

Pennsylvania Forest Stewards News



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Chair's Column

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

Dear Friends,

Welcome to 2023! This New Year I find myself following the illustrious Bob Slagter as Chair of the Pennsylvania Forest Stewards Steering Committee. Of course, my first task is to thank Bob for his many encouraging thoughts, words, and deeds during a tenure that presented multiple challenges—it's exceptionally hard to keep a community together without any possibility of face-to-face communication, let alone during the unexpected loss of Jim Finley—and Bob has managed to do so with grace, humor, and an especially acute insight into human nature.

Bob's columns in this newsletter are the least of his work; just "Google" him and you'll discover a PA Tree Farmer of the Year, his work with young students, his generosity with the Foundation for Sustainable Forestry, his model forest legacy plan, his woodworking skills, his fishing passion. Bob exemplifies what we see as the ideal forest steward—he's kept on learning after his initial training and used that learning not only for himself and his own land, but has been willing and able to influence other landowners and the greater Penn's Woods landscape to move toward a more resilient and sustainable future.

Indeed, that's what I see as my task for the next two years; this great Pennsylvania Forest Stewards program has trained 798 (just two short of 800!) Stewards in the 32 years since Jim Finley hijacked a pattern from the Vermont

Covert's wildlife habitat peer-to-peer program and converted it to forestry. You have emerged from your training with a passion for the woods; you (importantly!) know what you don't know but know where to find answers. You have diligently worked on your own land. You have worked with Pennsylvania's Woodland Owners Associations, land trusts, conservation districts, planning commissions, legislators, hunting clubs, civic clubs, peers, neighbors, friends, and family. You have made a difference.

We have a terrific foundation! Now, how can we do better?

Any organization needs to reflect on where it has been, where it is, and where it's going, to successfully transit changing times. We know that our woods have changed in the last 30+ years: 1991 knew no emerald ash borer, no hemlock woolly adelgid, no never-ending litany of invasive plants. Markets have changed: paper mills were a market for cull and few logs were exported in the 1990s, but who knew carbon markets might drive action? Landowners/audiences have changed: we are shifting from Silent Generation and Boomer ownership to a younger crowd of GenX, Millennials, and even GenZ managers. And I don't need to tell you that technology has been transformed!

My challenge, and yours too, is to keep the wonderful and successful parts of this program that have been a true template for other peer-to-peer organizations across the nation, and to light up the new opportunities we have to enable us to move forward effectively in a new environment. I can benchmark against other peer-to-peer organizations across the states, I can ask academic, governmental, NGO entities, foresters, and landowners for their ideas. I will do my homework, but I don't have the answers yet; I need your help!

I hope I see you at the 2023 Forest Landowners Conference at the Penn



Nancy Baker

Stater, March 24 and 25. Don't forget to join us for the PA Forest Stewards breakfast on Saturday morning, and please come to me with your ideas about the potential of the Pennsylvania Forest Stewards; I will have an open mind for anything you offer—there are no bad ideas here! And you can always reach me at bakerii@epix.net. I look forward to an inventive and successful future with you.

Best regards,
Nancy

And yes, you can find more about me too by Googling Nancy Baker, forestry!

A Reminder to All Stewards Attending the Forest Landowners Conference...

We invite you to join us Saturday morning at 7 a.m. for a very special time together at the **PA Forest Stewards Breakfast Buffet and Meeting!** To reserve your ticket(s), email us your name and names of any guests who will be attending with you to PrivateForests@psu.edu or call 1-800-235-9473. We look forward to seeing you at the Penn Stater March 24-25!



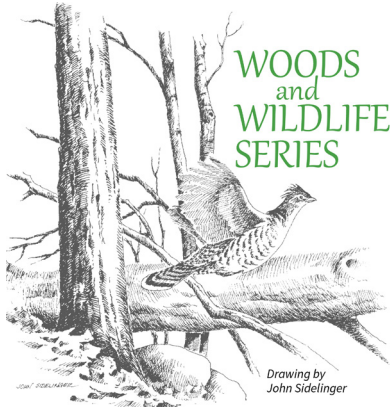
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Give A Hoot About Owls

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.

Like other birds of prey, owls are predators—they feed on meat, either freshly killed or scavenged. Since most owls are nocturnal and rarely seen, there are many myths and superstitions about them. We've had the rare privilege to raise young owls that were brought to our local veterinarian who had a permit to rehabilitate wildlife. As his wildlife rehab assistants for over 20 years, we spent many hours caring for owls. They are some of our favorite birds of prey and deserve to be admired for their superb adaptations in finding, catching, and eating prey under the cover of darkness. Fortunately, all owls are protected in Pennsylvania, since we now understand they play important roles in forest ecosystems.

Eight species of owls can be found in Pennsylvania¹, but we're going to limit our story to ones that we've interacted with on a close-up and personal basis: Great-horned Owls, Eastern Screech-owls, Barred Owls, and Saw-whet Owls. These owls are forest denizens and permanent residents of Penn's Woods.

We had to be very careful when raising Great-horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*), especially when they were learning to fly. Their strong, sharp talons raked Mike's face more than once, drawing blood, as they flew by us in the flight cage. Great-horned Owls are nicknamed "Tigers of the Woods" because of their ferocity and superb hunting ability. We quickly learned that their talons were their pri-



Owls, like this Great-horned Owl, have huge eyes with extremely large retinas that make their vision 150 times more efficient than human sight in dim light.²

mary defense, not their beak. Most often, they tended to click their beak rapidly while trying to slash us with their talons. If we cornered them in the flight cage they would fall on their back and project their feet, using their talons for protection. We wore heavy leather gloves and were very careful when we grasped their legs.

These magnificent birds are more fluff than weight. Their dense, soft plumage makes owls look heavier and bigger. Males and females have similar markings, but the females are usually larger. Great-horned Owls get their name from their large ear tufts, or "horns," that they can erect at will. Many owls have these feathery tufts, which make them look larger but have nothing to do with hearing. Their real ears are holes located



We fed mice (which they swallow whole) to this young Great-Horned Owl.

on the sides of their head, the hidden openings covered by feathers. Some owls have ear openings that are asymmetrical, which helps them locate sounds.

Since owls have fixed eyes, they can't move their eyes around like we do. To compensate, owls will bob their heads when trying to focus. They have to move their head to look up, down, or to the side in order to judge the position and distance of prey or their surroundings. Fortunately, they have very flexible necks and can turn their heads 270 degrees—not quite a full head turn. It's amazing that owls can find and catch their prey even in total darkness.

All owls are like the original stealth aircraft. Their silent flight while dodging trees and branches is a result of their feather structure. The leading edges of their primary feathers are serrated and extremely soft, while the trailing edge is fluffy. Their wings are also very lightweight with a large surface area, so they don't have to do much flapping. Since their flight is so quiet, they can glide silently to attack their prey.

Many of the 11 Great-horned Owls that we rehabbed were hit by cars while feeding on road-killed skunks. Not the most pleasant smell, but it didn't deter the owls. They also kill rats, mice, voles, smaller birds, squirrels, cats, snakes... just about any animal smaller than they are.

Another nickname for Great-horned Owls is "hoot owl," because of their calls: usually five deep, resonant hoots that we often hear starting in October, when they set up their breeding territory. Even though the female is larger, her hoot is shorter and a higher pitch than the male's.³ They mate for life and work together to raise their young. They nest in hollow trees, on rocky ledges, and sometimes take over other nests used by hawks, eagles, herons, or crows.

Although we raised almost a dozen Great-horned Owls, we raised just four Barred Owls (*Strix varia*). The young Barred Owl shown at the top of page 3 was taken from the wild illegally. We persuaded the family to release it for rehabilitation, but the owl was blind and succumbed for unknown reasons.

Barred Owls are also large birds that hang out in deep woods. When we hear Barred Owls calling on Tussey Mountain

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This young Barred Owl is strengthening its flight muscles by flapping its wings.

near our house, we wonder if they are some that we did successfully rehabilitate. Unlike Great-horned Owls which limit their calls to the breeding season, Barred Owls are vocal throughout the year. Their hoots are distinctive and have a rhythm that has been put to the words, "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" Turkey hunters often imitate the call since Wild Turkeys will gobble when they hear it.

We've heard Barred Owls in the middle of the night, on cloudy days, and at dusk. We think their calls are one of the most delightful sounds in the woods, especially when several Barred Owls start up a loud calling competition that sounds like excited monkeys. Barred Owls really show off during courtship in late winter



Eastern Screech-owls are common and widespread in Pennsylvania.

and may resort to a raucous collection of hoots, cackles, gurgles, and caws. They are definitely entertaining!!

Barred owls don't have ear tufts, but they do have a distinct facial disk made of strong hair-like feathers that act as a sound collector (think satellite receiver) to concentrate and send the sound to the owl's ears. Look at the other owl photos and you'll see that facial disks are common in owls. The Barred Owl is the only owl in Pennsylvania that has totally dark eyes, and the feather pattern is unique.

The dark streaking of barred lines on the feathers gives the owl its name.

As rehabbers, we cared for 34 Eastern Screech-owls (*Megascops asio*). Most babies were rescued from trees that were cut by loggers. The loggers didn't know the young were in the cavity until they felled the tree. Screech Owls often nest in tree cavities and abandoned woodpecker holes, as well as large birdhouses. Many years ago, we mounted a Wood Duck box on a pole in our woods along our lane that Screech Owls nested in for several years before honey bees moved in. A few years later it was reclaimed by a Screech Owl that successfully nested. Who would have thought that honey bees would compete with owls?

These small owls come in two color forms: grayish brown (more common in northern Pennsylvania) or reddish brown.² We've raised broods that contain young of both colors—the color is not related to age, sex, or season, but appears to be a genetic variation that provides good camouflage in either color, since the mottled plumage resembles tree bark. Of the ones we raised, 17 were grayish brown and 17 were reddish brown.

We don't hear a Screech Owl calling very often, so it's always a treat when we hear one at night. They make a spooky-sounding tremolo and a very distinctive whinny sound. We've never heard them actually screech. Screech Owls are declining in Pennsylvania due to a variety of reasons: they are often hit by cars, killed by pesticides, and often fly into windows.

The young Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) pictured at the right



This adult Screech Owl is sunbathing on a cold winter day. Adults only weigh about 5 to 7 ounces! The prominent feathery tufts make it look larger.

was found on the ground by a forester on May 18, 2000. It was quite a surprise since we didn't know they nested in Bedford County. We were asked to raise it and felt it was an honor to care for this beautiful owl. A month later it was determined ready for release, so we returned it to Buchanan State Forest where it was found. We fed it one last meal of wax worms before it flew into the forest. Saw-whet Owls make a short "too, too, too, too" call, which reminded settlers of someone sharpening a saw on a whetstone.⁴

Owls, continued on page 5



Northern Saw-whet Owls are the smallest owls in Pennsylvania, weighing only 2 to 5 ounces.

Seeking Hosts for Regional PA Forest Stewards Summer Meetings

We aim to resume holding regional PA Forest Stewards meetings, with two planned for the summer of 2023. We are seeking forest landowners interested in hosting the meeting at their property and showcasing some of their recent management activities. We would like to have one meeting in Bedford, Blair, Cambria, or Westmoreland County, and another meeting in Bradford, Lycoming, or Tioga County. The meeting usually starts in mid-afternoon with a woods walk, followed by an evening potluck meal and a short PA Forest Stewards update. In the past, these meetings have drawn between 15 and 50 fellow volunteers and guests, so hosts should have parking for about 20 vehicles and an outdoor area to meet and eat. Please reach out to Jeff Osborne if interested in hosting a meeting: jao5194@psu.edu or 814-867-5982.



Two 2019 regional meetings brought dozens of PA Forest Stewards together for good food and an informative woods walk.

2023 PA Forest Stewards Basic Training: Time to Nominate!

It is time again to plan for an amazing weekend of learning among landowners and friends! We are looking ahead to September 7-10, 2023 for our next Pennsylvania Forest Stewards Basic Training at **Ligonier Camp and Conference Center** in Ligonier Township, Westmoreland County (note this year's location) and we need your help to find those landowners and friends. We're looking for outstanding landowners and others who have a strong stewardship ethic, would benefit from and enjoy the material, and, importantly, would help get the word out about the importance of good forest care. These folks will join us for a long week-

end—participants will arrive Thursday afternoon and will learn and enjoy time together through Sunday afternoon. Prior to the weekend training, the class will review the online course “Woodland Stewardship: Management Practices for Landowners” that will introduce them to the various topics covered in the weekend together. During the weekend, the class will spend time in and out of the classroom diving deeper into forest management and stewardship. Enclosed with this newsletter is a nomination form. Seek out and nominate those folks who will both use and share what they learn. Nominations are due by March 17, 2023.



Submit your 2023 nominees for the four-day PA Forest Stewards training in September!



PA Forest Stewards 2023 Impact Survey: A Reminder to Track Your Outreach Hours

As we stand at the beginning of 2023, we want to remind all PA Forest Steward volunteers that this is a survey year. Every other year in October, we send each of you a survey to help us learn about—and quantify—the overall impact PA Forest Stewards have promoting forest stewardship across Pennsylvania and beyond.

This year, the survey will be sent in October, due back by November 30, and will provide a place to document your stewardship efforts during the prior 12 months, both your outreach activities as a volunteer and your work on your property. You will be able to report outreach hours and the number of people reached through activities such as participation in a Woodland Owners Association or on a conservation/advisory board, presentations to adults, work with youth, assistance to natural resources professionals,

and sharing with fellow landowners. You will also document hours spent and acres impacted on activities on your land, such as invasives control, deer control, developing a management plan, timber harvests, and more. We encourage you to keep notes about your activities during the year so that you will be able to readily complete the survey in late fall.

Your responses are very important. They help us understand the total impacts volunteers make on forest stewardship and improve and inform the programs we make available. Our funders and partners are always interested to hear the tremendous impacts the PA Forest Stewards make in promoting the message of good forest stewardship. Many other states look to what you are doing as the standard to attain. Thank you in advance for all that you will accomplish this year as PA Forest Stewards!

The Back Page: Stewardship Really Does Matter

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

"But I am an optimist..."

- Stephen Hawking, circa 2017

Let the games begin! Now that I have clawed my way to the bottom (again), you are faced with me for the indeterminate future, throwing my views about like so much chicken scratch from the "Back Page."

I was going to start a series this issue called "The Sporting Life" with my outdoor adventures—and I still may do that starting with the next issue—but this time, I just had to share with you something I read and saw on TV. It is called the sixth great extinction, and, I didn't know this, but right now all of us are in it, and, more importantly, we are all causing it.

You and I as Stewards are all about sustainability; we try our best to practice what we preach, but by just being human, we are intrinsically destructive. We consume 175% of what is there to be used. That means we'll simply run out of what we need to survive soon, and by that, I mean very soon. What we have built on earth now outweighs everything that grows on earth. We are now at, according to Scott Peley of *60 Minutes*, 8 billion people, and in 1970 we passed the number of people the earth could sustainably carry (which is 3 billion,

according to Christopher Tucker's 2019 book, *A Planet of 3 Billion*). From my readings, I am convinced we are closer to 11 billion and well on the way to an end game not much different than the dinosaur enjoyed. We are what we are, a consumptive species that is wired to take more than we need, to use more than we have, and to always seek higher levels of comfort. That is the springboard for our downfall, and people like the late Stephen Hawking and Paul Ehrlich are convinced that the guy with the sandwich board and the beard saying, "THE END IS NEAR" is right.

What to do, what to do? According to Hawking and Ehrlich, and others in the field, our only course is to keep doing what we are doing as Stewards. In a manner of speaking, we are the saviors of the species. We return to the forest what others have taken. We protect and purify aquatic ecosystems. We reach out to help others act responsibly. We raise and teach our children about sustainability. We follow the teachings of Jim Finley and others about the forest world, and so on.

I would maintain, however, that as our friend Rachel Reyna described, we really need to increase the trajectory of what we are doing. I mean, we need to aim high, teach well, work hard, consume less, be efficient, and, above all, seek to



love nature more. It may be too late, but we are the hope for the future and so are our children and grandchildren. You have heard it before, but we really need to do it for them, our heirs, our hope. And please don't worry about the planet—it will far outlast us.

Let me leave you with one more sobering factoid: our current rate of consumption for the 8 billion of us on board produces waste equal to our body weight EVERY WEEK. If that doesn't get our attention, nothing will.

Take care and I'll see you in two months. Thanks for taking the time to stop by.

Owls, continued from page 3

Bird bander Jeanine Ging attached a small metal band with a unique number on the owl's leg. Saw-whet Owls are strongly nocturnal and seldom seen except at banding sites scattered across the mountains in Pennsylvania. It is hoped that this little understood species will benefit from studies that track its movements during fall migration. Unlike our other forest-loving owls, Saw-whet Owls migrate to the southern U.S. each fall, but we don't know much about their breeding success in Pennsylvania. Since they are cavity nesters, they benefit from snags and den trees left in the woods and when people put up nest boxes.

Fortunately, most people no longer fear owls, but don't really understand much about them. The Harry Potter movies helped young people appreciate owls, but what can we do to help them? As forest landowners, consider leaving snags and den trees and reduce forest fragmentation when logging. Put up large nest

boxes for owls. Every winter, we enjoy seeing a Screech Owl taking shelter in the Wood Duck box at our pond—it often sticks its head out to sun on a cold winter day. Reducing the use of pesticides and poisons will help many of our native wildlife, including owls. Owls are natural and effective pest controls—just offer them a safe place to live!

References:

¹ Other owls found in Pennsylvania are the Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl, Short-eared Owl, and Snowy Owl (sometimes seen in the winter when they migrate south from the Canadian tundra).

² Fergus, Charles. 2000. *Wildlife of Pennsylvania and the Northeast*. Mechanicsburg (PA): Stackpole Books.

³ <https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Education/WildlifeNotesIndex/Pages/Owls.aspx>

⁴ <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/nswowl/cur/sounds>



This adult Saw-whet Owl is part of a banding study at the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch.

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Don't Miss Out on the 5th Biennial Forest Landowners Conference!

As things come together for the 5th Biennial Forest Landowners Conference, we're excited for this exceptional opportunity to share a broad range of information and resources with Pennsylvania's private forest landowners.

We hope you can join us Friday and Saturday, March 24 and 25, at the Penn Stater for two days of learning, making connections, and expanding your toolkit. Be sure to invite family, friends, and neighbors too!

Overnight accommodations at special conference rates are being offered at several area hotels. For more information about the conference, to find a list of hotels with room blocks for attendees, and to register online, go to ecosystems.psu.edu/forest-conference.

You can also register by phone by calling 1-877-345-0691, M-F, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Dates for Your Calendar

March 24-25. 5th Biennial Forest Landowners Conference. Penn Stater Hotel and Conference Center, State College, PA.

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

For more information, check the Finley Center website:

ecosystems.psu.edu/private-forests

Remembering PA Forest Stewards We've Lost

We recently learned of the loss of one of our fellow Pennsylvania Forest Steward volunteers:

- Joseph A. (Tony) Glasstetter (Class of '94)

Our thoughts are with the family of this long-time Steward.

We are so grateful for each Steward's service; if you hear of any of our volunteers who have passed away, please let us know.

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