



Newsletter of the Appalachia Ohio Alliance

The Sky Dance of the American Woodcock

It is early evening and the sun has just slipped below the horizon. We are standing in an unmowed meadow at the edge of a wet woodland. A small flock of red-winged blackbirds flies overhead, seemingly impatient to reach their evening roost. The air becomes still and earthy odors arise from the grasses which surround us. The melodious call of a song sparrow filters to us from a nearby thicket and a lone cardinal emits a clear whistle from the top branch of a dead tree.

We continue to stand quietly as the light on the western horizon diminishes and twilight sets in. Suddenly from the thicket there is a rush of wings as a small chunky bird flies past. In the failing light we notice short, rounded wings and a long bill. The wings produce a twittering sound as the bird flies past and disappears in the dim light of the meadow. In eager anticipation we face the meadow and wait for the familiar sound. Then we hear it! The loud, rasping, emphatic "peent" of the American Woodcock.

The woodcock has evoked curiosity because of its secretive, retiring habits. Even in the heart of its range in eastern North America where it is common the

woodcock is a shadowy apparition, keeping to itself in boggy woodlands, slipping about in the near dark. It is the rare person who gets a really good look at a woodcock and this usually occurs in the early spring (March and April) when courtship activity is at its peak. The performance of the male woodcock is an extremely complicated bit of animal behavior and to see it one must be willing to brave the damp, cool air of an early March evening. The performance starts just as the sun sets.

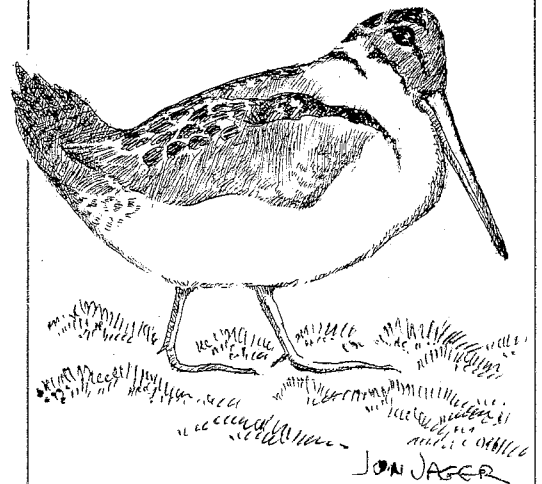
The stage for this performance must be a bit of open space, preferably on some knoll, a mossy spot or mowed meadow. Here, within hearing of his mate, the male woodcock performs. First he struts around on the ground, with tail erect and spread and with bill pointing downwards and resting on his chest. As he turns in a circle he emits the previously mentioned "peent" and will continue to do this at intervals of every few seconds. This call note will be repeated 50 to 100 times or more and then suddenly, without warning, the small bird mounts into the sky and, rising at an angle, he circles higher and higher until he looks like a mere speck in the sky. All during this upward flight he whistles continuously and emits twittering, musical notes.

At the apex of his climb he produces his true love song: a soft, hauntingly beautiful series of soft notes that drift to earth on the moist

evening air. These notes have an ethereal quality and anyone sensitive to "the songs of the earth" is deeply touched. At the completion of the love song the bird flutters downward, circling, zigzagging and finally landing at or near his starting point. He soon begins again on the "peent" notes and the whole act is repeated again and again until total darkness brings the performance to a halt.

Once heard and observed, the perceptive person will never again want to pass the spring season without experiencing the "sky dance" of the American woodcock.

by Paul Knoop



Editor's Note: *Paul Knoop, one of Ohio's best naturalists, inspired by this year's American woodcock "sky dance" experience, wanted to share it by writing this article.*

Thank you Paul.

My Trail With AOA

I ambled along a field's edge on a mid-spring afternoon with AOA board member Paul Knoop and founding member Jim Davidson. We stopped often to investigate a flowering plant or insect cruising by. Pennsylvania bitterness, wild plum and tiger swallowtails. Meandering along the edge of young forest and fallow field, we were monitoring one of 30 properties with AOA conservation easements.

"We'll head along the edge of this field and then dip down into the gorge ahead," said Paul, who had led previous monitoring trips to this property. "There are some nice big trees down there I want you to see."

Just on the quarter-mile walk to the lip of the gorge, I learned the identity of at least a half-dozen new plants, the food plants of several species of butterflies, and had the privilege to witness a discussion between two of the state's best naturalists over whether a small tree was a wild plum or tall chokecherry. I felt my brain was at capacity after the first half-hour and strained to memorize the words of my teachers and colleagues.

Descending into the gorge through the large oaks, hickories, ashes and other deciduous trees Paul wanted us to see, we speculated about the property's land-use history. Almost assuredly logged several times over, grazed, cultivated for crops and nearly devoid of trees less than a century ago, this patch of forest now harbored mature trees essential to a healthy forest ecosystem in this region of Ohio.

An old woodpile caught our attention, as logging was prohibited by the easement that blanketed this

landscape. Determining it was simply a remnant of an installed gas line near the property's boundary and not recent logging, we continued our descent towards rock and water.

Passing through periodic groves of eastern hemlock our conversation turned to the woolly adelgid, an imported insect that kills hemlocks over large areas of the eastern U.S. After losing the American chestnut to the blight and American elms to Dutch elm disease, other species of Ohio's native trees now encounter new insects and fungi that threaten their existence. Ash trees are falling victim to the emerald ash borer. Butternut and dogwood have declined (the former rapidly), and oaks are failing to regenerate in many areas of the state. No one knows exactly why.

"I attended a conference about invasive species last week and it was really informative," said Paul. "I was thinking to myself, 'well at least we have maples, right?' But I learned that the Asian longhorn beetle is becoming a serious threat to maples in the U.S." Turning to me with a smile, Paul said, "We humans have really screwed this place up, haven't we?"

I can't argue. Passenger pigeons, once numbering several billion, are now but a ghost whose absence haunts forests of the midwest. Elk, wolf, bear, fisher, marten, cougar and many other species of flora and fauna were either extirpated from Ohio or exterminated completely from the face of the earth only in the past 250 years. The Ohio we have inherited is a much different landscape than that seen by the Hopewell and Shawnee many centuries ago.

Although we were wading through a heavy topic of conservation, it didn't take much to brighten our spirits. Eyeing a small outcropping where water seeped out from the hillside, I

began turning over rocks in search of critters who make homes in the shadows of such crevices. I peeled a large rock in time to see a two-lined salamander slithering away into an earthen hole. The scent of wild ginger and wet leaves hung on the still air of the hollow bottom. Not all has been lost.

As we walked up the clear, unnamed creek, signs of life abounded - a two-lined salamander's eggs pasted to the bottom of a rock, mayfly larvae, dragonfly nymphs and green frogs. On our trek upstream, I learned another half-dozen plants and characteristics that set them apart. Some of the plants that were abundant on this property were rare across the rest of the region according to Paul and Jim.

I was constantly impressed and inspired by Jim's and Paul's ability to see so much of the landscape at once. They seemed to simultaneously be able to observe land use history, different trees, herbaceous plants, insects, mosses and lichens, mushrooms, amphibian habitat, listen to birdsongs (even though they both wear hearing aids), see into geologic time and pick out mammal sign. In addition to their mastery of natural history, both Paul and Jim continue to devote a great amount of time to conservation efforts. The same is true of other AOA board members, founders and volunteers.

When I participate in monitoring trips to various properties, I always think, "what if?" What if this dedicated group of individuals had not sought out conservation-minded landowners to protect these 5000 acres [under AOA's easement protection]. What would these lands look like? Would the same destructive mindset that claimed the

the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet have taken the oaks, salamanders and wildflowers on this property? I feel fortunate that I do not have to face that reality.

Instead, I am able to ponder such things as creating private lands' corridors to allow bobcats and black bears to re-colonize areas of Ohio. I am able to imagine a future landscape that more closely resembles that which the Hopewell lived upon many centuries ago. I am able to witness and even be a part of the creation of a local land ethic where private land owners facilitate conservation efforts and help ensure food security.

When walking and working with people like Paul and Jim, Clyde Gosnell and Omie Warner, Steve Goodwin and Russ Scholl. I am keenly aware of what I inherit. In addition to augmenting my environmental knowledge and sense of place, I inherit a land ethic. I listen to stories about hunting, prairie planting and restoration, and to tales of AOA's birth and growth. I am instilled with the experiences of my elders, and this has helped to shape my view of and relationship with the landscape. I am grateful for their dedication and hope to build on their efforts and inspiration. Thank you.

by Joe Brehm

Thank You, Joe

The board of AOA wants to thank Joe Brehm for his dedicated work and fantastic assistance during 2009 and early 2010 as part of his Masters Degree candidacy in Ohio University's Environmental Studies Leadership Option. He is due to graduate this Spring. Through his tireless efforts and leadership, Joe

helped the board evaluate its policies for conservation easement stewardship and guided the board through adoption of an updated Conservation Easement Stewardship Policy. Joe also graciously committed his time accompanying many board members and volunteers throughout his internship on many site monitoring visits - a very vital and integral part of AOA's land protection program.

Best of luck to you Joe!

Protecting Biodiversity

On a recent trip to visit family in Toronto, Canada, I had the opportunity to visit The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Of particular interest was a new exhibition about biodiversity I had seen in a museum exhibit publication I subscribe to. Joe Brehm's article reminds us that one of AOA's primary goals is to protect habitat and species biodiversity by preserving various habitats and, we hope, creating land corridors for wildlife in the process.

The exhibit was divided generally into the various biomes of the earth, giving examples of each from around the world, such as forest types and grasslands (our Great Plains prairies included). The exhibition repeatedly informed the visitor that almost all problems associated with habitat destruction and species population decreases are human caused. For me, this re-enforces the vital importance of what we in AOA are aiming to preserve. Isn't it nice to know that our efforts with AOA can have an effect to counteract negative human behavior with positive solutions and action?

Well done AOA workers and contributors. Keep up the good work!

by Jon Jager

President's Message

As 2010 approaches the halfway mark I would like to thank all those gracious donors who have helped AOA so far this year with financial assistance. Your support has helped to secure our new 19-acre property next to Ash Cave as well as the 80-acre Vinton County portion of the Bison Hollow preserve, which includes sandstone cliffs and waterfalls. We are also diligently working on a 92-acre conservation easement that will protect over a half mile of riparian zone along Raccoon Creek and a large adjacent wetland.

For those who are considering to also help our conservation cause, plan now in your 2010 tax deductible charitable-contribution plan. AOA is an all-volunteer organization of dedicated conservation-minded individuals. Your financial assistance is critical in helping AOA work with landowners to conserve family farms, forests and open spaces. Funds are also needed for property monitoring, education and other activities. Your donations often compound when we are able to secure matching grants for land preservation - no match, no grant! Stay tuned to find out if we can secure a pending grant to preserve some spectacular old growth forest in the heart of the Hocking Hills! Thank you very much for whatever level of assistance you can provide.

Brian Blair, President

Thanks to Clean Ohio Grant

AOA recently purchased 19.29 acres thanks to Marilyn House and the Clean Ohio Open Space grant program. Adjoining Ash Cave State Park this property protects a portion of the Queer Creek stream corridor. Look for more about Queer Creek Valley activity in the next newsletter.

**Appalachia Ohio Alliance
2010 Calender of Events**

**-Cohen Property Hike, July 24,
10:00 AM, Hocking County**

This 100-acre private retreat is owned by Alan Cohen and Evie Adelman. Over the past 30 years, Alan has introduced native and exotic plants to create a fascinating botanical array. A special attraction on this day will be the tall grass prairie which should be in all its splendor with blooming wildflowers and tall grasses.

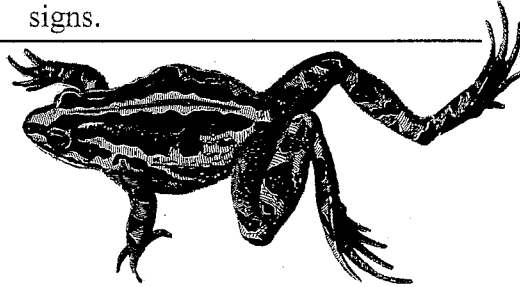
Directions: Located at 26488 Starr Route Road, Logan area.

**-Camp Oty'Okwa, October 24,
1:30 PM, Hocking County**

Camp Oty'Okwa is a 600-acre facility owned and operated by the Big Brothers Big Sisters of central Ohio. Here one will find some of

Hocking County's most primitive beauty with forested hills and valleys, high cliffs, recessed caves, clear-flowing streams and abundant wildlife.

Directions: Camp entrance is just off SR 664 on Purcell Road, south of Old Man's Cave State Park. Follow the signs.



The Electronic Newsletter

If you would prefer to receive this newsletter electronically, contact us at aoalt@earthlink.net. Please include your name and address so we can remove your name from our printed newsletter mailing list. Thanks for saving paper and mailing expenses!

Leave a Legacy of Beauty

If you are a landowner interested in leaving a legacy of natural beauty for future generations, plan now for 2010 taxes through a conservation easement. Please contact Steve Goodwin, program consultant at 740-967-2737 or any representative of Appalachia Ohio Alliance.

Appalachia Ohio Alliance

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*Preserving Family Lands
Today for Tomorrow*

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