



Volume 28 Issue 1

Rails to Trails of Central PA Inc.

January / February 2024

ASSIGNMENT FOR 2024:

Okay, we have the Lower Trail, we have the connection into Canoe Creek State Park, we have the 6 to 10 Trail right here in our backyard. On a statewide level we have a DCNR Mega-Greenway and the Trans Allegheny Trails System and on a Federal level, we have the 9-11 National Memorial Trail. The Lower Trail is part of every one of these trails! We as members of Rails to Trails know how huge this is, it provides a major recreational asset. We need for our members to become more vocal in the push to have trail development and the push to get the trails all connected. This year we need you to go to your local Borough, Townships and County meetings to let them know how important it is to the economic development of Central PA to support the connection of these trails. So please make this a goal for 2023 and help us to catch up to the rest of the country in recognizing the benefits of a trail system that all connects. Thanks.

WHAT IS THE LONGEST BIKING TRAIL IN PA?

Do you have a guess? For the answer see page 3 of the *Trekker*.

THINK SPRING BY COUNTING BIRDS

By Dave Hurst

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Walking the short distance across my backyard to the car was all it took for the intensity of birdsong to captivate me.

Dozens of nearly invisible, sparrow-sized birds – Dark-eyed Juncos – were chipping vigorously in my neighbor’s barren apple trees. More distantly, there were isolated “chirrup” and “eep-eeps.”

Although difficult to separate, there may have been as many as a half-a-dozen different calls within the cacophony. One would have thought it was springtime.

The date, though, was January 4. Since birds don’t have calendars, and the temperature at the time was 51 degrees, that they were singing like it was spring was understandable.

It was a reminder that even in the dead of winter there’s a lot of birdlife in the Alleghenies. Those of us who don’t maintain bird feeders just aren’t as aware of it as we are at other times of the year.

This is a good time to think about that – especially if you are growing a bit stir-crazy. One of the great annual bird-count events was held recently, and you can prepare and practice for the 2024 event now.

Birding is an outstanding way to engage with our natural heritage. This is an activity that can take you as far afield as you are willing to go, yet can be satisfying from a recliner while watching a backyard birdfeeder through the window.

For those with a competitive streak, there’s the constant challenge of seeking out as many species as possible; for the artistically inclined, birds are fascinating subjects for photography; for the contemplative, there are few more peaceful ways to spend thoughtful time than alone in a quiet wood, listening to bird calls.

Birding can be absorbing enough to be a pastime that lasts a lifetime. Yet tools have been developed that are making this activity increasingly easy for newbies to pick up and enjoy.

These all are good reasons to circle the four days of February 16-19, 2024 on the calendar. Those are the dates of next year’s Great Backyard Bird Count, cosponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Audubon, and Birds Canada.

This is citizen science at its best – an official count that provides ornithologists with important data they couldn’t possibly gather on their own. Not only does this information enable scientists to learn more about what is going on among bird populations, it often leads to proactive actions that can help struggling bird communities.

Last year 385,000 people from 192 countries participated, reportedly seeing more than 7,000 bird species, and sending in 142,000 photos. Pennsylvania was the fifth-most-active U.S. state with participants here submitting more than 24,000 checklists and IDs.

For people who haven’t done any birding in the past, this is a great time to try it – both because of the limited requirement for participation and the tools that have been developed to help. All that’s asked is 15 minutes sometime over the four-day period.

Two apps have been created. Merlin Bird ID is a good one for beginners, while eBird is more robust and can be used to report numbers of birds sighted as well as their species.

Download the Merlin app and appropriate “Bird Pack,” and they will tell you the birds you are most-likely to see (through Explore Birds) and how to identify those birds you do see. Then, if you register with the Cornell Lab, you can report your findings with a click of a button.

For all of the information on the bird count, links to the apps and webinar registration information, visit BirdCount.org.

As you can readily hear, the birds are out there. The Great Backyard Bird County enables you to identify them, count them, enjoy them – and perhaps even experience a bit of spring in mid-winter.

To respond to this column, email Dave Hurst at hurst.media.works@gmail.com.

RAILS TO TRAILS ANNUAL FUND RAISER RAFFLE



We will be once again mailing out the raffle tickets for this year’s fund raiser in the next newsletter. We understand that not all individuals feel comfortable participating in raffles, let alone fund raisers. If you do not wish to receive tickets, please let us know, or if next month you do not receive tickets and wish to, please just let us know and we will get some sent out to you.

As many of you know the raffle is our major fund raiser, providing a large percentage of our annual operating budget. It is also a way for you to renew your membership. By returning your ticket stubs and money, you extend your membership by one year. This applies to all memberships. For example, even if yours does not expire until January 2024, by selling the tickets, your expiration date would move to January 2025. Or, if you do not wish to extend your membership, you may use the ticket sales to give a membership to someone else as a gift.

There is a change to this year’s drawing date. There will be NO SPRING GATHERING. The attendance for this gathering has continued to decline. We always thought it was due to inclement weather, but last year we had perfect weather and the lowest attendance ever. Organizing the gathering, food donations, getting a grill, all the preparation, cooking, and cleanup is a lot of work. After a lot of thought and consideration it was decided to discontinue the gathering. With that said the Raffle Drawing will take place June 13th prior to the June Board Meeting.

We are very happy to say we have had great support from the community for the Raffle Prizes again this year, with some new donors.

Prizes this year are from: Spokes-N-Skis, REI, Hoss’s, Bluegills Bar & Grill, US Hotel, Prime Sirloin, Allegheny Creamery & Crepes, Biddle’s Brewery, ACE Hardware in Duncansville, Black Dog Café, and Boro Coffee.

More information on our donors, and on the raffle will be in the next newsletter when the tickets are mailed out.

WILDFLOWER WATCH: WINTER CRESS

By Bob Richers,

One of our early spring wildflowers is Winter Cress. In fact, this common plant quickly towers above other emerging plants and also is an early bloomer. It is an early source of pollen and nectar for bees and butterflies. The seeds are eaten by doves and grosbeaks.

Winter Cress is native to Eurasia and was introduced to North America. It is found mostly in the New England states. The plant is also known as Yellow Rocket Plant, Bitter Cress, Scurvy Grass or Scurvy Cress.

It is an herbaceous biennial member of the mustard family. In its first year the plant forms a rosette of leaves. In the second year, the rosette produces one or more flowering stocks. This cool season annual to biennial grows 8 to 24 inches in height.



The flowering rosette becomes an inflorescence of bright yellow blooms that rise above the foliage. The leaves are long and capped with a loped or indented lower section.

Winter Cress is found in fields and along roadsides. If there is any in your area, it will eventually show up in your lawn. It can grow in sandy or loamy soils, but does best in full sunlight and moist soil. It favors growing in cultivated fields of timothy hay or alfalfa. It will be cut with forage, which results in the spreading of seeds. It is considered a noxious weed in some states.

There are edible qualities to this plant. It is rich in vitamins A and C and had a history as an anti-scurvy plant. The young rosettes, picked while the nights are still frosty, can be added to salads or cooked like spinach. As the weather warms the leaves become bitter and require multiple boilings and water changes to become palatable. The flower buds can be boiled for 5 minutes with 2 water changes and served like broccoli.

TREE OF THE MONTH: RIVER BIRCH

By Dave Despot



River Birch (*Betula nigra*) is a medium sized tree (40 to 70 feet with a spread of 40 to 50 feet) that is commonly found in wet areas such as streambanks and bottomlands. The form is pyramidal when the tree is young developing into a rounded shape with maturity. Native range extends from Massachusetts to Florida, and west to Kansas and Minnesota. Most of the river birch I have encountered in central Pennsylvania has been in landscape plantings.

Leaves are alternate, simple, 1 to 3 inches long and 3/4 to 2 1/2 inches wide, sharp pointed and doubly toothed with a wedge shaped base. Leaf color is shiny green in the growing season culminating with a yellow autumn color and an early leaf drop. Bark color is reddish brown with peeling strips on young stems becoming deep reddish brown on mature stems eventually becoming dark brown with deep furrows and irregular plates, especially near the bases of the tree. Flowers are 2 to 3 inches long developing in early spring as drooping catkins. Fruit ripen later in the spring as tiny nutlets borne in cylindrical cones. Winter buds are appressed (held tightly to the stem), tiny (less than 1/4 inch long), light brown, with or without tiny hairs.

Trees of this species transplant well and thrive in areas of moist soil; however, they will grow successfully on drier sites. Iron chlorosis can be a problem in soils with a pH of 6.5 or higher. According to Michael Dirr, author of *Manual of Landscape Plants*, "to my knowledge, river birch is the most borer resistant birch for landscape planting although others are being tested." River birch is frequently recommended as a substitute for white birch which is often attacked by borers.

ANSWER For the Longest Bike Trail in PA:

Article by: Taiwo Victor

Photo by: ©Steve Guldeman/Shutterstock.com



Running a 150-mile trail, the Great Allegheny Passage is unquestionably the longest biking trail in Pennsylvania. Between Homestead, PA (near Pittsburgh), and Cumberland, MD, more than 150 miles of converted rail lines make up the Great Allegheny Passage. A relatively flat rail trail connects to the C&O Canal Towpath for a total of 334.5 miles before reaching Washington, D.C.

You can traverse valleys and navigate around mountains on this trail. You can cross the Mason-Dixon Line, visit several state parks, explore several trail towns, and much more if you ride the trail's full length.

Much of the trail parallels the Youghiogheny River. Make sure your bike can handle any terrain as you will be riding on gravel, crushed limestone, and in certain locations, dirt, in addition to asphalt and concrete.

The Great Allegheny Passage Route

In general, this route between Cumberland and Pittsburgh follows former rail lines, and Cumberland is the location of the mile 0 marker. The highest point on the Great Allegheny Passage is the Eastern Continental Divide at 2,392 feet above sea level. You can reach Pittsburgh by continuing west, where you will notice that the incline is mild but constant. Many historical locations along this path can inform you about Western exploration and even the French and Indian War.

The Allegheny Highlands Trail in Pennsylvania, the Allegheny Highlands Trail in Maryland, the Steel Valley Trail, the Youghiogheny River Trail, and the Three Rivers Heritage Trail make up the route of the Allegheny Passage. The route also

incorporates the 52-mile Mountour Trail, which serves the Pittsburgh International Airport.

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, one of eight national scenic trails, encompasses the section of the trail between Ohio and Cumberland.

SUPPORTING RAILS TO TRAILS IS NO LONGER AS EASY AS: SHOPPING AMAZON.COM.

Amazon's charity program, [Amazon Smile](https://www.amazon.com/amazonsmile) will come to an end on Feb 20.

Amazon announced it is ending the program because it hasn't grown to create the impact it expected. The small donations over time have helped supply residential facilities with basic needs such as food or hygiene products.

We thank all of you who did use the Amazon Smiles Program. Rails to Trails did benefit from it and are sad to see this program ending.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone: (____)-_____

E-mail _____

_____ New Membership _____ Renewal

_____ Individual	\$15.00
_____ Family	\$20.00
_____ Supporting	\$50.00
_____ Group	\$75.00

I am interested in:

_____ Horses	_____ Hiking
_____ Heritage	_____ Bicycling
_____ Nature Study	_____ Jogging
_____ Other	

I would like to help by volunteering for:

Make checks payable to:

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

March 14th, 2023,
April 11th, 2023,
May 9th, 2023,
June 13th, 2023,

Monthly Board Meeting, 7 PM at the Grannas Station
Monthly Board Meeting, 7 PM at the Grannas Station
Monthly Board Meeting, 7 PM at the Grannas Station
Monthly Board Meeting, and Raffle Drawing.

Please check our Calendar of Events page on our website to keep up to date, for other events that may be taking place on the trail hosted by other organizations

KEEP YOUR ADDRESS CURRENT

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Remember, if your mailing address is Highlighted, your membership is about to expire. Please renew quickly and continue to support Rails-to-Trails. Thank You!

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