

History of the Appalachian Audubon Society

By Robert Schell

The Fledging Years: The Appalachian Audubon society grew out of a need for an organization in South Central Pennsylvania, which would bring to its members program on nature, conservation, the environment and wise use of natural resources. Such a need was keenly felt by a small group of concerned individuals who had the interest and enthusiasm to set about the task of organizing and gaining the support of others in the area. Under the sponsorship of the National Audubon Society, the group met at the Cumberland-Perry County vocational School on November 29, 1971 to exchange ideas and to take the preliminary steps to form an Audubon Chapter.

By May of 1972, a constitution and bylaws were adopted and the first regular officers and board of directors were elected. Richard Rhinedress, of Harrisburg, was elected President. Under the direction of a team of hard working dedicated officers and directors, the organization achieved substantial growth, enough to justify application to National Audubon in September, 1972, for a provisional chapter charter.

Throughout 1972 and 1973, many interesting programs and field trips were presented, and membership grew, requiring a larger meeting space. Activities were transferred to Christ Presbyterian Church, Allendale, in Lower Allen Township, Cumberland County. On October 18, 1973, Allen J. Miller, Regional Representative of the National Audubon society presented to Appalachian Audubon its full chapter charter. Another key activity of the year was when Maurice Broun, curator of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary led a nature walk at Hawk Mountain, and later gave a program. The year, 1973 also initiated the first canoe trips of the Chapter.

At the annual meeting and election of officers in May 1974, H. Eugene Wingert of Summerdale assumed the presidency. As a popular biology teacher at Cumberland Valley High School, Gene was able to help the chapter continue its growth and to attract many naturalists and educators in wildlife and ecology.

In 1974 Stony Creek Valley in Dauphin County was threatened with the construction of two reservoirs and a proposed pumping storage power plant. The Stony Valley Coalition was formed from 20 local conservation organizations to "Save Stony Valley." Many AAS members, notably Audrey McGahon, were particularly involved in this very active group. Despite the lack of state funds, the Coalition did a scientific study of Stony Creek. When the results of the study were presented at an official hearing, PP&L challenged the Coalition, but the point person was Dr. Fred Howard, who had a better background than the PPL representative. The Coalition then submitted their study to both state houses for a Wild and Scenic Stream" designation. It passed unanimously, and in 1979, PP&L abandoned plans to build a pumping station facility in St. Anthony's Wilderness. Ralph Kinter noted that this showed the importance of varied environmental groups working cooperatively.

Gasoline and natural gas shortages of the 70's drove home the point to many that energy conservation was a necessity, and carpooling and resource conservation were emphasized by AAS. The first Environmental Forum was co-sponsored with other environmental groups in 1975 on "Wastewater - Bonanza or Boomerang" investigating the possibilities of using tertiary treated sewage water and sludge on the land as fertilizer. A subsequent forum featured Ralph Nader as a keynote speaker.

Appalachian Audubon Files:

Gary Smith of Carlisle succeeded Gene Wingert as Chapter President in 1976. As a member of the Pennsylvania Department of Natural Resources, he attracted other DER employees. A major project during this year was the saving of the Appalachian Trail.

In 1978 Herb Lilly succeeded to the presidency. It was Herb's suggestion that led to the annual Birdseed Sale as the major fundraiser of AAS. First-rate programs and field trips were becoming well known and respected throughout the area. Herb's ability as an organizer enabled AAS to increase membership and solidified its place in the community.

Glen (Ed) Maurer of Mechanicsburg was elected president in 1980. During his term the Osprey Reintroduction Project got underway and the chapter became involved and active in the Pennsylvania Audubon Council. AAS hosted the Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference at Messiah College with featured speakers including Dr. Russell Peterson, President of National Audubon. Two members, Audrey McGahon and Sue Daugherty, worked tirelessly and gathered other members to lobby the state legislators to pass HB 230 - the Pennsylvania Cancer Plan, allowing for a cancer registry.

Hilary Vida, Interpretive Naturalist for Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks was elected as President in 1982. Hilary was also the state's agent for the National Environmental Education Development Program. (NEED). The National Park Service sponsored NEED to develop a greater awareness of nature in school children. By 1982 membership had increased to over 1000 members and the annual birdseed sale had increased to 100,000 pounds of seed. One of the regular activities for AAS was manning the recycling centers at Colonial Park and at the Camp Hill Mall.

In 1984 Ralph Kinter was elected president. Ralph emphasized education. AAS developed a slide show for senior citizens that was taken into the community. To aid the schools, films were purchased on the environment and placed in the Audio-Visual Center of Capital Area Intermediate Unit. From the beginnings of AAS, Ralph was a popular and knowledgeable field trip leader and writer for the newsletter. His column, "In the Field" started in 1987 and continued until 2001.

In 1986 Warren Hoffman took over the leadership, and his enthusiasm for bluebirds was apparent in the programs. During his term, with the support of Frank Masland Jr. and Craig Dunn, as Boiling Springs property and a parcel of the Appalachian Trail were acquired.

In 1988 Cindy Dunn took office and immediately placed emphasis upon conservation efforts, particularly against raising the height of the dam at Harrisburg. One of her first moves was to send Ralph Kinter to a national meeting on Wetlands. Ralph's concept of preventive medicine, i.e. guarding wetlands from development rather than trying to solve problems after the damage was done impressed the authorities, and a Wetlands Alliance was formed. Cindy then put together the first Pennsylvania Conference on Wetlands at Penn State Harrisburg. It was so successful that the Department of Environmental Protection took it over and held annual conferences at Shippensburg University for many years. AAS also opposed commercialization of the state parks.

Cindy Dunn had been developing her influence in the environmental community. She was the Pennsylvania Director of the Chesapeake Bay Alliance. She was active in the Pennsylvania Audubon Society, and she was elected as a Director of the National Audubon Society. She then became an aide to John Oliver, Secretary of DCNR. When National Audubon initiated state offices instead of regional direction, Cindy became the first Director of the Pennsylvania Audubon Office.

Jane Earle took office in the last decade of the 20th century. She worked for the Department of Environmental Protection in mine reclamation. Her strong interests in amphibians and other forms of swamp life were reflected in the field trips. It was during this time that Bob Diethorn developed a memorial to a faithful deceased member, John Loyd, by planting trees and wildflowers in the cloverleaf at Route 83 and Route 15. AAS also became involved with the Alaska Coalition and NAS Activist, showing strong conservation support.

As President from 1992-1994, Bob Diethorn continued his emphasis upon the conservation efforts of the chapter. Earth Day became an important celebration of the chapter, and he built demonstration materials so that AAS could go into the community with its message of a safe environment. Bird in the Balance was initiated. This became the foundation for the Important Bird Areas Program of Pennsylvania; and PA was the first to establish this important project that is ongoing. Bob also participated in the Cumberland County Conservation of Open Space Task Force and helped plant the Countryside Stewardship Exchange. This evolved into a Cumberland County Greenway Plan in 2000. It was also during this period, and with the strong leadership of Bob, that the 21 acres that became Trout Run was acquired. This property is the only land owned and operated by AAS.

Wendy Plowman became the leader with a burning desire to bring to fruition her work on obtaining the property bordering the Yellow Breeches above the Boiling Springs pool. Her tireless work in battling Amtrak over a right-of-way and in working with the Natural Lands Trust to obtain monetary support for purchasing the 52 acres of land that was named for the beneficiary became the Wittlinger Preserve. This was then deeded to South Middletown Township with the proviso that it remain a passive preserve, and AAS had the right to use it for educational purposes. AAS also did more tree planting along a moved Appalachian Trail. In cooperation with King's Gap, a family field day was held. The Education Chairman, Bob Schell, received a grant for training teachers for environmental studies, especially on a global basis.

Bob Schell moved up from education Chair to the presidency in 1996. Due to his educational background and international interests, he emphasized the global aspects of the environment, particularly the rain forest depletion and the increasing impact of the burgeoning population. He also places emphasis upon the need for political action to address the growing environmental problems. It was at this time that Bob tapped Cathy Clark to start a Bluebird program that grew and grew until it had a vast membership and influence in the community. Bob also developed Appalachian Audubon brochures to gain new members. Work on Trout Run, under the dynamic leadership of Lorrie Preston, continued and trees and shrubs were planted and trails developed with the help of Tressler Boys and neighborhood people.

Bob Diethorn became the first president to serve more than one two year term. He agreed to serve a single year in 98 to 99. During this time, AAS fought to prevent the damming of Swatara Creek, and won. It was involved in the National Audubon Population and Habitat program. It also initiated the sale of shade grown coffee to its members to stimulate tree planting in the tropics where coffee is grown. AAS also lent support for the new state office at Wildwood, and held a Walk for Parks fundraiser for the purchase of computers and software for the educational area of Wildwood. Lorrie Preston and Bob continued work at Trout Run, building four native plant gardens. Lorrie also brought AAS into Country Market's annual spring garden festival to display its program and seek new members. Waddel Robey re-energized the Conservation Committee and acted as liaison to the State Office.

Dale Darkes agreed to give up another "Go" as Treasurer to serve as leader for one year 1999-2000. Dale had been on the Board for 20 years at that time and continues on the board today.

It was during this period that "Kinter Point" was established at the end of the boardwalk at Wildwood Lake to remember Ralph's contributions to wetlands and the wildflowers at the sanctuary. Besides this, AAS contributed \$500 for the preservation of Millers Gap in Cumberland County. Members also testified before the Department of Parks and Recreation to limit ATV use and to ask for more control. This resulted in a ruling several years later that went along with these suggestions. AAS, along with the State Audubon Office, testified for the need to limit white-tailed deer populations since the deer were destroying much of the woodland due to overpopulation and development pressure contributing to deer habitat loss. This led in 2001 to lengthening doe season for hunting.

Terry Neumyer assumed the presidency in the 21st century. An avid birder, Terry had been a trip leader to Cape May and then Presque Isle. Terry gave many slide programs of his trips around the United States and abroad while he chased over deserts and through tropics to take pictures of birds and birder friends.

During 2001 under the organization and with the enthusiasm of Grace Randolph, AAS won national recognition for gaining new memberships through various new member initiatives. Jen Johnson, former AAS Hog Island Ecology Camp Scholar and active AAS member, became the first student representative on the Board of Directors, serving during her junior and senior year in high school. With Waddel Robey's assistance, Jen and her Environmental Studies class at Lower Dauphin High School developed a web site on the Reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act.

The presidency was vacant from May - Dec. 2002 when the Directors asked Jan Getgood to assume chapter leadership. She continued in the presidency until May 2005 when our current chapter president, Ramsay Koury was elected to the helm. Known for bringing outstanding program speakers to AAS, Ramsay, as 2nd PA Breeding Bird Atlas coordinator for Cumberland County blocks is attempting to have as many members involved in this exciting 5-year effort as possible. Ramsay is also now famous for his willingness to volunteer as Driver TWO years in a row for the NJ Audubon's World Series of Birding first place Youth Team known as the Space-Coast Coastal Cuckoos. Ramsay has developed a very nice program and field trip brochure and has activated a new AAS website at www.appalachianaudubon.org.