



Montour Preserve Newsletter



AUTUMN 2009

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Autumn Nature Notes

The color change of leaves on **deciduous trees** is the highlight of October in Pennsylvania. This leaf change creates a visual splendor in Penn's Woods as trees make the transition to a dormant state for the winter. Each year brings its own unique blend of colors and offers a brilliant end to a long and productive growing season. With over 100 species of trees growing here in Pennsylvania it's no wonder our forests have such a wonderful variety of color.

From late October into November, **Red-tailed hawks** are moving south. Look overhead on a warm autumn day for a kettle of redtails circling as they glide on a "bubble" of rising air. Wild **Canada Geese** migrate in November (except for resident birds). **Witch Hazel** blooms near the middle of the month in our forests. **Milkweed** pods begin to open and spill their silk-stranded seeds to the wind. Waterfowl migration peaks during the second or third week of November and **Tundra Swans** often make a brief appearance.

Male **Great Horned Owls** begin to establish their territories in December. Listen for their "Who's awake? Me too" calls on frosty nights. Later this month look for the moth-like flight of **Short-eared Owls** over grassy fields just before sunset. Keep a close look out for a possible Arctic visitor, **Snowy Owl**. One could show up this winter.

Sky Watch

Throughout most of October, **Jupiter** is in place for viewing before midnight. As Jupiter sets in the southwest about 1 a.m., **Mars** rises in the northeast. **Venus** is

the most brilliant object in the pre-dawn sky. The full **Hunter's Moon** occurs on the 3rd; **New Moon** is on the 17th. In the early hours of October 21st Earth passes through the peak of the **Orionid meteor showers** providing a good chance to see "shooting stars" particularly from midnight until dawn at a rate of up to 15 per hour.

The well-known winter constellation, **Orion, The Hunter**, is now easy to pick out in the east-southeast by 7:30-8 p.m. November's full **Moon** is on the 2nd; **New Moon** occurs on November 16th. **Jupiter** is due south after sunset this month but sets before midnight. **Mars** rises before midnight. **Venus** slips lower in the southeast each morning. On the 14th Venus, a thin crescent Moon and the star Spica form a narrow triangle above the southeastern horizon. In the predawn hours of November 17th the **Leonid meteor shower** peaks with up to a dozen meteors per hour in a moonless sky.

December sports two Full Moons, the first on December 1st and the second (a blue moon) on the 31st. **New Moon** is on the 16th. **Mars** grows brighter and rises earlier before midnight as the month progresses. **Jupiter** is the brightest planet this month but sets about 10 p.m. in early December and earlier as the month progresses. A moonless sky will make for excellent viewing of the **Geminid meteor shower** in the early morning hours of December 14th. Winter officially begins on the 21st of the month when the sun reaches the **winter solstice**. Look for the **Great Square of Pegasus** high overhead this month.

October Programs

RAPTORS AND MIGRATION

Saturday, Oct. 10

2 to 3 p.m.

Meet in Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

Raptors are masters of the wind, efficient hunters and are moving through Pennsylvania this time of year. These predators are specialized in both form and function. Some are generalists while others are more specialized in making a living. Join us for a look at hawks, eagles and owls, their natural history and migration patterns through our state.

AUTUMN FOLIAGE WALK

Saturday, Oct. 17

1:30 to 3 p.m.

Meet in Environmental Education Center

(Rain or shine)

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

Nature's dazzling decorations of fall foliage and autumn wildflowers provide a visual feast for the eyes. Radiant reds, glittering golds, and opalescent oranges light Pennsylvania's woodlands and fields with brilliant colors this time of year. Join us for a leisurely walk through the resplendent forests of Goose Woods for a closer look at leaves and flowers. We'll reveal the identity and folklore of some common woodland trees and discuss factors affecting color change and leaf drop. Dress appropriately for the outdoors and plan for a leisurely walk.

YOUNG EXPLORERS: AUTUMN COLORS

(Ages 3–5)

Wednesday, Oct. 21

10 to 11 a.m.

Advance registration required — Call 570-437-3131

Meet in Visitors Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

It's the time of year for colorful autumn leaves and fall flowers. Join us as we explore nature in autumn. We'll take a close look at the colors of autumn through a story and activity. Dress for the weather and time outdoors.

GETTING GREENER ENERGY FORUM

Saturday, Oct. 24

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Various vendors and resource people

If you have considered energy conservation or alternative sources of energy, but don't know where to start, then join us to learn about some of the options. We'll have information and displays about wind and solar power, government incentives, LED lighting technology, energy conservation and more. Come any time and stay for as long as you like. A more complete schedule of events will be available closer to the date of the program.

Teaching Environmental Awareness Workshop

FLYING WILD

Wednesday, Oct. 28

8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

Flying WILD professional development workshops are designed to provide formal and non-formal teachers of K-12 students with a comprehensive overview of “Flying WILD: An Educator’s Guide to Celebrating Birds,” as well as practical hands-on training in its implementation. Workshop facilitators also share information about migratory birds and their conservation needs and help participants connect with the bird conservation community in their area.

Each participating educator will receive a complimentary copy of “Flying WILD: An Educator’s Guide to Celebrating Birds” and a certificate for six hours of professional development training upon completion of the workshop. Act 48 hours will be available. Lunch will be provided. Registrations are accepted online. To register, please visit www.pplprojectearth.com and click on “TEA Workshops.”

November Programs

SIGHTS, SOUNDS AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Saturday, Nov. 7

2 to 3:30 p.m.

Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Lester Hirsh, poet and singer/songwriter

In a return performance Lester Hirsh, 2005 Grammy Nominee for best spoken word, will weave music and poetry while exploring the sights and sounds of nature and the intuitive connection to the world around us. He will perform on six- and 12-string guitar and harmonica as well as vocals. He might even use a rainstick. There will be songs for children and adults, some audience participation and a mix of music that explores many cultural avenues. The show will be educational and entertaining for all ages.

WINGS OVER WATER

Saturday, Nov. 14

9 to 11 a.m.

Meet in Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

The annual autumn waterfowl migration is under way. Ducks, geese, and other water birds stop at lakes and ponds for a time before moving farther south for the winter. This is a great opportunity to observe migrant species we rarely see at other times of year. The program will begin indoors with a brief talk and video presentation on the identification of waterfowl. Then we’ll bundle up and go outdoors to observe and identify water birds on the lake at the time. Dress for the weather and plan for some walking. Bring binoculars or a spotting scope and a field guide if you have them.

WINGS OVER WATER

Saturday, Nov. 21

9 to 11 a.m.

Meet at Goose Cove Overlook

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

The numbers and species of waterfowl moving through during migration can change from day to day, so we'll have a second look at migrants on Lake Chillisquaque. This is a great opportunity to observe migrant species we rarely see at other times of year. Bundle up to spend time outdoors to observe and identify water birds on the lake. Dress for the weather and plan for some walking. Bring binoculars or a spotting scope and a field guide if you have them.

December Programs

GREEN FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Saturday, Dec. 5

2 to 3 p.m.

Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

The holidays are always hard on our budgets, but there are ways to save money, energy and help the environment in the process. Join us as we share some tips for saving energy, being kinder to the environment and saving money in the process. We'll explore ways to reuse and recycle, "green" shopping, reducing energy usage and more.

OWL MOON

Friday, December 11

7 to 8:30 p.m.

Environmental Education Center

Presented by: Jon D. Beam, Senior Naturalist

The silence of a winter's night is broken by the haunting hoot of an owl. A moon-cast shadow glides across the snow silent as a ghostly specter. Join us to explore the natural history and folklore of the Great Horned Owl. The program will begin with Jane Yolen's story book, *Owl Moon*. Afterward we'll explore the life history of Great Horned Owls, how to identify these birds, some of their unique behaviors, and what makes them so successful. In addition, we will discuss other owls found in our area. And we'll even venture outdoors and try calling a Great Horned Owl and listen for it to call back.

Around the Preserve

Keep in touch with the weekly changes in nature by listening to WVIA-FM &

PPL's "**The Nature Notebook**" broadcast at 89.9. This fall you can learn about migrating birds, chipping chipmunks, bears, buffleheads and more. "The Nature Notebook" airs at about 4:57 p.m. Sunday afternoons. Or you can hear broadcasts from the comfort of your computer using the following link: <http://www.pplweb.com/community+partners/nature+notebook/broadcasts.htm>.

A Natural Mystery

A scattering of sun-bleached bones on a little-used gravel road catches my eye. Their whiteness stands out against the background of gravel gray. This looks like a natural mystery just begging to be solved. Who was the original owner of these bones? What happened here? When did it happen? Was another animal involved? This looks like a challenge. I'll start with an inventory.

If you love a mystery, then take a walk. Chances are good that you will find a natural mystery to solve. Just take your time and observe what is around you. Something will catch your eye. "What is that?" you might ask at seeing an unfamiliar wildflower, hearing a new bird song or discovering a set of animal tracks. Identification of the unknown is a typical nature mystery to solve.

Twelve smaller bones, two claws and three longer bones round out the group. All have a bit of greenish algae growing on them, otherwise there are no visible cuts or tooth marks. The bones are in an area no larger than three square feet. The surrounding habitat is a mix of small grassy openings, shrubs and trees with a stand of white pines bordering the road on one side. Further investigation reveals: deer tracks crossing and along the road; a few scattered turkey feathers; scat, probably from a fox; and a bowl-shaped depression in the dust along the edge of the road possibly made by an eastern cottontail rabbit.

Then there are the more complex natural mysteries. It might be a pile of woodchips at the base of a tree, a freshly dug hole in the ground, an intricately constructed nest in a bush, a shed exoskeleton by a stream. "Who left these behind?" becomes a bit more challenging.

The size and shape of the two longer bones indicate that they had been part of a leg. A small bit of brownish fur confirms that the original owner was a mammal. The small claws show that the mammal was not a predator. The lack of additional skeletal remains indicates that either the foot and leg were carried here or the rest of the body was carried away.

Sometimes the mystery is a behavioral one. "Why is the animal doing that?" becomes the question to answer. Perhaps it is two butterflies circling one another as they spiral upward. Or it could be two birds bobbing their heads back and forth. Or perhaps it's a large wasp digging a hole in the ground. Or a bat flying in the daytime. Whatever caught your attention, it certainly demands an explanation.

The size of the bones indicates a smallish herbivore larger than a mouse. Two that immediately come to mind are groundhog and cottontail rabbit. There are not signs of groundhog activity in the immediate area. There is evidence of rabbit activity, however.

Solving the mystery will require gathering as much information as possible and practical. Where did you find the mystery item? When did you see it? Under what circumstances? What was the habitat like around the area? What were the size, shape, color and any other specific characteristics? These questions are similar to the type a detective might ask in solving a mystery.

Most likely the rabbit fell prey to a predator. The likely suspects include weasel, fox and owl. A weasel typically caches what it doesn't eat for later. Fox is a possibility, particularly since fox scat is on the road nearby. The bordering stand of white pines would provide good cover for a great horned owl and there is evidence of them roosting and nesting here.

If you need to consult resources once you return from your outing, don't rely solely on memory to help you solve your natural mystery. Take notes in the field. Better yet, make a quick sketch of what you saw and supplement it with notes. Then when you get to a field guide or resource person you will have accurate information at hand to help with identification.

The evidence is only circumstantial in this case. It appears that a cottontail rabbit was killed by either a fox or an owl. Either the foot and leg were dropped here or the majority of the rabbit was consumed here and the foot and leg left behind. This natural mystery will remain unsolved except for speculation.

Some natural mysteries are not solved immediately. They require additional observation and information gathering. Others are never solved. That's all part of being a nature detective. No matter, trying to solve natural mysteries is still fun and challenging. Give it a try on your next outing.

