, must be self-motivated, and willing to persevere when tasks become difficult. The ECO's home and family environment are also heavily considered because of the impact they will have on the dog.

K-9s selected for duty are German shepherds because of their sociability, loyalty, ability to work in adverse environments, and ability to be trained to perform a variety of tasks. The K-9s are required to live with their handlers, where they grow accustomed to everyday stresses, helping them remain social and obedient. It also helps the handlers and the K-9s form strong bonds, which is important considering K-9s are also trained to protect their handlers.

J. Goerg

German shepherds like Paws (shown here in 1979) are chosen for law enforcement because of their extreme loyalty, dedication and perseverance.

J. Goerg

Many criteria must be met in order for an ECO to become a handler, or a dog to become a venison-detection canine. Paws and ECO Matzell (shown here in 1979) became DEC's first certified K-9 Unit after meeting such criteria and undergoing extensive training.

James Clayton

DEC's K-9 Unit dogs are friendly, confident and, just like their ECO partner, act professionally in public. Though powerful, they are always under their handler's complete control.

In addition to the breed, there are several other attributes a dog must possess to be suitable for law enforcement detail. The dogs must behave well around people, be confident, friendly, and ready to adjust to varying conditions. The dogs must also be healthy and in athletic condition; hips and elbows are often X-rayed to rule out hip dysplasia and arthritis. Most importantly, the ideal dogs have an extreme "ball drive." The dog that lives to play with a ball is a dog that can be easily trained to perform police dog tasks. The chosen K-9 and handler attend a 16-week training school where they learn under the direction of a DLE K-9 instructor to become a certified K-9 team.

During the first phase of training, the K-9s achieve a high level of obedience. They learn to respond to both verbal and hand commands, walk at their handler's heel, and sit, stay and return to the handler when directed. And just like an ECO, the K-9 must act professionally in public.

K-9s selected for duty are German shepherds because of their sociability, loyalty and ability to work in adverse environments.

Because they are considered "trained locating tools," K-9s are also taught to locate evidence. Their superior sense of smell allows them to locate people and evidence otherwise difficult or impossible to find. Additionally, the dogs are trained to find spent shell casings from firearms left behind at shooting incidents by locating the odor of burned gun powder. This ability has been particularly helpful investigating Hunter-Related Shooting Incidents (HRSIs).

The Division of Law Enforcement conducts detailed investigations of HRSIs. In the confusion that exists between shooter and victim, it is often difficult to locate the exact point of firearm discharge. Using their detection ability, K-9s quickly and efficiently locate spent shell casings, evidence helpful in reconstructing shooting incidents. K-9s are also able to locate the wadding from shotgun shells, which shows the direction of aim. Additionally, they can locate firearms that have been discarded by violators in an attempt to avoid prosecution. Obviously, finding the firearm used in a crime is important for the case investigator, but it also is important to protect public safety.

DEC's K-9s are also trained to track human scent. Whether that scent is from a lost two-year-old child or a 40-year-old poacher fleeing the scene of a crime is of no significance to the K-9. The dog is trained to follow the freshest scent and, if he performs well

and the conditions are correct, the person is located and the K-9 receives a reward. Most of the time that reward is no more than to play with a ball, or receive praise from his handler. While tracking, the dogs often locate important evidence left behind by the violator or lost person. This can save valuable time by directing the responders to areas that should be searched.

The K-9s' tracking ability can also be used as an investigatory tool. For example, K-9s can track scent from an abandoned vehicle, which may lead to evidence of ECL violations such as illegal baiting of game, or harvesting ginseng out of season.

Historically, all the K-9s were trained to detect venison and to apprehend game violators who had taken white-tailed deer in some illegal manner. As the program evolved however, a few K-9s were trained to locate specific species, such as songbirds and fisher. DEC K-9s are now trained to detect black bear, trout, wild turkey, black bass and, of course, venison. This provides a more year-round use of K-9s, and more assistance to ECOs as they perform their duties.

While on duty, DEC's K-9s are trained to protect their handler and any other persons from harm.

Quite often, an officer in the field merely has to say to a suspected violator that a DEC K-9 is on its way and the person usually just confesses and provides the location of the evidence.

The duties of an Environmental Conservation Officer can be dangerous. ECOs work alone in remote areas, usually dealing with people who possess firearms and/or other weapons. Alcohol is frequently a factor in the most serious violations, which can occur late at night. ECOs also participate in fugitive searches, assisting fellow ECOs and other agencies in the apprehension of criminals. For these reasons, DEC's K-9s are trained (like other Police K-9s) to protect their handler and other persons from harm while on patrol. The K-9s protect their handlers both with and without command, as the situation dictates.

After K-9 selection and training, the result is a unique law enforcement tool. Never fully understanding how important their actions are, these dedicated "employees" work solely for their handler's praise.

James Clayton

James Clayton

Using their detection ability, K-9s quickly and efficiently locate spent shell casings, evidence helpful in reconstructing shooting incidents.

Paws retired in 1988 after serving as a pioneer in the field of conservation law enforcement, and has long since passed away. ECO Dick Matzell is also retired, but remains proud of the accomplishments of the K-9 Unit he started all those years ago. As DEC's K-9 unit enters its fourth decade, the K-9s and their handlers continue to maintain the proud tradition of the Division of Law Enforcement's commitment to resource and environmental protection.

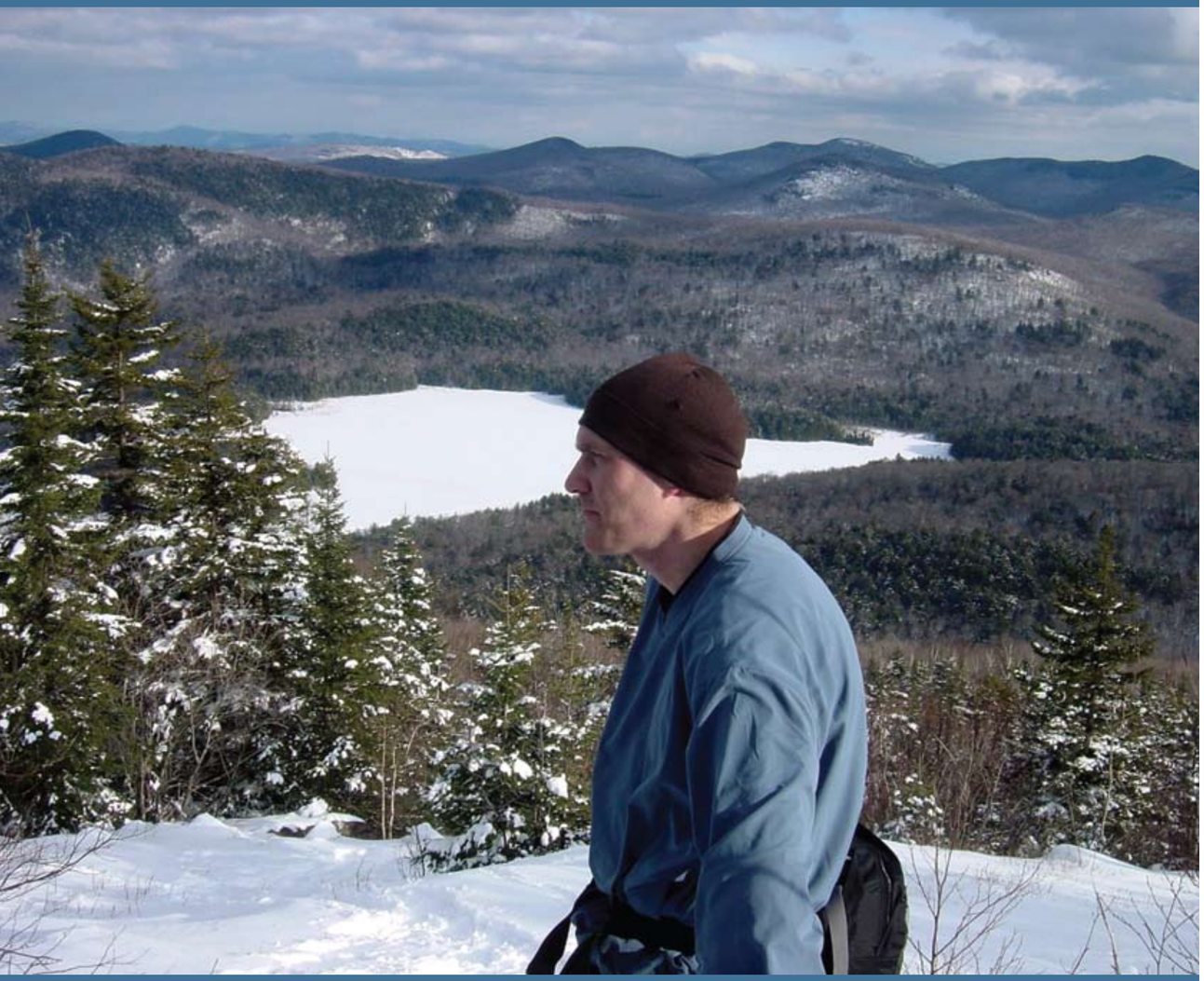
And about those three illegal deer found in Greene County? Five poachers were arrested and charged with taking a white-tailed deer illegally and for other offenses. However, Blitz's day was not done. Soon after that case was closed, Blitz and Isles were called to Delaware County on another request. With Blitz's nose, they tracked a poacher through the woods to his camp and located two other deer taken illegally. It was just another day at the office for one of DEC's committed K-9 crew.

Technical Sergeant **Keith Isles** is DEC's K-9 Unit program coordinator and the K-9 handler for DEC's Region 4. He is currently assigned to Schoharie County.

James Clayton

Did You Know?

The term "K-9" was first coined during the 1940s and 50s in the US Army's War Dog Program. The program trained dogs to help soldiers in combat and was often referred to as "Canine Corps." Due to its phonetic association, the program became informally known as "K-9 Corps" and thus the dogs became "K-9s." Following World War II, the partnership of war dogs and their handlers became a good addition to law enforcement, and the term K-9 continued to spread.



Waking in a Winter Wonderland

No Mosquitoes!

NO CROWDS. NO NOISE. NO HEAT.

Winter camping offers a unique adventure

by Jim Muller

It was cold, about 19 degrees, and four of us–myself, my nephew Mark Hay, and friends Jay Katonica and Scott Handy–were bushwhacking up Warren County's Mount Blue on a slippery, snow-covered slope. Our canine escort, Maddux, an immense German shepherd/husky cross, bounded ahead with enviable ease as the rest of us struggled on the slick footing.

Our plan was to have lunch at the summit, then hike down and spend an overnight at the lean-to on the western shore of Lizard Pond. Earlier, donning snowshoes we crossed frozen Garnet Lake, then followed the mile-long trail leading to Lizard Pond on the southwest shore. We left the Lizard Pond trail where the swamps in the pond's valley first become visible, and headed up the mountain.

Mount Blue, which rises from a solid ledge deep in Garnet Lake to a height of 2,940 feet, is part of the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest, a popular winter recreation area in the southeastern corner of the Adirondack Park. But snowshoeing on a blanket of fresh snow this winter day, it seemed like virgin territory, with no other people and no traces of snowshoe or ski tracks. There weren't any bears or varmints, and no black flies or mosquitoes.

As a founding member of **winter-campers.com**, with more than 30 winter camping trips logged, I'm often asked "Why go winter camping?" To the uninitiated, the concept of going camping in the wintertime conjures up images of sitting huddled and shivering, with icicles freezing on the end of one's nose.

When we stopped on a ledge to rest and soak in a breathtaking view of Garnet Lake and Lizard Pond, I thought about the advantages of winter camping, such as how that view would be obscured by vegetation in other seasons. I also reflected on the fact that there were no crowds, no noise, nothing to disturb the sense of solitude and discovery. Another advantage is that freezing temperatures allow you to explore areas that are too wet or overgrown to traverse during other seasons. In fact, these are often ideal destinations for winter camping. A conservation benefit of winter camping is the durable surface provided by snow that protects heavily used trails and campsites.

Camping in the winter time conjures up images of sitting huddled and shivering, with icicles freezing on the end of one's nose.

I got hooked on winter camping many years ago when my nephew challenged me–then an experienced three-season camper–to a January weekend in the Siamese Ponds Wilderness. I loved the feeling of independence and confidence in my survival skills inspired by that winter camping trip.

Winter camping presents unique challenges—and rewards.

I got hooked on winter camping many years ago–I loved the feeling of independence and confidence in my survival skills.

But winter camping is not for everyone. The days are short, the nights cold and long. It's an activity that requires planning and preparation, physical stamina, the right equipment, an adventuresome spirit and a positive mental attitude. In the winter, the margin for mistakes is small, with discomfort or worse as the penalty. And truth be told, crawling out of a cozy sleeping bag on a freezing morning to melt snow for coffee is not most people's idea of a dream vacation.

A snug sleeping bag was hours away as we continued our trek, with treeless patches on the southeastern side of the mountain–the result of a 1908 fire–affording us splendid vistas. Taking advantage of these open areas, ledges and false summits, one can enjoy 270 degree perspectives of Crane Mountain, Lizard Pond, Bearpen Peak, Baldhead Mountain and Moose Mountain. To the west are Georgia Mountain, Harrington Mountain, New Lake Mountain and Wilcox Mountain.

With these glimpses of the impressive panorama providing inspiration, we scrambled onward and upward. Although Mark, who had planned the trip, touted the hike as "relatively easy," we found out later that DEC's Wilcox Lake Wild Forest Draft Unit Management Plan characterizes it as offering "moderately difficult bushwhacking opportunities to adventuresome hikers and snowshoers."

This proved an apt description. For me, it was extra tricky since hip replacement surgery had left my balance and leg strength somewhat less than desired. Fortunately, Jay had packed trekking poles, which he graciously loaned me for the bushwhack up and down Mount Blue. Needless to say, they were a great advantage and I purchased my own trekking poles after the trip.

At the peak, we posed for the requisite group photograph and enjoyed a quick snack while the wind blew in increasingly dark cloud cover. Then it was time to head back down Mount Blue. If the way up was steep and slippery, the way down was steeper and slipperier. Fortunately, no one got hurt as we tumbled and slid our way down the mountain. We hiked the remainder of the trail along Lizard Pond to spend the night at the lean-to on the western shore.

Shelter from the cold: in this case, the Lizard Pond lean-to.

James Muller

Carl Hellman II

Getting Started Winter Camping

The following are just a few tips for getting started winter camping. For a complete list of the gear you'll need and things you should be aware of, check out **wintercampers.com**.

❄ **Winter camping can be gear-intensive.** Snowshoes, sleeping bags, down booties, and extra clothing can be expensive–especially if they are only used once. If you can't borrow gear the first time, improvise; for example, use two summer sleeping bags instead of an expensive down winter bag.

❄ **When planning a trip, be realistic and remember that making the trip enjoyable should be your primary goal.** During winter, travel will be much slower than in the summer, so reduce your mileage goal by 50% to 60% and don't worry if you fall short of the intended destination.

❄ **Start first by taking an extended day hike and preparing a meal.** It's a great way to introduce you to winter camping skills without worrying about shelters and sleeping overnight in cold temperatures.

❄ **Join experienced friends and/or hiking organizations** such as a local Adirondack Mountain Club chapter (**www.ADK.org**) to learn the ropes. You can use these contacts as sources for your initial gear.

❄ **Safety first!** Keep in mind that weather can change quickly—so be prepared. Bring plenty of warm clothing (no cotton) and dress in layers. Warm hats, mittens, boots and jackets are a must. Bring ice picks if crossing any frozen waterbody. They allow you to grip onto the top ice if you fall through, and can save your life. Likewise, crampons are handy on icy slopes. Also, be sure to let someone know exactly where you are going, and how long you'll be gone.

Enter the world of outdoor enthusiasts who would rather battle sub-zero temperatures than mosquitoes.* Wintercampers.com *chronicles their travels with logs and photos of their winter camping trips. The website has both serious advice such as winter camping recommendations, gear reviews, and a list of essential items, as well as a lighter side with a camping application and a funny winter camping poem. Informative and humorous, you'll be motivated either for an adventure or a good laugh.

Once we settled in at the lean-to, we boiled water for hot drinks and wolfed down reconstituted freeze-dried meals. In other situations, what passes for food in these highly processed packages would be turned back to the kitchen. However, the salty, hot food tasted great to four tired, wet and cold winter campers. Maddux had to content himself with dry dog food.

Afterward we sat around a fire and talked until bedtime as flurries floated down. This is one of the best parts of winter camping. Since it is dark early, there is lots of time to chat, laugh and discuss future trips. Not only does a campfire help pass the time during the long nights, but the sense of camaraderie is enhanced as the night deepens around a campfire circle. As our fire dwindled, we settled into warm sleeping bags and took advantage of the extra darkness to log a solid night's sleep.

In the morning, we awoke to the sun illuminating the back side of Mount Blue across Lizard Pond. Mark was the first to arise while the rest of us lingered in our warm sleeping bags and offered breakfast ideas. Despite our imaginative suggestions, Mark gave us hot water, which we used to make a simple breakfast of hot oatmeal washed down by coffee and hot chocolate.

Following this quick breakfast, we snowshoed out the Lizard Pond trail to our cars and searched for a convenient diner for a well-earned second breakfast.

Jim Muller has been backpacking since the 1960s. He lives in Holland Patent (Oneida Co.) and frequently camps in the winter. During the other three seasons, he canoes and camps with family and friends.

Photos in this article were taken from **www.wintercampers.com**.

James Muller

In winter, you don't need a motorboat to cross a lake.

Season's Greenings

Holiday shopping with the earth in mind

by Meaghan Boice-Green

I saw the first one in early October. I wasn't as surprised as I would have been a few years ago, but it still seemed a bit early. As intended, it instilled the age-old question: the holidays are coming... what will I get everyone?

I am talking, of course, about store holiday displays. Stores used to have the courtesy to wait at least until after Halloween to encourage us to buy, buy, buy for the season of celebration, but no longer.

While the leaves change to red, many retailers are promoting "going green." As they head into the gift-giving season, stores everywhere are cashing in on growing awareness that what we buy affects the planet that supports us. You can't browse in a big-box store without seeing a product that claims to be "green;" companies are touting the earth-friendly colors of everything from cosmetics to cleaning products to SUVs. So, as I pondered my festive shopping duties, I wondered if I could make choices that were light on the earth.

In late November I decided to venture out on my first shopping trip of the holiday season. I grabbed my reusable shopping bags and headed downtown, determined to make my purchases as eco-friendly as possible.

My first stop was a country cooperative about four miles from my house. Despite the pricey-sounding title, this small-town cooperative featured reasonably priced Americana-type crafts, antiques and county decorations in tiny stalls throughout the store. While they don't take out large ads in the Sunday newspaper, small shops like this one provide a place to find goods more likely to be made with local materials—or at least with local labor—than a mall or big-box store. In the United States, the lion's share of the oil we consume is used for transportation, not only of people but of goods. Shopping as close to home as possible and purchasing products that are locally made can drastically reduce the amount of fossil fuels used to bring products to us.

Browsing the store, I found a purse made from a pair of old jeans. It was lined with purple fabric and had a purple sash through the belt holes—perfect for my lavender-loving sister. It was the kind of purchase that feels doubly good: buying a product made of recycled material while supporting a local entrepreneur. And it was affordable!

Finding products made of recycled material is not always as easy as this, but more and more companies are adding recycled content to their products. Products labeled "post-consumer recycled" are the best, because it means the product contains items collected from consumers (e.g. curbside recycling programs). Products usually list a percentage of their content that is post-consumer recycled. The higher the percentage, the better!

"Post-industrial recycled" is another term popping up on product packaging. It means that the product contains material leftover in the making of a different product. This extra material may otherwise end up in a landfill.

Satisfied with my purse acquisition, I walked down the street to a local consignment shop to search for an outfit for my four-year-old niece. Consignment shops and thrift stores offer gently used goods, usually at a much better price than buying new products. I found a cute little pink outfit with a fairy on it in my niece's size. At $3, it was a win for my wallet as well as the earth! I also picked up a toy cash register for her younger brother, at half what it would have cost me brand new. At his age, he wouldn't notice the box was missing.

Next stop: the local book store. This particular book store also sells coffee and children's toys. For my mother-in-law who loves coffee, I scanned the coffee shelves for a brand that is certified as "Fair Trade." Fair trade certification means that the coffee growers got a fair deal for their part in producing that coffee; they are not subject to sweatshop conditions. A fair deal for workers also means a fair deal for the planet, since production methods that protect workers usually also protect natural resources, helping to create a more sustainable future. Beyond coffee, you can also find clothing, tea and housewares that are fairly traded. Groups like the Fair Trade Federation (**www.fairtradefederation.org**) provide information on companies that take the health of workers and the health of our planet into consideration.

As I headed downtown, I was determined to make purchases as eco-friendly as possible.

After that: a big-box retailer. My husband really wanted a new TV—a much bigger purchase than I'd normally consider, but our current set was barely hanging on, with a cracked frame, a remote control held together with duct tape, and a less-than reliable picture. As I strolled down the aisles of televisions, I searched for the EnergyStar® label, a clear indicator of TVs that exceed government-required energy standards. Many people think of EnergyStar® when shopping for appliances, but you can find EnergyStar® television sets, computers, printers, copiers, and even windows, doors and furnaces! And energy-efficient products mean lower utility bills.

Overwhelmed by the choices in this big-box store, I opted to learn more about my TV buying options on the EnergyStar® website, **energystar.gov**, when I got home. The website even includes links to special manufacturer's promotions, which could save me even more money. Then I could make a truly informed choice.

On to the office supply aisle to get a ream of paper for my computer printer. The first ream I looked at had the three-arrow recycling symbol on it. However, the symbol by itself only means that an item potentially can be recycled, not that it is made of recycled material. It also doesn't mean recycling it is realistic—for example, some companies mark their plastic wrap as recyclable, even though there are virtually no recycling programs available for plastic wrap.

I was in luck—the next ream I spied was marked with the magic words: "100% post-consumer recycled paper." I tossed it in my cart.

Susan L. Shafer

When you buy locally, you help reduce emissions from large trucks and other transport vehicles. Buying locally also means fresher and tastier foods, and small farmers stay in business.

Susan L. Shafer

Green Shopping

Consignment shops and thrift stores are great places to find gently used products for a fraction of their new price. In addition, you can try local church bazaars and online reuse sites if you are looking to shop more eco-friendly. Sites that offer sustainably made, recycled, or reusable goods and products include **craigslist.com**, **greatgreengoods.com** and **ecomall.com**. In addition, the website **freecycle.org** acts as a catalyst for people to give and get reusable items for free.

If you prefer to shop at box stores or supermarkets, there are certain things you, as an environmental-savvy consumer, should be aware of. In a process called "greenwashing," companies use words like "natural," "organic" and "recycled" to make their product sound more earth-friendly. In reality, the product may have no special qualities at all. Instead, look for labels like, **"Fair Trade certified"** and **"FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified,"** as well as **"post-consumer recycled"** and **"post-industrial recycled."**

Climatecounts.org is a website that may also help you choose products with low environmental impact. This organization rates major companies on their efforts to address climate changes and offers a handy pocket guide you can print out and take with you shopping. It can help you choose among brands when you don't know much about the earth-friendliness of a product you are buying.

As I headed toward the store exit I walked past a large wrapping paper display. The average American produces more than four pounds of solid waste per day. America also consumes about a third of the resources used in the world, despite having only 4.5% of the world's population. Did I really need wrapping paper this year? The first way to minimize my environmental impact is to decide if I need to buy something at all. I had saved gift bags, boxes, and bows from the year before, so I chose to save my money. After all, a plain white box with a bow on it makes an elegant gift. Likewise, newspaper comics make for wrapping paper that's sure to entertain.

I stopped at my local supermarket to pick up some groceries for Thanksgiving dinner. As I walked down the produce aisle, my eye focused on a "Pride of New York" label over a large display of apples. My grocery store, like many, now labels foods that are grown right here in New York. Choosing produce that is grown locally is an easy way to cut down on "food miles," the distance food travels (usually in a large truck) to reach our tables. If local produce isn't available, choosing food marked "organic" or that contains organic ingredients is the next best option. Organic growing methods bypass artificial fertilizers and pesticides, relying instead on natural ecological processes and healthy soils to produce food. Artificial fertilizers and pesticides are often made from fossil fuels, so organic agriculture can help conserve precious resources.

I picked up a bag of Pride of New York apples to make applesauce to go with the turkey. My kids had requested peach pie for Thanksgiving; since peaches were no longer in season, I picked out a package of frozen ones, checking for the "USDA certified organic" label on the package. The label ensures that the product meets federal standards.

On my way out of the store, I thanked the store manager for offering many new, eco-friendly products. Store managers need to know when the changes they made are appreciated by customers, and asking for earth-friendly options makes it more likely that you'll be able to find such products.

Driving past the sparkling holiday displays, I went home feeling a little bit greener than I had before.

Meaghan Boice-Green enjoys the challenge of finding great green gifts in stores near her home in Medina. She is the Director at DEC's Reinstein Woods Environmental Education Center in Depew.

Susan L. Shafer

On Patrol

Carl Heilman II

Real stories from Conservation Officers and Forest Rangers in the field

Contributed by ECO Lt. Tom Caifa and Forest Ranger Lt. John Solan

Snagging in the Rain—Oswego County

On a rainy day in late October, ECOs William Burnell and Matt Dorrett conducted a foot patrol of a popular fishing area along the Salmon River in the town of Albion. Since it had been raining for most of the day, the officers weren't confident that the foot patrol would pay off. After a lengthy walk, the officers came upon several fishermen at a bend in the river. With binoculars, the officers determined that two of the men had weighted treble hooks attached to the end of their line and were attempting to snag salmon. After a short interview, the men admitted to the officers that they were trying to snag fish. The officers also found a small tackle box with a dozen more weighted treble hooks inside. These are illegal to use or even possess on the Salmon River. When asked why they were using illegal hooks in broad daylight, the anglers' responded, "We didn't think you guys worked in the rain!" The men were charged with several violations including attempting to take fish by snatching, possessing snatch hooks and possessing marijuana.

Wintry Rescue—Saratoga County

Forest Rangers Suzanne Heare, Mike Bodnar and Werner Schwab were conducting a snowmobile compliance checkpoint at a trail intersection near the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest. The rangers had already issued five tickets for various violations and checked approximately 100 snowmobiles when they were alerted to a possible snowmobile accident about one mile away. The rangers responded and encountered a snowmobile on its side in the trail, and the injured operator. The rangers radioed local EMS responders and requested to meet them at the trail system parking lot. They treated the injured subject and used a local club's trail groomer to transport the patient to awaiting EMS providers. The victim was reportedly treated for minor injuries and released from a local hospital the same day. Through witness interviews, ranger investigation revealed the ski on the injured party's snowmobile hooked some low hanging brush on the edge of the trail, causing it to flip. Luckily no one else was injured and the operator was not seriously hurt.

Long Arm of the Law—Hamilton and Nassau Counties

In November, ECO Keith Kelly responded to a deer-jacking complaint in the town of Long Lake. The complainant said that during breakfast she heard a gunshot and when she looked out her kitchen window, she saw a vehicle on the roadway. As she watched, a man got out of the truck with a rifle and the vehicle began to roll backwards. Apparently the man was so excited that he forgot to put the vehicle in park. After chasing his truck down the road to stop it, the man entered the woods and recovered the four-point buck that he had shot. Over the phone, the woman gave ECO Kelly a detailed description of the man, his vehicle and license plate number. Unfortunately, ECO Kelly did not get there in time, but through his investigation he found out the man lived in the town of Westbury on Long Island. ECO Kelly relayed this information to Nassau County ECO Erik Dalecki who met and interviewed the man at his home later that same day. When faced with the detailed account from the eyewitness, the man admitted to taking the deer illegally. He was ticketed for discharging a firearm within 500 feet of a residence, taking deer from a motor vehicle and taking deer from a highway. ECO Kelly recovered the deer, which was hidden at a camp in Long Lake.

Ask the Ranger

Q: Do I have to register and insure my snowmobile to ride on snowmobile trails on DEC land or easements administered by DEC?

A: Yes. All snowmobiles operated in New York State must be registered and insured in New York. The exception is when the operator owns the land he or she is operating on, or if the snowmobile is operated on a trail in an adjacent state that occasionally crosses into New York.

Flight Patterns

New York's second breeding bird atlas points to shifting bird distributions

Merlin

Richard Ettlinger

Carolina wren

Eric Dresser

by Kimberley Corwin

"Teakettle! Teakettle! Teakettle!" I turn my head toward the sound and catch a glimpse of brown feathers. Together with its loud and distinctive song, a white stripe across the bird's head confirms that this is a Carolina wren. Wrens never fail to make me grin, what with their inspirationally inquisitive nature. The five-inch Carolina wren first introduced itself to me when I was visiting Long Island more than eight years ago. Today I frequently hear Carolina wrens around my home in Albany County. They did not always breed this far north, though. This wren and other bird species in New York have shifted their breeding ranges, some quite drastically.

Susan L. Shafer

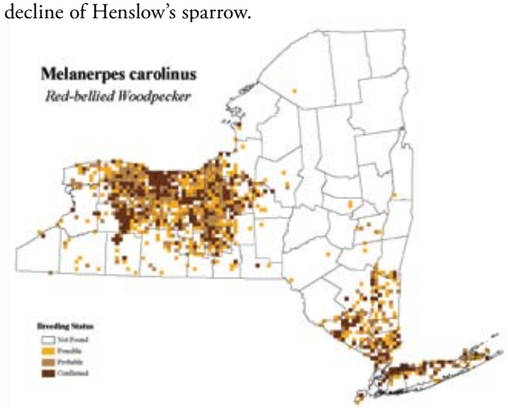
From 2000 to 2005, more than 1,400 bird watchers participating in the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas project spent countless hours scouting fields, forests, wetlands and rivers to find birds and document their presence and breeding behavior. The work of these dedicated volunteers was compiled and analyzed over the past three years and the results are now available in the new book, *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State.*

Many birds have shifted their distribution in the last twenty years.

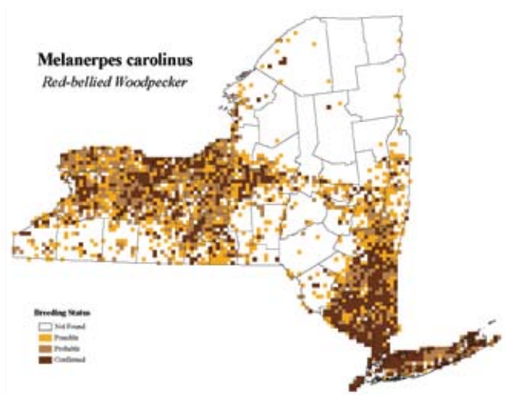
A breeding bird atlas is a collection of maps that demonstrate where birds breed in a given area; in our case, within New York State. To gather this information, biologists divided New York into 5,332 survey blocks, each measuring 25 square miles. During a five-year period, volunteers reported the bird species they saw in each survey block. Close observation of each bird's behavior allowed observers to determine whether a bird was a possible breeder, a probable breeder, or confirmed as a breeder in the state. For example, if an observer finds an adult bird tending to a nest with chicks, it is a confirmed breeder in New York. Simply seeing an adult bird during breeding season allows only a "possible" designation. Plotting all the data on a map reveals the distribution of the species in New York.

The greatest value of New York's breeding bird atlases is that they allow for comparison between two large sets of information from two distinct time periods. New York is the first state to produce a second generation of its breeding bird atlas; the first was published in 1988. The 2000-05 survey and resulting book document the changes in bird distributions over the 20-year period. It is surprising to see just how dynamic our bird populations are.

Many birds have shifted their distribution in the last twenty years. About 22 percent of our 252 bird species showed a notable expansion or contraction in their distribution. There are six new species, too; trumpeter swan, common eider, black vulture, merlin, sandhill crane, and Wilson's phalarope have all become established breeders since the first atlas. When studying the differences between the two data sets, biologists can identify patterns of change and document long-term trends. Two of these long-term trends are the increase of forest birds and the decline of grassland birds, as illustrated by expansion of the range of red-bellied woodpeckers and the decline of Henslow's sparrow.



In the past twenty years, red-bellied woodpeckers expanded their range significantly.



Top: from the first atlas. Bottom: from the second.

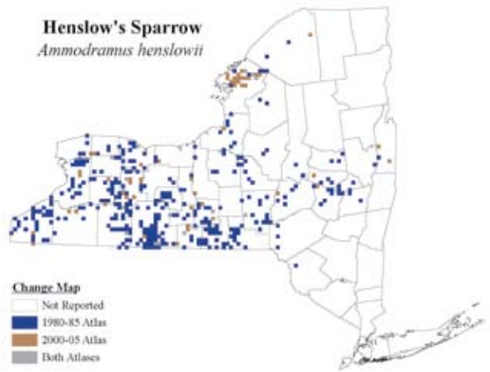
Sandhill crane with colts

Victor Lamoureux

The red-bellied woodpecker presents an interesting case study of a species expanding its distribution in New York. Two distinct populations of this woodpecker were present in the first atlas: one in western New York and one in the southeastern part of the state. In the ensuing twenty years, both populations expanded and the two have now merged. This interesting pattern of range expansion is likely due in part to the availability of new forest habitat and the maturation of existing forests.

Another habitat change that has occurred in New York over the past few decades is the decline of grasslands. In New York, this habitat type is dependent on active farming; a decline in farming preceded the decline in grassland cover. Loss of grassland habitat is a well-known concern among bird biologists throughout the northeast, as the same socio-economic factors are working in neighboring states. One of the bird species suffering the most from this change in habitat is the Henslow's sparrow. The blue blocks on the change map indicate the locations where this species once bred but is no longer present. Efforts to conserve grassland habitat can benefit this bird and many others that rely on open habitats.

While some species have declined, others have benefited. One of these is the merlin, a medium-sized raptor that resembles a peregrine falcon. Twenty years ago, the merlin was not known to breed in New York, but nested to the north, across most of Canada. The second atlas revealed that a surprisingly expansive population of merlin had become established in New York, with records in 131 survey blocks. Nesting was confirmed not only in the Adirondacks, where habitat similar to that in Canada is available, but in other areas of the state as well. Interestingly enough, confirmed nesting records came from well-populated areas including Ithaca and Binghamton. In these cases, the birds built nests in tall conifer trees and found abundant prey items at bird feeders.



Merlin

John Perry Baumlin

Juvenile pileated woodpeckers

Eric Dresser

An exhibit on New York's two breeding bird atlases opened at the New York State Museum in Albany on October 3rd. It focuses on the status of our bird populations and includes a display of the original artwork commissioned for the book.

The book can be ordered through the Cornell University Press website at:
www.cornellpress.cornell.edu

Another interesting observation is that some bird species seem to have adapted more successfully to being near people, or have even managed to benefit from the association. This category of "people-friendly" birds includes Cooper's hawks, which often take birds from backyard feeders, and pileated woodpeckers, which were once considered to be shy birds but now often appear in neighborhoods. Both species have increased their distribution in New York.

Global climate change will likely affect bird distributions in the coming decades and future atlases will help us to document resulting distribution shifts. The current atlas shows northward movement for several species including black vulture, Carolina wren, and hooded warbler. Interestingly—and perhaps unexpectedly—several northern species have expanded their distributions south. These include common merganser, merlin, and palm warbler. Many factors play a role in the shifting of species distributions, whether north, south, east or west. It's a bit too early to say with certainty that global climate change has contributed to distributional shifts seen in New York.

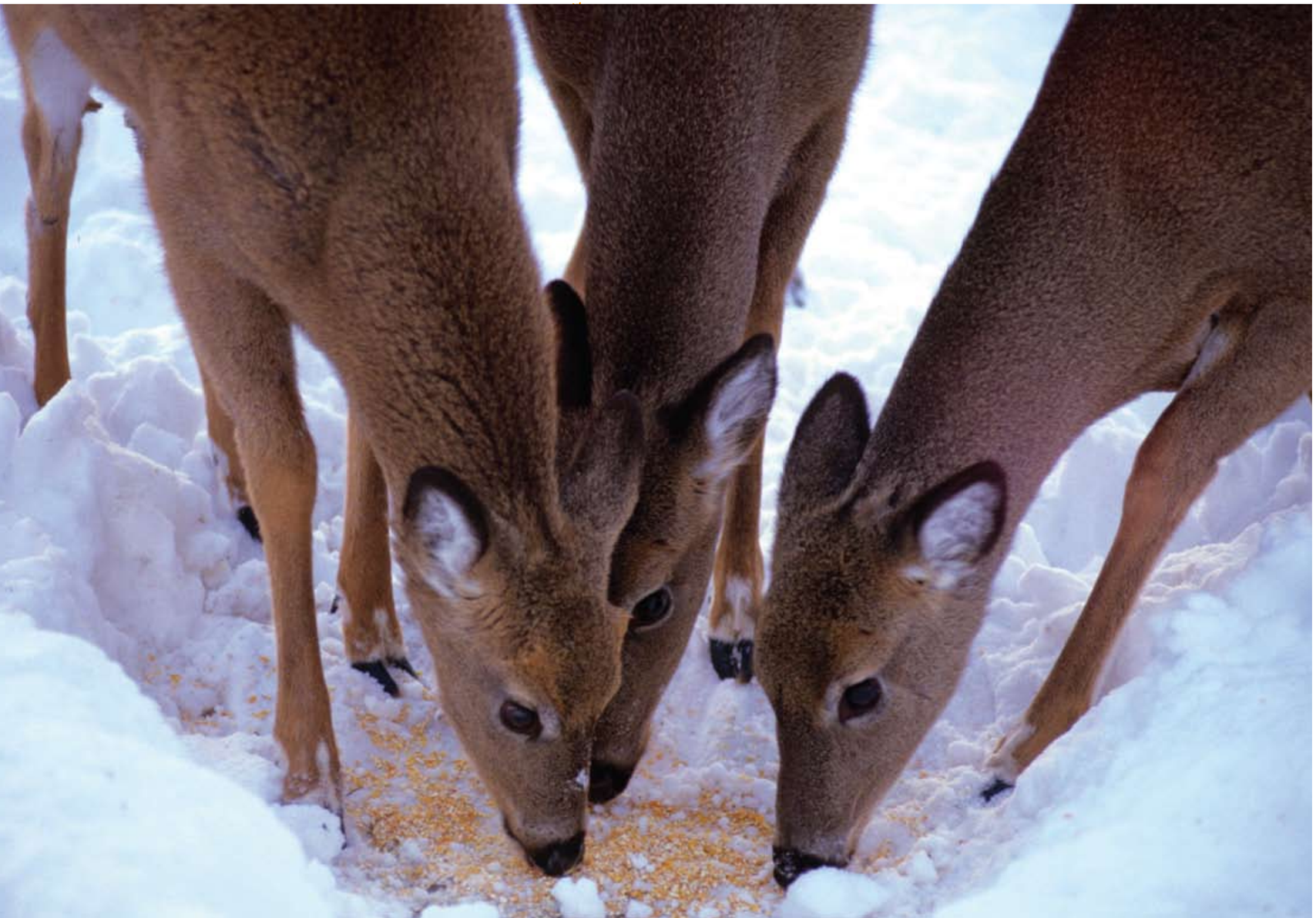
The next breeding bird atlas in New York will be conducted in 2020-2025. It will be fascinating to see how the stories that unfolded during the second atlas will develop in the third.

Kimberley Corwin works as a wildlife biologist in DEC's Albany office. She was Project Coordinator for the recent atlas fieldwork and is co-editor of *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*.

Good Intentions GONE BAD

Feeding Deer in Winter
Can Cause More Harm than Good

by Donald Wharton



Bill Banaszewski

Editor's Note:

As the truck crept along the road through the dimly lit hemlock forest, the crunch of snow under the tires gave this place an almost otherworldly appearance. "Come along; I'll show you," then wildlife bureau chief Gary Parsons had said to me earlier that day.

On a trip back to Albany from a meeting up north, Gary turned his truck onto a back road near Long Lake, if several miles away could be considered "near." It was winter. Winter in all its north-country glory. The snow was deep; the temperature deeper.

Old trucks carrying older men had arrived ahead of us. Clad in the red-and-black buffalo plaid that is the near uniform of the north-country sportsman, they carried 5-gallon pails of feed—corn, I presumed—and tipped them a bit every few feet along the roadway.

As if someone had rung a dinner bell (in fact, they almost had), deer began to materialize, ghostlike, from the dark woods. First one, then another, now four, no, a dozen, then a dozen more. Where had they been just minutes before? How could so many seemingly appear out of the thin, frozen, Adirondack air?

We moved slowly along, largely unnoticed. Gary's extra-cab, four-wheel-drive pickup fit nicely into the central Adirondack setting. We were witnessing a north-country scene that has been played out for generations—in a sense, we were watching tradition in action.

It was obvious to me that these men were genuinely concerned about the deer they were feeding; that they held strong convictions about what they were doing. Their intent was pure, but did their actions have the intended effect?

—Dave Nelson, Editor

I'll always remember one deer I saw on the East Branch of the Sacandaga River some years ago. Every time he took a jump he disappeared, with only his head and back visible above the deep snow. He stopped after just a few jumps; it was simply too exhausting for him to move. On another occasion, this time in Saratoga County, I saw where deer were eating the bark off young hemlock trees; surely the deer were nearing starvation.

Scenes like these can evoke strong feelings among even the most seasoned outdoor observers, who feel something must be done to help the deer, or they will soon succumb to the elements.

People are inclined to feed deer for a variety of reasons. Some believe that deer need supplemental food to survive harsh northern winters. Hunters have fed deer for generations, to "get them through the winter," and to improve deer populations on lands they hunt. Other folks feed deer to attract customers to commercial enterprises.

In 2002, DEC banned the supplemental feeding of white-tailed deer in New York State.

I believe many people feed deer for the same reason they feed birds—they enjoy seeing deer up close, an opportunity that doesn't usually present itself at other times of the year. And it is difficult to fault people for that; white-tailed deer are beautiful and fascinating animals. But people often feed deer within feet of a dwelling, and when there is little snow on the ground. Some people feel so strongly about this practice they are willing to risk getting a ticket from an Environmental Conservation Officer and a potential fine.

In 2002, DEC banned the supplemental feeding of white-tailed deer in New York State. Although biologists have long opposed deer feeding, the feeding ban was prompted largely in response to the recent discovery and threat posed by chronic wasting disease (CWD), a rare, fatal, neurological disease found in members of the deer family. The practice of supplemental feeding can increase the incidence of many diseases, including CWD, which can be transmitted through saliva and waste. But the practice has other, less obvious, deleterious effects.

Deer will travel many miles to reach supplemental feeding areas and this disrupts their natural migration to normal winter "yards." Deer feeding in and around settled areas, and traveling to and from them, are exposed to motor vehicle collisions, dogs, legal and illegal shooting, domestication and competition with other deer.

NYS DEC Jeremy Hurst

When deer are in close proximity to each other and their food, the possibilities of disease and conflict arise—this deer, standing in the feed, shows the effects of aggression by other deer.

NYS DEC Jeremy Hurst

In the late fall, deer's digestive systems become conditioned to handle woody vegetation. When other foods are offered it can take time for their systems to adapt, during which they may eat but receive little or no nutrition. This occurs at a critical time of year when deer can't afford that to happen.

When driving through an Adirondack village a few years ago, I saw two young deer plodding down a driveway in the direction of the main road. They looked little like the wild, alert deer I'd recently seen while hunting in the backwoods nearby. I would be surprised if they survived the next hunting season; their wild instincts were gone. And first they'd have to survive the winter without getting hit by a car or truck.

A study by state biologists in the 1960s following what was described as one of the easiest winters on record found problems with artificial feeding. In an examination of 54 wintering areas, both natural and artificial, mortality was negligible or absent in all areas with the exception of supplemental feeding locations.

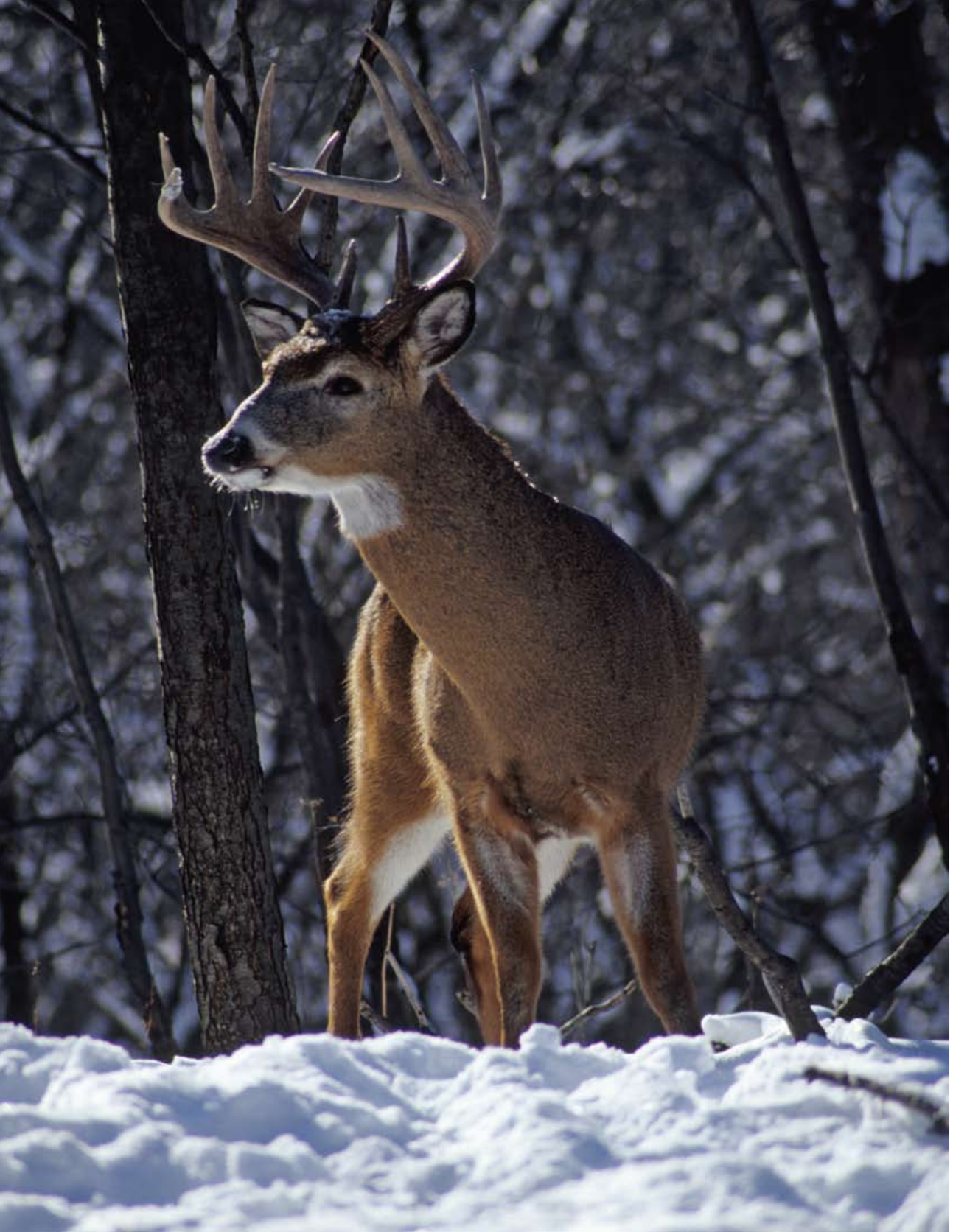
It would be very easy for people to conclude that deer are dependent on humans, when if left alone, the deer would likely manage just fine.

Because deer will travel such great distances to reach food, hundreds of deer can congregate near supplemental feeding areas. Imagine what could happen if supplemental feeding were condoned. With the exception of a few places in the Adirondacks, much of the state's deer herd could end up at just a handful of feeding areas. Diseases could spread very quickly. But how? Let's take a look.

In natural yarding areas, deer are spread out over considerable distances, occasionally even several square miles. In supplemental feeding areas they are usually concentrated around piles of food, whether corn, apples or some manufactured product.

When a deer feeds in the wild, it nips off a twig or picks up an acorn. The food item is soon gone and there is little chance that another deer could come into contact with the original deer's saliva or waste. In contrast, when a deer eats from a pile of food, there is a good possibility that deer could ingest the saliva or waste of another deer that preceded it. In addition, some manufactured feed contains animal protein that can harbor the prions that cause CWD.

Unlike the crowded conditions found at artificial feeding locations, natural wintering areas usually



Edward Jakubowski

Artificial feeding grounds like this are sometimes very open, causing deer to become vulnerable to the cold, dogs, legal and illegal shooting, disease, and competition with other deer.

Donald A. Wharton

contain numerous trails deer can use as escape routes. Another problem with artificial feeding areas, according to big game biologist Jeremy Hurst, is that they are occasionally located in areas of poor winter cover, where deer are forced to expend valuable energy reserves to stay warm.

Furthermore, concentrations of deer near feeding sites can seriously damage browse in the surrounding areas. They can also set back the regeneration of valuable forest tree species by excessive browsing. In some areas, woods subject to excessive browsing take on a park-like appearance, with little desirable vegetation on the ground.

People who watch deer at feeding sites sometimes change their perceptions of deer. They're likely to see deer more as pets than wild animals. It would be very easy for people to conclude that deer are dependent on humans, when if left alone, the deer would likely manage just fine. I remember seeing a sign on a deer feeder's lawn years ago that read, "Please help feed our babies." Good intentions, but the wrong idea.

Some people like to blame forest stand characteristics in the State Forest Preserve for deer problems in the Adirondacks and use that as an excuse to feed deer. From my forestry background and experience hunting in the Adirondacks, I know that two things are happening on state land which will benefit deer in the long run. The first

White-tailed deer are some of the most adaptable wildlife on the planet.

is the return of conifers like spruce, balsam and hemlock that were logged and cleared 100 years ago for pulp and paper. In many instances those conifers were deer wintering areas.

The other thing is that the forest canopy is beginning to open up as it ages. Older, mature trees are subject to blowdown, insects and diseases. When large trees die, and when beaver or ice storms take their toll, small, open patches of forest are created where the sun hits the forest floor. Deer use the resulting low growth of vegetation for food and cover. Both of these processes will continue indefinitely in the Forest Preserve.

The "patchwork" pattern of state and private ownership in the Adirondacks also benefits deer. Depending on conditions, deer will prefer state land at times, and private timberland at others. For example, deer will often travel miles from winter cover on state land to feed on the tops of felled trees and walk the skidways created by logging operations on private lands.

There are a number of things that individuals can do on their own land to enhance winter deer habitat and improve deer's natural food. Winter thinnings and logging provide food in the form of cut tree tops, and later, sprout growth. Spreading such practices out over a couple of winters will help deer even more. Managing your stand to selectively benefit conifers will provide winter cover. Removing vegetation that competes with overgrown apple trees is beneficial to deer and other wildlife. Snowshoe and snowmobile trails can also help deer navigate deep snow.

White-tailed deer are some of the most adaptable wildlife on the planet. One hundred years ago there were 500,000 deer in the entire country; today, we have almost twice that number in this state alone. Make no mistake about it, when the snow piles up and temperatures plummet to near zero degrees, white-tales will have their problems, whether they live near Long Lake, in the Catskills or Western New York. Nevertheless, as much as we'd like to feed them, deer are usually better off left to their own devices to handle what Mother Nature deals them.

Author and lifelong New Yorker **Donald Wharton** lives in South Glens Falls. Over the years, he has contributed articles on otter, fisher, log drives, bush pilots and deer hunting to the *Conservationist*.

BRIEFLY Compiled by Jenna DuChene

Silene caroliniana pensylvanica (wild pink)

Steve Young

2008 Rare Plant Report

In June, the New York Natural Heritage Program published its annual status lists of New York rare plants. The program produces the status lists to: provide information to people of various disciplines; assist in the search for rare plants; and help conservation and protection efforts. The rare plant data is compiled via fieldwork and various oral, published or unpublished reports, as well as herbarium specimens. The contents of this year's list include six newly added species, the renaming of four species and the removal of four other species. In total, there are 570 rare plants in New York; 447 are vulnerable to extinction and 123 are extirpated. You can look at the entire 2008 New York Rare Plant Status Report on our website at **http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/29396.html**.

Special Licenses Website

DEC's Special Licenses Unit recently updated its website to provide greater accessibility, information and enhanced features. Now each special license has its own webpage with information on how to apply for that license, what the license authorizes, and rules and regulations applying to that license. In the future, the unit's website will also house information on various special licenses, such as: examination dates; fish and wildlife health topics; conferences and seminars; and changes in laws and regulations related to that special license. It will also include a frequently asked questions section. Visit the Special Licenses Unit at **www.dec.ny.gov/permits/359.html** to check out the updated look.

Fish PCB Concentration Decreases

Rock bass and yellow perch around Wilcox Dock in Plattsburgh are showing a decrease in PCB concentrations. Remediation of Cumberland Bay from 1999-2000 removed materials containing more than 20,000 pounds of PCBs, including 195,000 cubic yards of sediment and wood- and paper-processing sludge from around the dock. An additional 37,000 cubic yards of material had been removed from a nearby wetland and shore area. Studies show the remediation has lowered the lake's PCB concentration over time. The overall result is that dredging contaminated sediment and other materials from the lake have resulted in a significant improvement in environmental conditions.

Marinas Receive Awards

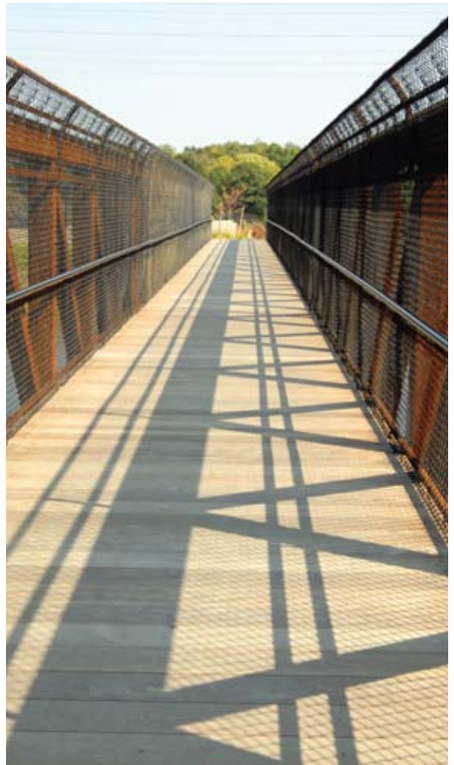
For their outstanding efforts to support the Clean Vessel Assistance Program's (CVAP) mission to improve the quality of New York's waterways, the town of Huntington on Long Island and the Coxsackie Yacht Club received awards in August. The CVAP provides federally funded grants to marinas, not-for-profit organizations and municipalities to assist with the costs of installing pumpout and dump station facilities to receive sewage from recreational boats. Huntington used grants from CVAP to make pumpout facilities available and convenient, while the Coxsackie Yacht Club used grants to install its first pumpout in 1995 and a replacement in 2006. They were chosen as winners based on nominations from New York's boating community, using a new Boater Survey developed by the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation.

BRIEFLY

New Cohoes Falls Park

Long regarded as an historic asset along the Mohawk Towpath Byway, Cohoes Falls has a new reason to attract visitors. Collaboration between Brookfield Renewable Power, the City of Cohoes and the National Park Service's Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor allowed the creation of Cohoes Falls View Park. The park was unveiled in August and sits next to the Brookfield Renewable Power's 38-megawatt School Street hydroelectric generating facility. It offers an unobstructed view of Cohoes Falls and a number of new features. For instance, visitors can now enjoy a 192-foot long pedestrian bridge, primary and secondary overlook areas with nearby trail access, and an 80-person amphitheater. In addition, new signage highlights the historical, geological and educational importance of Cohoes Falls, the Mohawk River and other nearby interest points.

Susan L Shafer



Drilling the Marcellus Shale

Near-record energy prices, vast untapped gas reserves, a rush to lease rights, and concern for the environment have led to a lively debate in our state: how to access this energy, and at the same time, ensure that the environment is appropriately protected.

While drilling for oil and gas has a long history in New York State, recent interest in natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation have raised much discussion. The formation lies deep underground, from Ohio to West Virginia, Pennsylvania and into New York; there is an estimated 168-516 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The possibility of harnessing this energy has led many land-management and energy companies to pursue leases with landowners. Questions, however, have arisen about potential environmental consequences of the proposed drilling technique and the other impacts that expanding the industry would have on communities. To address those issues, DEC has initiated a review of potential environmental impacts of horizontal Marcellus gas drilling using high-volume hydraulic fracturing techniques, and how these impacts could be mitigated.

New York State has one of the most stringent environmental regulatory programs in the nation for oil and gas drilling. There are approximately 13,000 active oil and gas wells in the state today.

For more information on drilling in the Marcellus Shale formation and for a brochure on private land leasing, please visit our website at **www.dec.ny.gov/energy/46288.html**.

Richard Thomas

Ask the Biologist

Q: ***What is the difference between an antler and a horn?***

A: Anatomically, they are different structures. Antlers are found on the males of deer, moose and other members of the deer family. A true antler is actually a bone. When antlers are growing during the summer months, they are covered with a thick, velvety skin called "antler velvet." The velvet is covered with blood vessels and pumps nutrients into the developing bone tissue. Antlers grow progressively larger until the late summer when the velvet finally dries up and sloughs off. What's left is the familiar, hardened bone—or antler—of the white-tailed buck or bull moose. By winter, antlers break off at the base of the skull, leaving the bucks and bulls antlerless until the following summer when antlers begin growing anew. In contrast, a horn forms on the head of both male and female members of relatives of the cow family. In North America, true horns grow on bison, wild sheep and musk ox. The difference is that horns are permanent. A bony base grows from the top of the skull, but the external sheath or "horn" is the anatomical equivalent of a hoof or fingernail. Formed of a substance called keratin, the horn continues to grow throughout the life of the animal. So while many hunters refer to a white-tailed deer's head ornamentation as "horns," they are really antlers. Despite these anatomical differences, horns and antlers perform similar functions. They are uses by males while sparring for dominance during the breeding season.

—Gordon Batcheller, DEC Wildlife Biologist

LETTERS Compiled by Eileen Stegemann and Jenna DuChene

Meat-eating Rabbit?

The enclosed photos taken in Corinth last winter show a rabbit eating a blue jay. A cooperative extension agent said nature's "vegetarians" will eat meat when the chance arises. How common is this?

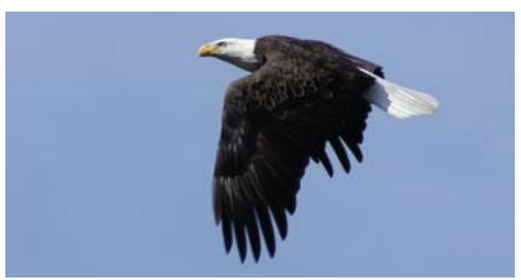
Kevin and Beverly Moran
Corinth, Saratoga County

You're lucky to have caught such an unusual sight on film. We checked numerous references, but couldn't find anything about rabbits eating meat. While it's uncommon for nature's vegetarians to stray from herbivory, wildlife is opportunistic. Your rabbit may have been taking advantage of a free meal, perhaps the blue jay met its unfortunate fate by flying into a window or side of the house. Thanks for sending us the photo; it's certainly a thrill to catch a glimpse of the oddities Mother Nature has to offer.
—Dave Nelson, Editor

Eagle Sighting

As I was driving from my dentist to the Thruway, I saw a bald eagle on Carman Road in Rotterdam. I managed to take a few photographs—he sat in a tree for a bit, then finally nailed a squirrel and was gone. While I have seen a couple of eagles at the Watervliet Reservoir on Route 20 and one up by Basic Creek Reservoir near Westerlo, this eagle on Carman Road was the closest encounter—a thrill for me!

Roy Saplin
Altamont, Albany County



Wow—great shot here, Roy. On first glance, it certainly seems unusual for a bald eagle to be in the Carman Road area, but I checked a map and noticed it is very close to the Watervliet Reservoir. We do have eagles there regularly, so this could explain your sighting. It is still pretty unusual for a bald eagle to be there and to be taking a mammal. Although they do eat mammals, their diet is almost entirely fish.
—Peter Nye, Leader of DEC's Endangered Species Unit

Something's Amiss

This picture was taken in the Village of Arcade by our grandson Eric Pettit. We have seen the large doe for the past three or four years. We wonder if the other deer may be her sibling. They have been seen together in a number of areas of the village.

Alton Pettit
Arcade, Wyoming County

Thanks for sharing your photo of such an unusual situation. While uncommon, we occasionally see deer that survive severe injuries and remain mobile and otherwise healthy on three legs. Yet to see two deer together, both with similar leg amputations, is unusual. That the two deer are together may suggest some familial relationship, but the condition of their right hind legs should not be assumed to be inherited. Leg amputations in deer typically occur due to severe trauma, such as from a vehicle collision or a compound fracture of the leg.
—Jeremy Hurst, DEC Wildlife Biologist

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REVIEW by Scott Stoner

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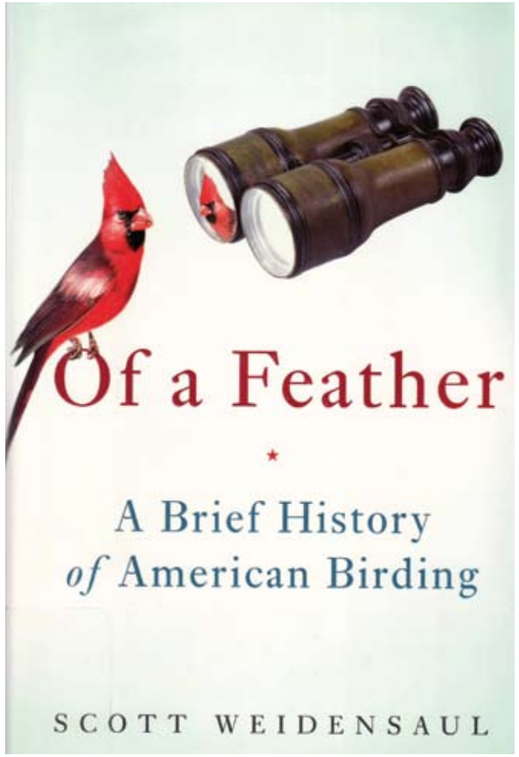

Birding, as Weidensaul describes, is "utterly conventional [and] fully mainstream." *Of a Feather* starts and ends in the excitement of the present—birding from Maine to Alaska. In between, Weidensaul recounts a fascinating history—from the discovery of birds on a new continent (by people who became unlikely heroes) to birding and conservation as we know them today.

The early days in America featured "shotgun ornithology," when the only accepted sighting was of a bird in the hand. Birds never before seen by Europeans were collected and described at a rapid pace. Many of these pioneers had checkered pasts and lacked formal training, but they came to America and became immersed in the discovery of new species of birds.

Those early days were also ones of excessive collection and even wanton destruction. Birds were shot indiscriminately and their eggs collected by the thousands. Battles raged between collectors and preservationists. Sometimes the battle was literal, as early wardens were killed trying to protect the birds. Egret plumes, and even entire songbirds, adorned ladies' hats; only with pressure from the ladies themselves were the egrets saved. Sadly, the great ivory-billed woodpecker was not as fortunate. This great denizen of the southern swamps was collected, sold, and decimated throughout its historical range.

Alexander Wilson, author of the early 1800's collection *American Ornithology*, and considered the "Father of American Ornithology," and John James Audubon, author of *Birds of America* and a name synonymous with birds, were among many influential figures for whom birds were named.

In 1934, a shy young artist from Jamestown, New York named Roger Tory Peterson published *A Field Guide to the Birds*. With his simplified approach to identifying birds at a distance, Peterson helped open up birding to the masses. Other guidebooks followed, including recent works by Kenn Kaufman and David Sibley.

Thirty years ago, "the 600 Club" was an elusive goal for one's "life list" of North American birds. Remote areas, such as Alaska's outer Aleutians, were just becoming known and available to birders. The bar has since been raised, as many "listers" have passed the 700 mark. Weidensaul ends with a timely discussion of the intersection of birding and science, and the role birders must play in conservation.

Of a Feather is an important book, and a must-read for everyone who cares about the history—and future—of birds and birding in America.

Lifelong birder **Scott Stoner** has traveled from Florida to Alaska in the pursuit—and enjoyment—of birds. He answers many of the bird-related letters to *Conservationist*.

Back *Trails*

Perspectives on People and Nature

The Perfect Tree

by Eileen Stegemann

We spotted the perfect tree. It was our second time passing through the area and we must have missed it on the first go-round. Despite the fir tree's obvious lopsidedness and rather sparse branches, we all agreed it would look great in the house. Besides, we'd had many a Charlie Brown tree over the years and once we put them in the corner and decorated them, they looked spectacular. So, we took out the saw, cut down the tree and carried it back to the house.

This was our 26th year picking out a tree together (our 21st with kids) and we looked forward to this outing. It was a chance to be outside and reconnect with nature and each other.

My husband and I first did this when we were living in a small, dilapidated farmhouse outside of Watertown, New York. That winter was brutal with snowdrifts over my head (I kid you not!), but it was our first Christmas together and the thought of trekking into the woods to cut our own tree was exciting. Bundling ourselves up so that only our eyes were exposed, we headed out. The wind was howling, pummeling us with blowing snow, but we didn't care because we were young and hardy. Forty-five minutes later—whining because I couldn't feel my hands or feet, and mumbling why the heck were we out here anyway—I "convinced" my husband that the scraggly thing before us was indeed the perfect tree. What amazes me now, is that a family tradition was born out of this experience.

When kids arrived, we had to change our tradition. After carrying a screaming baby on our backs, we realized we needed to make this outing more kid-friendly. The next year we went to a local tree farm that had wagon rides and refreshments. We still got to pick out and cut our own tree, and had tons of fun doing it.

For a few years, when our young son had mild asthma, we had to forgo a real tree in the house for an artificial one. During this time, we still kept up the tradition of our woods walk. Instead of cutting a tree, we'd gather fresh boughs to decorate the porch and get that great pine smell.

Our annual outing was not so much about the tree, but about being outside together enjoying nature. At a time of year when you are more likely to hunker inside where it's warm and dry, getting a tree or some boughs was a good excuse for an outdoor excursion. And my husband and I used these trips as opportunities to teach our kids about nature, hopefully passing along our enthusiasm for the woods and its inhabitants. We'd point out different tree species, follow tracks, and even examine scat. Over the years, we've seen some pretty amazing things, from otter tracks to piles of feathers and fur, remnants of some predator's meal. On one outing, we witnessed a weasel chasing a rabbit in the deep snow. We watched for several minutes as the two zigzagged across the yard before the rabbit managed to elude its pursuer. It was like a scene from National Geographic, and something we often recount.

After the holidays, we temporarily move our tree onto the deck where it continues to provide us with pleasure. It becomes a haven for numerous bird species that use it for cover and explore it for any delectables they can find. Some years we string popcorn and cranberries, which really delight our feathered friends.

When I was young, my parents would sometimes buy a balled tree to plant in the yard after the holidays. I always thought that was a great idea, but never could get organized enough to do that. Instead, we obtain our tree locally —from our own property, or from a tree farm or stand—and then plant a seedling each Arbor Day. A couple of those seedlings are now taller than 15 feet, providing us with another kind of lasting enjoyment.

With both kids in college now, our family tradition is evolving again. Fortunately, we all still look forward to our outing, but as both kids are currently studying environmental sciences, they're now teaching us a few things about nature. I know we will continue to enjoy our winter search for the perfect tree, and look forward to some day introducing our family's next generation to the joys and wonders available during winter in upstate New York.

Eileen Stegemann is Contributing Editor of *Conservationist* magazine.

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