

Pennsylvania Forest Stewards News



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Chair's Column

By Nancy Baker, PA Forest Stewards
Steering Committee Chair, '00

Dear Friends,

It was so good to see and to speak with many of you in person at the Forest Landowners Conference in March! Indeed, I missed a couple of presentations when I was loath to cut a discussion short. For me, despite the convenience of Zoom, person-to-person conversations remain the best way to connect; I'm more than a little dependent on looking someone in the eye and reading body language to truly understand and detect meaning and motivation.

The conference made it possible for me to continue a "listening tour" I began at the beginning of this term as your chairperson. Given the opportunity to speak briefly at DCNR's Bureau of Forestry Winter Meeting in February, I fortuitously had the chance to listen to a number of service foresters from across the state talk about their interactions with landowners. Exchanges with Game Commission and conservation district personnel, with watershed and Master Gardener coordinators have shown how our programs overlap. In conversations with many of you by email, telephone, yes—Zoom, and in-person, I have found your insight and ideas very helpful. And while I do have some initial, broad questions to begin any discussion, it's the meandering nature of subsequent dialogue that lets me see where your excitement, your impact, your ideas, and your concerns lie.

One point that has appeared repeatedly is outreach. It's hard. It's not easy to find a way to approach someone. If, at the mailbox, you greet your new neighbor who owns a ton of forestland and suggest between, "Good morning" and, "Terrific spring weather!" that you have some peer-to-peer training in woodland management to share, that news may elicit some anxiety on their part. Even if there's a long-term relationship involved—my parents and your grandparents worked adjacent farms—that doesn't guarantee that we'll agree on how the world works.

Preliminary data from the new 2021 PA Forest Landowners Survey indicates that the top five objectives for owners of woodlands include: wildlife, beauty, solitude, enjoyment of land ownership, and recreation (not including hunting). I wonder, do you agree with me and detect a degree of territoriality in these responses? I think we tend to build not just real fences, but psychic barriers around our land and possessions, and that we go "on-alert" when someone encroaches on what we perceive as "ours."

A Women and Their Woods participant once came to me with a puzzle. She had a plan and a consulting forester. She had diligently worked to free her property from an epidemic of invasives only to realize that her surrounding neighbors harbored an alarming jungle of nasty

seed sources. She instinctively knew that approaching any of them, especially if she presented them with a problem, would be counterproductive. What to do?

Here was my suggestion: ask your forester to tour your land on a Sunday afternoon with you. Ask if you may bring others along (and volunteer to pay him or her). Invite your neighbors to tag along on your land (you know they're dying to see what's happening over the fence on your side!). Make sure you have cookies and coffee at the end of the tour. Start any discussion by listening.

It works! You've invited the other person into your territory rather than encroaching on theirs. It doesn't have to be fancy; it just has to be welcoming! (It even sounds like a proposal for a Walk in Penn's Woods on October 1, doesn't it?)

But the real point of all this talk is the careful listening. Listening to you has helped me clarify some of the pinch points for PA Forest Stewards volunteers. Careful listening will help us move the program into the future. Please give me a holler if you would like to join the discussion. I'll be at the regional meetings in Tioga and Armstrong Counties this summer, and I will have my ears on. I hope I see you there!

Best regards,
Nancy

bakerii@epix.net or 570-746-1844

PA Forest Stewards Regional Summer Meetings Are Back!

After a four-year hiatus, summer meetings will be happening this year! All Pennsylvania Forest Stewards and their guests are invited to join us at one or both of this year's events: Friday, June 30, 4-7:30 p.m. at Dale Spitzer's property in Tioga County, and Friday, July 14, 4-7:30 p.m. at Timothy Troup's property in Armstrong County.

Details and registration information on page 3.



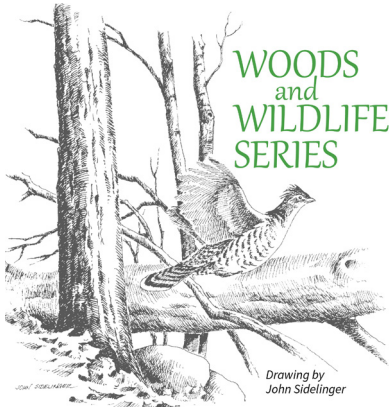
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Singing the Blues: Are Some Birds Really Blue?

Article and Photos by Mike and Laura Jackson, PA Forest Stewards, Class of '00



This article is part of a series exploring animals and their dependency on forests. Each article blends personal experiences with factual information and will challenge you to look closely in your woodlot for evidence that you are a habitat provider for the species.

“Be like the bluebird who never is blue, for he knows from his upbringing what singing can do.”

– Cole Porter, *Anything Goes Musical*

It's a chilly March morning, just a few minutes before dawn. The dawn chorus has very few musicians this time of year, so the Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) takes center stage with its loud and persistent voice. When we listen more intently, we sometimes hear the song of the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). It's best described as a warbling song of several phrases, low-pitched, with just one to three short notes. Although this song is an example of an Eastern Bluebird's "loud song," it's easy to miss when other avian songsters are belting out their melodies from higher perches.

Later in the spring, when bluebirds are nesting, we sometimes hear the bluebird's "soft song," also called the whisper song. Yes, bluebirds can whisper! Mike built a bluebird nest box for each of the four posts at the corners of our vegetable garden, so the males sometimes sit in the nearby fruit trees and sing softly to the females incubating eggs. Does the song reassure the brooding females that all is well? We like to think so. It's a soothing song and it adds to our sense of well-being as we tend our vegetable seedlings.

Cole Porter knew that the "bluebird is never blue," but he was referring to "feeling blue." In reality, bluebirds aren't blue



This Eastern Bluebird nested in one of the garden boxes that Mike built. It has a metal hole restrictor to deter squirrels from enlarging the hole. The large roof of the Peterson design deters raccoon and cat predation and shades the young, so they are less likely to overheat.

in color, they just appear to be blue. Like the sky, bluebird feathers don't contain blue pigment. It's all about the scattering of light rays.

Laura used to show her students this simple demonstration to help them understand why the sky is blue: She would shine a bright light from a slide projector through a glass container of white, watered-down milk. Voila! The milk turned blue. Was it magic? No. It's just that the light beam scattered when it hit the tiny globs of fat and protein suspended in the milk, and the blue wavelength was reflected to our eyes.



Eastern forest landowners recognize the importance of Blue Jays as keystone species in our oak forests. They not only cache more acorns than they eat, but they carry the acorns long distances, helping to grow more oak trees and enlarge forests.

The sky is blue because sunlight is scattered by particles of dust in the atmosphere. If we had no atmospheric dust, the sky would look dark all the time. At sunset and sunrise, the light from the sun has to travel further through the Earth's atmosphere, so we see mainly orange and red. On a sunny day, when the sun is overhead, we have the beautiful blue...Laura's favorite color.

Now, we are singing the blues—there aren't any bird species that have blue feathers. It's just an illusion. As light waves interact with the extremely tiny keratin structures (called nanostructures) and air pockets of a bluebird's feathers, the nanostructures allow most of the light wave to pass through, but the blue wavelength is blocked and bounces back to our eyes. The blue color of a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) is also an illusion. So is the beautiful blue of the Indigo Bunting.¹



The brilliant flash of blue and the cheery song of Indigo Buntings make them one of our favorite forest birds.

People don't value Eastern Bluebirds just because of their looks. This medium-sized bird is also highly prized because it eats so many insects—especially caterpillars that it feeds to its young. Bluebirds often catch insects on the ground in spring and summer, so they are attracted to yards and golf courses. In the fall and winter their diet changes to fruit, such as winterberry holly, juniper, dogwood, hackberries, and sumac. Because they feed on the ground during nesting season, they avoid brushy areas. We rarely see bluebirds in our mature woods, but we did find them nesting in our shelterwood cut for several years. The loggers left snags and den trees, which the bluebirds used, since they are secondary

"Blue" Birds, continued on page 3

Attention PA Forest Stewards and Guests:

You Are Invited to Regional Summer Meetings; RSVP by June 15

Since we had a Forest Landowners Conference this year, we are planning to have two regional meetings this summer for PA Forest Stewards and their guests. The first meeting will be hosted by Dale Spitzer on June 30, 4-7:30 p.m., in Lawrenceville, Tioga County. Dale has been working on timber stand improvement cuts in stands that are nearly 30 years old and were pastures. He planted a conifer stand in the 1990s and will have another conifer planting this spring. He also has edge cuts bordered with switch grass, ponds, and vernal pools.

The second meeting will be hosted by Timothy Troup on July 14, 4-7:30 p.m., at



his property in Apollo, Armstrong County. Tim has been mechanically controlling invasive shrubs for years on his property. Tim also has a wood shop which he built and utilized for his career as a contrac-

tor. We are hoping to explore some tools and techniques for wood processing and building in the shop.

Both meetings will start with walks to features on the properties. Then participants will enjoy a meal where the Center will provide an entrée and drinks, and PA Forest Stewards are asked to bring side dishes and desserts to share. After the meal we will provide updates on the PA Forest Stewards program.

Please RSVP for either meeting to Jeff Osborne at 814-867-5982 or jao5194@psu.edu by June 15 for exact program addresses and to receive any meeting updates.

“Blue” Birds, continued from page 2

cavity nesters. They don’t make the cavity—they rely on cavities made by other species like woodpeckers.

Since bluebirds prefer open habitat with little or no understory and sparse ground cover, many people have put bluebird nest boxes in their yard, but orchards, small clearcuts in oak-hickory forests, and pine plantations with little ground cover are also great places for bluebirds to nest.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission sells bluebird box kits that are easy to assemble and make a nice project to do with youngsters. You can purchase them from Howard Nursery or your regional Game Commission office.

We put bluebird boxes in our yard and at the edge of our woods, hoping to attract other animals. We’ve found nests of nuthatches, chickadees, flying squirrels, and deer mice in our bluebird boxes.



Uncle Mike helped Amelia and Silas build bluebird houses to put in their yard.

It’s a good idea to clean out the boxes each fall since bluebirds will sometimes use them for shelter during cold winter nights. Mice also like to build nests in them, so we check our boxes each spring and make sure they are empty to entice a bluebird.

A bluebird box has a hole no larger than 1.5 inches in diameter—any larger and European Starlings could take over. Unfortunately, English Sparrows and House Wrens will use bluebird boxes—they sometimes kill the female and the babies, which is heart-breaking to find. Other predators like cats, raccoons, and black rat snakes will also kill bluebirds, so be sure to add a predator guard around the hole and put a baffle on the pole to make it harder for predators to access the nest.

Ironically, bluebird feathers aren’t blue, but they lay blue eggs, with variations ranging from white to vivid blue. American Robins are in the thrush family, just like bluebirds, so it isn’t surprising that both species lay blue eggs. So do other birds in the thrush family—Wood Thrush and Veeries. Quite a few other birds lay eggs that are blue with brown speckles. Blue eggs have a pigment that is in biliverdin, a chemical derived from hemoglobin—the red pigment in blood.

There are two theories as to why birds that aren’t blue lay blue eggs. One is that blue absorbs a suitable amount of heat to help the chick develop but blocks harmful ultraviolet radiation.² The other is based on studies that showed male robins take better care of chicks that hatched from brighter blue eggs. The



After Eastern Bluebird females line the nest cavity with dried grass, they lay three to seven blue eggs, although sometimes the eggs are white and even more rarely pink. We have found white eggs, but never pink ones.

research team deduced that chicks from brighter blue eggs were healthier and stronger, and thus likelier to survive.³

The next time you see an Eastern Bluebird, Blue Jay, or Indigo Bunting, we hope you take a few seconds to appreciate the rarity of the color blue in nature and the complexity of feather structure that produces that striking blue color. Better yet, see if you can attract more bluebirds to your yard. The Bluebird Society offers a lot of information about bluebirds that you can access at www.thebsp.org.

References:

¹ <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/how-birds-make-colorful-feathers>

² <https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/why-do-some-birds-lay-blue-eggs>

³ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/05/120514122838.htm>

Two-day Conference Draws Over 420

A Look Back at the 2023 Forest Landowners Conference

Over 420 woodland owners, professionals, students, and interested people gathered at the Penn Stater Hotel and Conference Center in State College, PA for the 5th Biennial Forest Landowners Conference March 24 and 25.

From the pre-conference tours and workshops to the 74 presentations during nine learning sessions, three outstanding keynote speakers, and dozens of forest-related exhibits, attendees found inspiration, resources, education, and networking to help good things happen in our woods—in turn resulting in healthier, resilient, and more sustainable forests.

The James C. Finley Center for Private Forests thanks our many partners that made the 2023 event a huge success and look forward to the 6th Biennial Forest Landowners Conference in March 2025.



Clockwise from top left: Exhibit Hall; opening keynote speaker Jennie Stephens; Friday presentation on creating and updating a dynamic management plan; Woodmobile exhibit; PA Forest Stewards breakfast.



Beginner's Help, continued from page 5

exclusively for doe hunting for young hunters, so Jess (much to his chagrin) had to watch the bucks pass by.

As we walked together down the pipeline right of way, me in the lead with Jess following as he carried the one gun we brought with us—no use carrying two guns when Jess would take any shot we had—I saw the movement I was hoping for about 50 yards ahead.

Kneeling as I stopped, I whispered, “Hey Pal...there she is, just past that small tree on the left side of the path.”

“Where? I don’t know where you mean.”

“Easy, now, just take your time and look through the scope at the first tree on the left. See the front half of the deer sticking out from behind the trunk?”

“Oh, yeah...there it is, I see her, I think I can hit her...”

BANG!

In the moment of the shot, in the rain on the side hill as I waited to see what the deer would do, I flashed back to the other deer we had seen and missed, to the raccoon I had let Jess shoot as a reward for hunting hard all day, to the miles we had walked and the fun we had together. There was the time we took over my friend Art’s stand right after lunch and saw seven bucks in two hours, one an 11-point that we got one shot at

that went awry. There were the several does I pushed past Jess as he stood with my brother that also were missed. There was the one doe that we got a shot at on the railroad grade that hit the deer in the front leg. That one turned out to be great practice in tracking as we followed her for the rest of that day and part of the next, never to see the doe again.

As the moments shortened back to real time, I could see the doe lying at the base of the tree. We had finally succeeded. Jess was happy and I was glad he was. I took the gun and put another round in the chamber as we walked toward the deer. He kept chattering the whole way...

“Did I really get her? Is she dead? Will we have to shoot her again? How do we clean her up?”

He watched me as I slowly cleaned the nice 90-pound animal (well-hit in the ribs just behind the heart) intent on everything as I showed how to make the cuts, let him hold the heart and liver, and finally dressing out the anal regions. “Gross!”

I cannot say if Jess got ever got in touch with his natural self in the woods. In fact, the chances are, he did not or maybe he has yet to do it, but each year since he turned about 15 we seem to get away less and less. His schedule seems filled with work, school, and

social engagements. He is 18 and has announced he will “get back to me” on whether he will hunt with me this year. After hearing this, the question is, did I fail; will he ever hunt or fish on his own? Did the competition from cell phones, iPods, and video games prove too much for me?

I really don’t know what Jess got out of our time in the woods; I cannot know what he thinks. I can, however, see that he is whatever he is in part because of our time together. I also see that these times changed my view of the natural world unmistakably. I know now that somehow, the whole time, I was doing the bonding for me as much as for Jess. I wanted to see the world through his eyes, to see things fresh and new again. To enjoy the first sighting of a black bear up close, to watch as the snow fell around the flock of turkeys that walked calmly up to my calls, to see the porcupine and raccoon and pheasant fall to the first shots by my best friend.

So now, nearly 20 years later, what may have started as an altruistic gesture, taking Jess to the woods has had results that were totally selfish. I got much more than I ever gave.

So, if you have a chance, take a kid to the woods. You won’t regret it!

The Back Page: Reflections from a Sporting Life and Other Ramblings

By Bob Slagter, PA Forest Steward and Retired Steering Committee Chair, Class of '08

The Pre-Ramble

Dotyville is a crossroads that used to be a town in the Pennsylvania portion of the Appalachians. It is also a state of mind. You can walk old fields and see by the now-random-looking stone piles where the old farmhouses used to be. You can feel the stream flowing through the valley as it has since the last ice age. I heard from my uncle years ago there used to be a post office and store along the railroad line...he had lived there on a farm in the summers as a boy. So the Slagters have a history at this crossroads. When you go online, there is a reference that will show Dotyville, but the only thing you will see are the roofs of a few dwellings, one of which is the cabin that is home base for these writings. That is a good thing, if you would rather see woods than structures.

It has been fun to be in the woods for most of my life, and writing about the memories of the time spent there has only increased the wonderful woodland images for me. I recently pulled my memories into a book. Now, I know everyone and his family have tried writing an outdoor book. If there is a point of separation, it may be that this is a work of creative non-fiction...it combines remembrances of what was and the semi-fantasy of what may have been. As I compile my back page ramblings for this newsletter, I plan to draw on these writings and hope the reader will find their own personal, virtual images of life in the outdoors from reading my musings and memories. The stories herein are memory-based, fanciful images created during woodland travels. They are meant to entertain me and, if lucky, bring enjoyment to everyone.

So, if you will, take my literary hand and we will cruise the woodlands together. Don't worry, boredom is all there is to fear...and you can alleviate that simply by tossing the reading aside. But give it a chance—you just might enjoy the trip.

Beginner's Help

"I wrote Beginner's Help about 20 years ago, but I hope it's still relevant and enjoyable today." – Bob

We walked through chest-high weeds thick as could be and I feared for a moment he would panic at what the imposing tangle must look like from his

height. He had let go of my hand and had fallen a handful of steps behind and he was so small, less than three years in the world, that he surely would panic at any moment. Just as I started back to reassure him, I heard the sweetest little chuckle coming from down in the weeds. Then as he drew nearer, the chuckling turned into a full-blown laugh. He loved it! Well, I'll be...

"Hey pal...you havin' fun?"

"(Chuckle) DEEDA, DEEDA, (chuckle)..."

He was calling the name he made up for me as soon as he could speak, "Deeda," and he was clearly loving one of the first walks we had taken together in the woods with Jess doing his own walking. His gammy and I had been carrying him in a backpack through streets and woods for at least a year, but this was his first time on his own. He was getting a whole different perspective on things. I couldn't be happier that he was enjoying his run through this little jungle.

This was the first solo trip for my grandson and newest best friend to our cabin. I had gotten up before dawn, as I usually do, thinking Jess would need time to get his motor running. But I was really surprised to see him sitting straight up in his crib smiling at me when I came into the room that he and his mom shared. It was the summer before his third birthday and he had gotten the message from his mom and me that we would be going for our first guys weekend without Mom or Gammy. I had longed to show Jess my view of the natural world since that first phone call



In this photo taken nearly 20 years ago, Bob Slagter and his grandson Jess get ready for a day of hunting together.

announcing Jess' arrival. It is such a big part of who I am and the center of activity for most of my free time.

It seems I had been in the woods since I could walk. My dad was born into a hunting and fishing family (his dad made at least part of his living as a market hunter and his mother was the offspring of a Mohawk Indian and a French fur trapper). With my brother and me in tow, Dad would take his beagles out for rabbits and go sit on a stump during warm afternoons for squirrels, and hunt deer after Thanksgiving. We fished all the spring months and went camping and fishing in Canada many summers. The outdoors is in my blood, naturally, and I wanted to bring the natural side out of my boy. I always felt it was the perfect way to round him out as a human being. I never knew that the real reason for these trips and lessons would not be realized by me until much later...

"Hey, Buddy, how about stopping one more place to look for a deer on the way back to the cabin?"

"Oh, man, it's raining, Deeda, and we been out here all day getting nothing but wet."

"That's the lesson for the day, Pal. When you are sure you are done, whether it's fishing or hunting or whatever, make one more cast with the rod or make one more stop to look for a deer or turkey."

"That's crazy. Then you always stay out and never go home!"

"No, after you are sure you are done, then make just one more stop. In this case, we'll stop close to where we started this morning, just over the hill from the tree stand. We're looking for deer feeding along the side hill as the sun goes down. Ok, Bud?"

"OK, but this is the last stop, right?"

With a positive shake of the head, a big smile, and an "Attaboy," I aimed the mule up the lane that would deposit us on top on the hill above Caldwell Creek Valley. This morning, we spent our opening hours in the tree stand just above where I parked. The day was typical for the first day, cold and damp. The tree stand was in a great location as we proved in the early season when Jess and I watched three different bucks cross within gun range of the stand. The early season is

Beginner's Help, continued on page 4

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The James C. Finley Center for Private Forests
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University Park, PA 16802

Applications for Class of 2023 PA Forest Stewards Will Arrive in Mailboxes in Mid-April

If you nominated someone for the Class of 2023 Pennsylvania Forest Stewards training at Ligonier Camp and Conference Center, Ligonier Township, September 7-10, we ask you to check with them and encourage them to submit their application by the June 1 deadline.

Over 100 application packets will go out this year, and we are looking forward to a full class eager to learn and join the ranks of PA Forest Stewards volunteers.



Dates for Your Calendar

June 30, 4-7:30 p.m. PA Forest Stewards Regional Meeting. Dale Spitzer's property, Lawrenceville, Tioga County. RSVP requested (Jeff Osborne, jao5194@psu.edu or call 814-867-5982).

July 14, 4-7:30 p.m. PA Forest Stewards Regional Meeting. Timothy Troup's property, Apollo, Armstrong County. RSVP requested (Jeff Osborne, jao5194@psu.edu or call 814-867-5982).

September 7-10. PA Forest Stewards Class of 2023 Training. Ligonier Camp and Conference Center, Ligonier Township, Westmoreland County, PA. Applications due by June 1, 2023.

For more information about other upcoming events, check the Finley Center website:

ecosystems.psu.edu/private-forests

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