

X-C Ski DEC ● Sparring Bucks ● Tale of Two Coats

NEW YORK STATE  
**Conservationist**  
DECEMBER 2007

# Counting All Birds

## Getting Wild in the Big Apple

### North Country's Secretive Predator

Inside:  
Premiere issue of

# Conservationist

for  
**KIDS!**



Dear New Yorker,

Since 1946, the *Conservationist* has highlighted our state's spectacular natural resources and educated generations of New Yorkers on the importance of conserving them. The magazine's proud tradition is part of our collective consciousness, helping New Yorkers to appreciate our environment and pass along the wonders of nature to their children.

Now, this great magazine is even better.

This issue of *Conservationist* contains a number of enhancements, including myriad design changes and the inaugural issue of *Conservationist for Kids*, an exciting new magazine full of environmental facts and fun outdoor activities for schoolchildren across New York State. In upcoming issues, you'll see additional improvements, including articles detailing New York's approach to a wide range of emerging environmental challenges.

Enjoy this issue. There's much, much more to come.

Governor Eliot Spitzer



Dear New Yorker,

The Great New York State Fair begins on August 23 this year and DEC employees have been hard at work preparing our environmental exhibits, educational materials and booths for thousands of visitors.

Whether you stop by the DEC Aquarium building or Log Cabin, there will be a range of things to see, do and learn about. While you're there, you can also purchase a subscription to DEC's award-winning *Conservationist* magazine, get a hunting, fishing or trapping license, or buy a Habitat Access Stamp, which supports healthy fish

and wildlife populations. More information about this important DEC initiative can be found on the inside back cover of this magazine.

Of course, admission to all DEC buildings and exhibits is free. So take a trip to the Fair—you may discover something you didn't know, or even better, you may open a child's eyes to the outdoors and spark a lifetime interest in our environment. No matter what, I'm sure you and your family will have a good time.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the summer and I look forward to seeing you at the New York State Fair!

Commissioner Pete Grannis

Eliot Spitzer, Governor of New York State

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Gama Grass photographed in Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx.

# Searching for *Green* in Gotham

**The Big Apple** affords wonderful opportunities to study changes in biodiversity through time.

By Robert DeCandido, PhD | Photos by author

New York City is my laboratory. When spring peepers begin chorusing in March, I am transformed from sleepy bookworm into mad scientist, keen to identify every plant and animal I find in my travels through Gotham. On starry summer nights, I creep through Central Park, in search of owls that flit from tree to tree in the shadow of skyscrapers. In autumn, I spend hours with my neck craned to the skyline, watching hawks heading south in migration. During winter, I keep warm in science libraries, thumbing through vivid accounts of wild New York written by early naturalists in whose footsteps I now follow. I am on a mission to determine what plants and animals inhabited my city in the past, and which ones live here still. Why have some species disappeared, while others flourished? Is there any rhyme or reason to these local extinctions? By answering such questions, it might be possible to develop strategies to protect our remaining biodiversity.

I know, I know. To some, New York City is regarded as the land of rats, roaches and other nasty things. Worse, many scientists don't take urban ecology studies seriously. I am often teased by those who do "serious" research in the rainforests of faraway Shangri-las. Compared to them, I feel like an outsider to real science. However, important biological information that has relevance to "wild" places can be discovered in urban areas if you know where to look. Cities like New York afford wonderful opportunities to study changes in biodiversity through time. There is often a history of investigation for particular urban locations made by naturalists dating back as far as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, recorded in scientific papers, museum specimens and field notes. This historical record can then be compared to what still exists today in order to understand how and why changes have occurred.



Does the study of New York City's urban ecology have any relevance to other places? Absolutely. Today, most people in North America, South America, Europe and Australia live in cities. By 2025, almost two-thirds of the world's people will live in urban areas. Understanding the effects of rapid development will help conservation biologists decide what kinds of species and habitats to monitor in the coming years as urban sprawl affects natural areas throughout the world. Rather than a strange place to study nature, New York City might be the perfect laboratory to study a habitat that people, plants and wildlife share together. Understanding changes in diversity in New York City through time can shed light on the future of biodiversity everywhere.

Here in Gotham, my favorite species are wildflowers and other plants that grow in our parks. No special skills are needed to find them, and they won't run or fly

away when you do. Plants define natural areas in the five boroughs: from the meadows and woodlands of the Bronx to the ponds and forests of Staten Island, to the sandy ocean beaches and salt marshes of Brooklyn and Queens—and even to the baseball fields of Manhattan's Central Park. Native plants (those found here before Europeans arrived) tell us about what New York City was like in the past and our connection to other places near and far. For example, a native tree such as the sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) commonly grows in moist woodlands in all five boroughs and ranges south to Guatemala. Another native species found here, skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*), is also native to eastern China. American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) trees still exist in New York City and so do native orchids. We have at least one globally endangered plant, Torrey's mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum torrei*), found in fewer than 20 other locations in North America.

New York City also has many non-native plants such as dandelions, hawkweeds and bittersweet. To the casual observer, these invasive plants make natural areas in New York City look vibrant. But looks can be deceiving. These non-native plants tell a tale of disturbance and development, extinction and invasion.

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Non-native plants such as purple loosestrife, Asiatic dayflower, garlic mustard and porcelainberry can outcompete native plants creating a landscape of sameness that can adversely affect birds and insects.

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Some of these non-native European species are so aggressive they can sprout through the



Salt marsh in the Bronx



Asiatic dayflower

asphalt in parking lots. Alien plants such as porcelainberry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and Asiatic dayflower (*Commelina communis*) have run rampant in meadows throughout the city, making it virtually impossible for native species to keep a toe-hold. We have little idea how others such as purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) affect the diversity of our native insects and birds. Overall, in the last 50 years many of our natural areas have become dominated by a handful of non-native generalist species, creating a landscape of sameness.

As a result, we are losing the diversity that is characteristic of New York City. In order to help combat this invasion and preserve native plant species, we urban scientists needed some weapons of our own: an inventory of what plants once lived here but are now gone (extirpated), and a comprehensive list of what remains (extant). In the past two decades, my colleagues and I have

compiled a list of more than 2,100 New York City plant species, 1,369 (65%) native plants and 739 (35%) non-native. New York City is home to about 60% of the native species ever recorded in New York State—an area 150 times larger. Pockets of native plants still thrive in New York City because some of the finest natural areas were set aside as parkland



Great Lobelia

beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Most of the Bronx parks were established in 1888 as part of New York City's first environmental movement, whose motto was "More Parks Now!" By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, clubs and organizations with strong interests in plants and wildlife had been established. These included the Torrey Botanical Club (1867), the American Museum of Natural History (1869), the Linnaean Society of New York (1878), the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences (1881), the New York Botanical Garden (1891) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (1895). Today, we have a good idea of what plants and animals were previously found in each borough because of the collections, notes and writings made by members of these organizations.

Since the first comprehensive studies began, native herbaceous plants such as wildflowers, sedges and grasses have been most abun-





Helleborine orchid

dant. Approximately 30% of our botanical diversity comes from just three families of plants whose members generally prefer much sunshine. These include asters and goldenrod species (Asteraceae), grasses (Poaceae), and sedges (Cyperaceae). The abundance of species in these and similar sun-loving plant families indicates that from the 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of New York City's natural areas were composed of open fields and meadows. Closed canopy forests were rare. Since the Second World War, we have lost nearly half of our native herbaceous species. By comparison, only about a fifth of woody shrubs and trees have become extinct in New York City. Certain groups of our native plants have been particularly prone to extinction. Gone are the majority of our native ferns, violets, sedges, grasses, and pondweeds. We have lost 24 of the 30 species of native orchids ever found here. All 21 of the native orchids once found on Manhattan

Island have been eliminated. Nine entire plant families (all composed of herbaceous species) have been extirpated from New York City. Sadly, here in the Big Apple, native herbaceous plants, especially wildflowers, appear to have a dim future for a variety of reasons.

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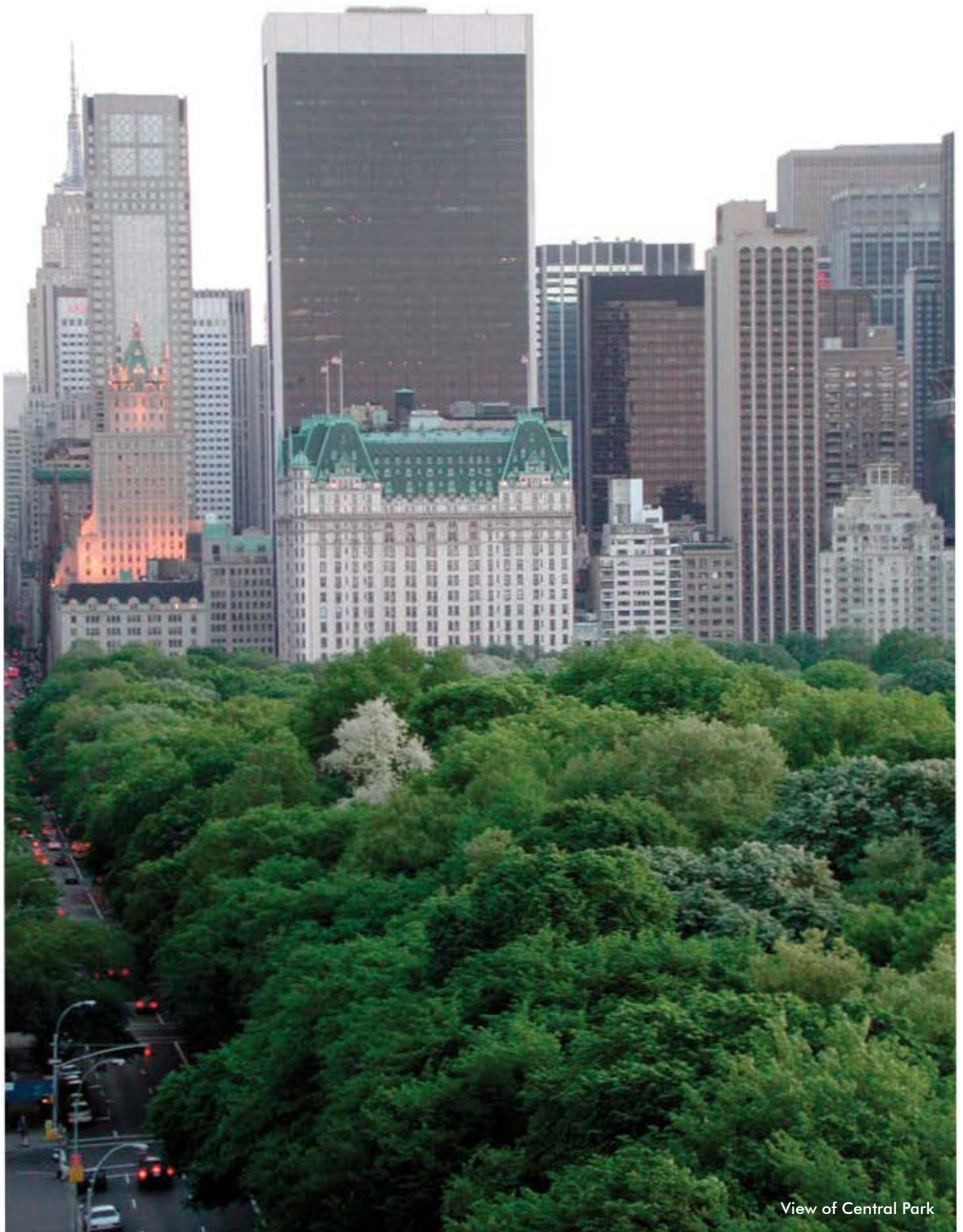
Pockets of native plants still thrive in New York City because of its magnificent parks. Half of all the plants ever catalogued in New York State, are found in the city.

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In our parks in the last 75 years, development for landfills, highway expansion, baseball fields, buildings and water treatment facilities has caused a net loss of open space for living things. Native herbaceous plants are forced to

exist on ever smaller parcels of land. Many sun-loving native plant species are being shaded out as the forest around them has matured. In the few remaining meadows and fields, our native species are losing the war of competition with aggressive non-native plants. Increased use of city parks has had a negative effect too, especially on erodible slopes and sensitive wetlands. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from New York City is that the designation of an area as a park is not sufficient to ensure the preservation of its native plants, or to prevent the invasion of non-native species. This is most evident in Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx, the second largest park in New York City. Since 1947, at least 145 native plant species have been extirpated, while 136 non-native species became established during this same time frame. Every habitat in that park has a greater percentage of non-native species than just a half-century ago.





View of Central Park



In each New York City borough, a wave of extinction threatens our native flora. Not surprisingly, Manhattan and Brooklyn, the two boroughs that developed the fastest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have been affected most. They have the least amount of parkland and have lost approximately 70% of their native species. Even Queens, where most parks were established from the 1920s through the 1960s, lost roughly 62% of its native flora. An alarming trend is clearly evident: in every borough except Staten Island, more native species have been eliminated than still exist. If other boroughs are any indication, the same trend is going to happen to native plant species diversity on Staten Island in the coming years.

Being a true-blue scientist with

ear pressed to the ground, I am always listening for solid ideas to help save New York City's remaining plant diversity and prevent further degradation of our natural areas.

Perhaps collecting seeds of native plants for propagation and translocation, or removing acres of non-native plants that carpet our parks could stop the loss of native species. Such endeavors are part of the solution, but we can't forget to preserve one of our most important habitats: the classroom. Growing there now are young New Yorkers in whose eyes I can read two fundamental questions: Why should we care if our native species go extinct? Why is preserving our diversity important?

These are good questions, and ones that people throughout the world are trying to answer. In the last decade, urban naturalists from as far as Italy and Russia have documented the remaining plant species of their cities, found rare native plants and published scientific papers about changes in local biodiversity. Closer to home, the "Chicago Wilderness" movement has sparked public support and fueled a wave of enthusiasm to save or restore pockets of native plants and animals in the urban environment. In more than one California city, people are working to transform abandoned landfills into meadows, wetlands and forests. Perhaps a new perspective is needed, too: besides restoring parks at street level, green space can







Garlic mustard

be created for native species atop buildings, especially in industrial areas. In New York City, just such an idea is taking root. Almost 600 acres of warehouse roofs are being planted with hardy, drought-resistant grasses and wildflowers for climate control. These and similar solutions, especially if they involve young people, are music to my ears.

Right now in New York City, a renewed environmental movement is afoot to preserve our remaining wild plants and places. Naturalist foot soldiers are combing our parks, continuing to note species new to the city. Graduate students from city universities are conducting ecological studies of urban oases. Reporters from the *Village Voice* and even the *New York Times* are reminding everyone that

good things can still be found in our town. However, the future of New York City's remaining biodiversity depends on more than the efforts of naturalists, scientists

and concerned citizens. We need to ignite the imagination of all New Yorkers, from school kids to taxi drivers to Mayor Bloomberg himself.

Who cares about the 2,100 plant species that compose New York's parks, yards and city streets? Why is biodiversity important? I don't know, but I can hear the flowers thinking.

Urban ecologist **Dr. Robert DeCandido** was born and raised in the Bronx. He has studied bird migration, night hunting peregrine falcons, Gotham's nesting owls and American kestrels, and flora of the Big Apple.



Cardinal flower





# YOU LOOKIN at Me?!

In late summer, whitetail bucks remove velvet from their antlers by rubbing them on bushes and small trees. Once their antlers have "hardened off," bucks will challenge each other in ritualized wrestling matches called "sparring."

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Unlike rams who charge each other in headlong rushes, bucks will carefully intertwine their antlers first, then begin to push and shove to determine who is stronger.

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If antlers come apart, the bucks will often pause, re-align their antlers, and begin anew in an almost courteous fashion.

When does are in heat, sparring becomes much more serious. Aggressive activity increases as mature bucks fend off any would-be competitors. A subordinate buck will usually turn away. If he does not, fights can be intense, involving great strength and neck twisting. Given enough force, this twisting will sometimes result in a broken antler tine.

Antlers can be splayed out slightly by the two bucks pushing against each other, only to spring back when one or both deer relaxes and releases the tension.





LIKE FALLING LEAVES, SPARRING FOR DOMINANCE IS A CLASSIC SIGN OF CHANGING SEASONS IN THE GREAT NORTHEAST.

By Dave Nelson

Occasionally this results in the antlers locking together, which can doom both bucks to exhaustion and inability to eat or drink, and eventual death.

If you happen upon two or more whitetail bucks occupying the same field or patch of ground after Labor Day, watch closely. Consider yourself lucky if you ever witness whitetail bucks challenging each other in this time-tested manner to determine social hierarchy.

**Dave Nelson** is editor of *Conservationist*.

## TINE AFTER TIME

BY MIKE RAYKOVICZ

Last fall during archery season, I was lucky enough to take a nice buck on my friend Jonathan's farm in Owego. When I got the deer, my hunting partner Dave remarked that it would have been a nice rack if two of the tines weren't broken off. Although he was right, I hesitated to admit it. I thought it was a pretty fair rack, even with the missing tines.

Nine months later, Dave asked me to help clear some blown down trees blocking a few of the woods roads on Jonathan's farm. We worked for about two hours, clearing away the tops of hemlocks and other blow downs. At one point, I went ahead and waited for him to come along with the tractor. When Dave arrived and stepped down from the tractor, he spotted a piece of broken antler on the ground.

"Look at this," he said. "I've never found a broken antler tine before. Have you?"

On a hunch, I asked him if I could take it home to see if it was from the buck I got last fall.

Believe it or not, it was a perfect match. What makes it more amazing is that we found the tine about a quarter mile from where I bagged the deer. It's a bazillion to one shot. Chances are, the buck was walking down the logging road and encountered another buck. They fought and he lost the tine.

Truth be told, I think the rack does look better with the tine attached. But don't tell Dave.

**Mike Raykovicz** has enjoyed Southern Tier outings for a long time. He enjoys them even more frequently these days, now that he's retired from the Owego Free Academy.

Mike Raykovicz





# Meet the

*New York State Conservationist, December 2007*





# Marten

By Paul Jensen

**New York's marten population must be closely monitored and carefully managed.**

# I

It's mid-winter in the southwestern Adirondacks. Our convoy slowly snakes its way along an old logging road near the West Canada Lake Wilderness Area. The anticipation of what awaits us makes it feel like Christmas Eve.

Passing through open hardwood ridges and thick stands of spruce, our progress is hampered by the deep snow, the result of lake-effect storms that sweep across Lake Ontario, sometimes dumping several feet of snow at once. As we near our destination, it's not a gift we seek, but rather a small carnivore in the weasel family—the American marten (*Martes americana*). It's our hope to capture and fit radio-collars on a few of these secretive creatures to learn more about their habits.

We leave our sleds behind and plow through knee-deep, powdery snow. Approaching one of several live-traps, the pungent smell of our skunk-based lure assaults our nostrils. Moving closer, our excitement mounts as we are greeted by a low growl. We have successfully captured our first marten.

As I brush away the snow covering the entrance of the plywood box that houses our live-trap, the marten, a young male, continues to vocalize his displeasure via a series of low growls and hisses. Enticed to this location by the lure we hung on a nearby tree, as well as by the succulent sardines topped with raspberry jelly placed inside the trap, he's surely regretting his decision to go after an easy meal. I carefully remove the trap from the box to get a closer look. It's exciting to see an animal whose secretive nature keeps it hidden from most people's view.



Handling a live marten is a rare opportunity afforded few north country researchers.

Staring back at us from inside the box trap is a long slender marten, with thick orange-brown fur, a dark tail, furry feet, large ears, and distinctive, small, black weasel eyes. I name him Louie in honor of the legendary French Louie—a fitting name for this icon of the northern forest.

To minimize the marten’s stress, our team works quickly. We use a specialized handling cone to remove the animal from the trap and then administer immobilizing drugs so that we can safely handle him. We collect standard biological data: weight, length, and other physical measurements, and attach ear tags and a small radio-collar (about half the size of an AA battery) that will enable us to find this marten over the course of a year. With these data, we’ll be able to estimate the animal’s home range and better understand its use of habitat types.

We have only about 10 minutes to complete the entire process before the animal begins to recover from the effects of the drugs. We make one final check of the data, ensure

that the radio-collar is functioning properly, and place the animal back in the trap to fully recover.

I name our first marten  
“Louie” in honor of the  
legendary French Louie  
—a fitting name  
for this icon of the  
northern forest.

After about an hour, we release Louie and watch in amazement as he easily navigates the deep snow and quickly disappears out of sight. To our great satisfaction, this scene played out multiple times during the first year of our study, as we continued our trapping through early April.

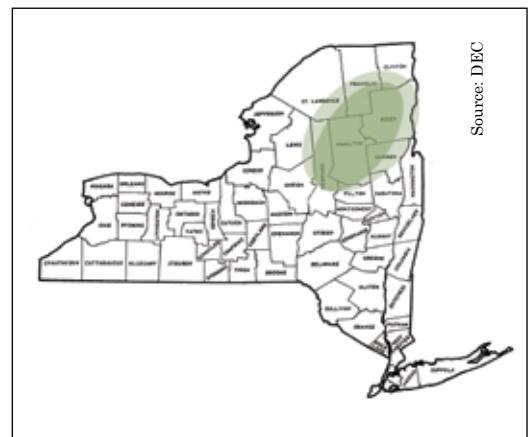
American martens (formerly known as pine martens) once ranged throughout New York and the northeastern U.S., when unbroken forests dominated the northeastern landscape. Marten populations declined substantially throughout the northeastern U.S.

during the late 1800s and early 1900s, primarily due to habitat loss caused by intensive logging and overharvesting by trappers before trapping was regulated.

In 1936, New York closed the marten trapping season. Over the next 42 years, martens re-occupied much of their former Adirondack range—a testament to the resiliency of wildlife populations and natural systems, remoteness and inaccessibility of the Adirondacks, and the emerging science of wildlife management.

In 1978, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) reopened the marten trapping season in a limited area of the High Peaks region. This move restored the rich tradition and history of trapping in the Adirondacks, made famous by woodsmen like French Louie who roamed far and wide in the wilds of West Canada country in search of game. This season also marked the beginning of scientific studies designed to investigate the natural history and population status of this intriguing mammal. For the last thirty years, New York trappers have provided biological data critical to our understanding and management of this species.

To that end, DEC staff recently began a four-year study to learn



Source: DEC

The American marten is found throughout much of the Adirondacks (martens are common in the dark green area and also occur in the lighter green area).



more about the distribution and habitat use of Adirondack martens. Using remote trail cameras triggered by a combination of motion and an animal's body heat, we are documenting the presence of marten and other carnivores. In addition to marten, we've photographed fisher, mink, weasel, bobcat, fox, coyote, and black bear. This study has taken DEC staff to some of the wildest and most remote areas in the Adirondacks, including the Five Ponds Wilderness Area, Pigeon Lake Wilderness Area, and the High Peaks.

Early in this effort, we enlisted the aid of several area trappers

for advice on appropriate baits and lures, and benefit from their considerable knowledge of marten natural history. Their assistance has paid big rewards, increasing our catch rates and improving efficiency of the study.

Prior research indicated that martens prefer mature coniferous forest stands. Our preliminary results suggest that martens use a wide range of forest stand types in the Adirondacks, including those that are predominantly deciduous. Martens now occupy an area of about 5,300 square miles in the Adirondack Mountains. Although they are carnivores, feeding largely on red squirrels and small mam-

mals, martens eat a wide variety of food, including berries.

Smaller cousins of the more widespread fisher, adult marten are about two feet long, and weigh about 1½ to 2 pounds on average. They are chiefly nocturnal, and den in hollow trees or logs.

At the end of our first field season, we learned that Louie had "slipped" his collar (a fairly common occurrence with martens). While this was frustrating news, I look back on our first marten capture as unforgettable. The slipped collar also brings to mind a story about the real French Louie chronicled in Harvey Dunham's book, *Adirondack French Louie*.



After a marten is captured, biologists fit a battery-operated radio collar around its neck, which allows the animal to be tracked for up to a year.





On the run from the law in Maine, Louie apparently outwitted and escaped his would-be captors by crossing a river jammed with logs on their way to the mill. It would seem French Louie's spirit continues to roam these wild lands.

Senior wildlife biologist **Paul Jensen** works in DEC's Warrensburg office. The author acknowledges several organizations for permission to access their lands for marten research: Adirondack Ecological Center (SUNY-ESF), Adirondack League Club, Ausable Club, Domtar Inc., Elk Lake Preserve, Finch Pruyn & Co., Inc., Follensby Pond, International Paper, Jerseyfield Preserve, Miller Park Association, The Nature Conservancy, and Wilmurt Club.

Trail cameras triggered by a combination of motion and infra-red light allow biologists to document the presence of carnivores like marten, bobcat, bear and fisher.



# Less Waste, More Fulfilling

## Tips to reduce holiday waste generation

By Debbie Jackson



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# Merry Reuse & Happy Recycling!

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Let's face it—with all of our buying, wrapping, packaging and celebrating, we generate lots of solid waste during the holiday season. But we can also reduce, reuse and recycle the remnants of our holiday cheer. Here are some tips to help!

### Tips for holiday shopping

- Bring your own reusable tote bag rather than accepting a separate bag for each purchase.
- Decline a bag for smaller items, or use the box the product came in.
- Choose products that are minimally packaged.

### Gift-giving

- Give experiences, not stuff. Consider gift certificates movies, dining, classes, concerts, sporting events, etc.
- Give a personal service like snow-shoveling, running errands, etc.
- Make a donation in the name of a friend or family member to an organization that they support.
- Give eco-gifts, like reusable tote bags, a bike, energy- or water-saving devices, or bird feeders.
- Donate replaced appliances and clothes that still have a useful life.
- Don't use wrapping paper. Add bows to holiday shopping bags or gift boxes, or use the colorful comics from the Sunday paper.
- Give gifts in baskets, tins or jars. If you buy gift wrap, look for recycled paper with the highest post-consumer content you can find.

### Greeting cards

- Buy holiday cards made from recycled paper or make your own.
- Use postcards to eliminate envelopes and excess paper.
- Clip holiday cards to make gift tags for next year.

### Holiday decorations

- Save decorations for reuse.
- Donate decorations to local schools, churches, town offices or non-profit organizations.
- Use natural ornaments such as pine cones, shells, dried flowers, popcorn or berries.

### Recycle Christmas trees

- Chip and mulch them for compost or landscaping materials.
- For more holiday ideas, email us at [dshmwrr@gw.dec.state.ny.us](mailto:dshmwrr@gw.dec.state.ny.us)

**Debbie Jackson** oversees DEC's solid waste recycling program.

# EMPIRE STATE **ADVENTURE**



## *Slip=Sliding Away*

By Brian W. Swinn

Cross-country skiing is easy to learn and great exercise. Not only will it get you off the couch, you may even look forward to forecasts for cold and heavy snow.

*New York State Conservationist, December 2007*







## Kick...glide. Kick...glide.

Hear the rhythmic swishing sounds your skis make in their snowy tracks. Listen to their staccato hum as they overrun patches of fallen pine needles. Drink in the cool, crisp air.

Cross-country skiing likely originated centuries ago in Scandinavia, where it remains popular as sport—and often as everyday transportation. Today, cross-country skiing offers a delightful mix of exercise, fun and a bit of winter exploration. Because of the many cross-country centers scattered across New York State, you should be able to find a course where you can set your own pace.

Most cross-country areas are far too large for manmade snow, so the sport essentially depends on Mother Nature's winter blessing. You'll find that most established centers groom their trails for skiing ease, and will

be happy to apprise you of current trail conditions.

In contrast to downhill skiing, which turns gravity into motion, cross-country requires muscle power.

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Enjoy the stillness of the woods broken only by the sound of your own breathing and an occasional bird call. This is the allure of cross-country skiing, a sport that cuts across age and experience.

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There are different skiing styles, but the beginner will probably prefer the diagonal stride method, where pole-equipped arm and opposite leg are moved forward together,

and sides are alternated. It's much easier to do than to describe, and most people find the learning curve to be short.

Advanced skiers often perform the much more dynamic skating stride, which features a powerful kick. Overall, the movement resembles ice skating or rollerblading.

Your initial investment in cross-country gear can be very small. With daily equipment rentals and trail fees running just several dollars per person at established ski centers, all you need to get started is appropriate clothing. Naturally, if you have access to large tracts of snow-covered land and you long to break trail, buying equipment might make sense. Cross-country skis exhibit an entirely different personality than the downhill variety. Equipment for downhill is designed for turning capability and control at speed. Slightly springy, gently arched, waxless cross-country skis are longer, more slender and have textured patches on the undersides that grip when you step down. Let up, and the skis spring back a bit, helping you speed across the snow. The characteristics of cross-country skis, combined with some easily learned techniques, help you climb, glide and maintain control. Also available are classic skis, which require application of different waxes according to snow and temperature conditions. To complete your outfit, you will need boots that match the bindings and poles made expressly for the sport—all fitted for your size and weight.

Newcomers are always astonished at how warm they get on the trail, even on the coldest winter days. By all means, keep yourself covered, but do so in layers, so that you can remove and add clothing at will. Stay away from cotton and lean toward fabrics that retain your body heat and wick moisture from the body. Cross-country skiing can



# Connect to Nature

## Ski DEC

DEC's four environmental education centers are the perfect places to try out your newly acquired cross-country skills and equipment.

- Five Rivers Environmental Education Center (Albany County)
- Reinstein Woods (Erie County)
- Rogers Environmental Education Center (Chenango County)
- Stony Kill Farm Environmental Education Center (Dutchess County)



Each education center offers its own blend of ski experiences. Visit [www.dec.ny.gov/education/74.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/education/74.html) for more information about DEC environmental education centers and cross-country programs they may offer in your area. Although many state forests have trails suitable for skiing, some have become cross-country skiing destinations. On the Tug Hill Plateau, where the snow gets deep and stays all winter, there are state forests with extensive and well maintained cross-country ski trail networks that offer many miles of scenic trails for skiers to explore. For more information, see the Region 6 Natural Resource Highlight on Winona, Barnes Corners and Carpenter Road State Forests at [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/353.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/353.html)

provide a good aerobic workout, so wear non-restrictive clothes that would be appropriate for jogging or power-walking in winter weather. You'll also be surprised at how many muscle groups you use, so take it easy at first. After a few times out, you and your muscles will start getting used to the routine. Remember to bring plenty of water to keep hydrated.

Start with short jaunts, especially if the kids come along. Don't be disappointed if you don't complete your entire trip. After all the exercise and unfamiliar arm and leg motions, snow angels and snowball fights might start to look like a good fallback plan.

Even though it's a relatively low-risk sport, caution to avoid injuries is always advisable, and cross-country skiing proves no exception. If you pick a cross-country trail well-matched to your abilities, the chance of injury is minimal.

Beginners often tend to ski somewhat slowly and cautiously, and most hills pale in comparison with their downhill brethren. Because cross-country skiing requires several inches of snow cover which

can cushion falls, many people find the most outrageous thing that happens is a quick, comical bout with lost balance, followed by a less-than-graceful sit in the snow. Embarrassing perhaps, but usually harmless.

Cross-country skiing is a great way to build low-impact, aerobic activity into winter. And don't forget—nothing quite wraps up a day of cross-country skiing better than a cup of hot chocolate shared among friends at your favorite ski area.

*Editor's note:* In August, *Conservationist* suffered the loss of contributing editor **Brian Swinn** to cancer at age 54. Before going on medical leave, Brian toiled tirelessly to finish several projects, including this article. We are fortunate to be able to continue to share his fine work with our readers, even after his untimely passing.

One of his favorite pastimes was going on "adventures" (as he called them) with his son. It was fitting, then, that Brian became the feature editor for the day trips we refer to as "Empire State Adventures" in this publication. We miss his thoughtful input and his quick wit. Above all, Brian was a tremendous writer.

Kick...glide. Kick...glide. Au revoir, mon ami.

### Places to Go, Courses to Ski

With winter nearing full stride, now is the time to check out places for your cross-country ski adventure. Local favorites abound, but there are many places known far and wide for skiing in New York State.

Although beginners might be best off with established centers that offer equipment, lessons and well-groomed trails, other options exist. Memorable surprises await the fully equipped skier in areas such as the **Finger Lakes Trail** in Letchworth State Park in western New York, the 50-kilometer **Jackrabbit Trail** in the **Adirondack High Peaks**, the John Boyd Thacher State Park near Albany and the **Eagle Hill Trail Loop** in Tarrytown. Many of the more remote areas may require advanced, trail-breaking skills, but repay you with solitude and splendid natural beauty.

Check the internet or local chambers of commerce for more information, and for other places to ski.



# STILL COUNTING AFTER

*The Christmas Bird Count combines*





Male house finch  
Photo Bill Banaszewski

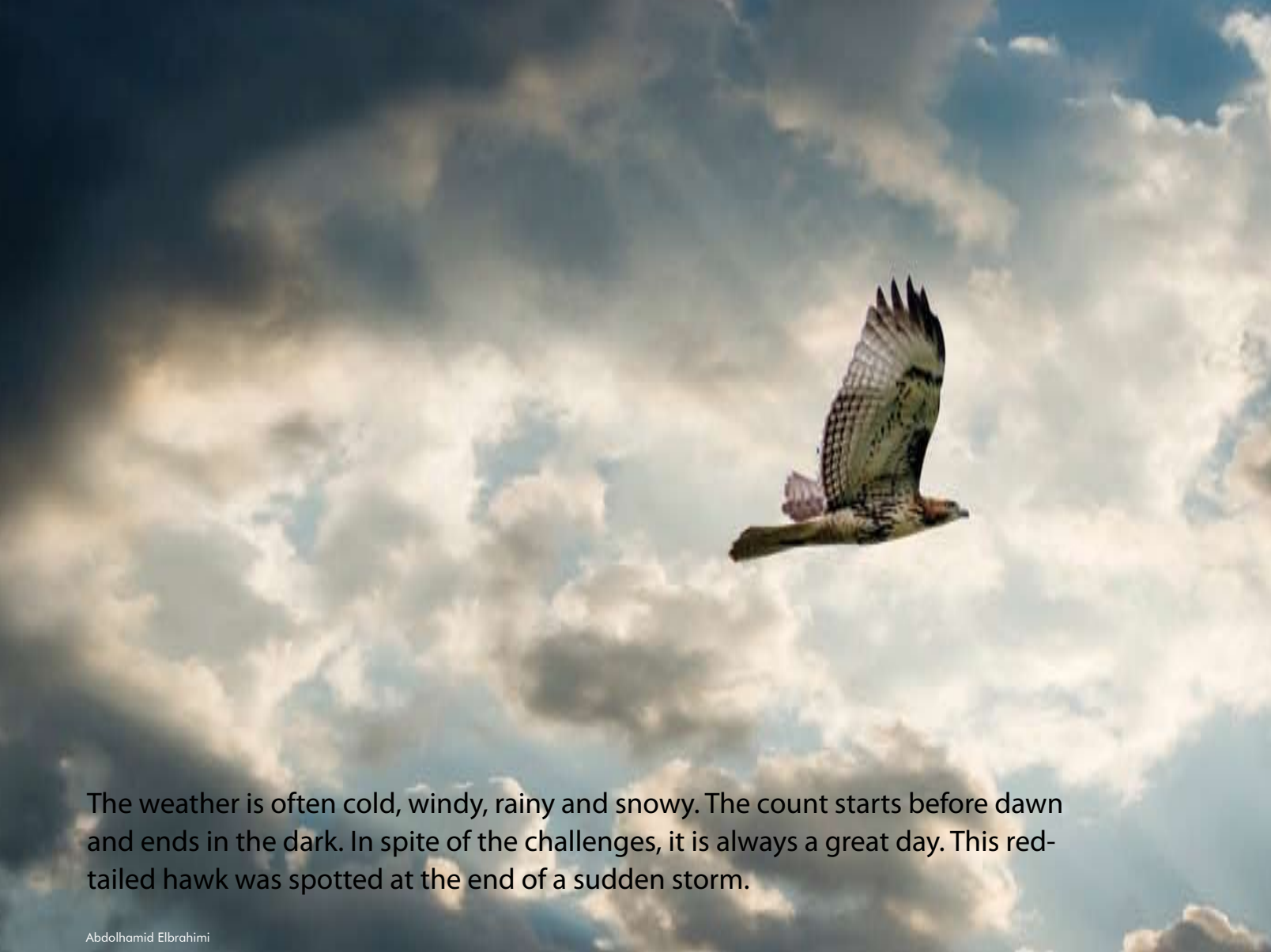
By Scott Stoner and  
Denise Hackert-Stoner

The last bit of Thanksgiving turkey has been eaten. Santa has arrived at the local mall. Pumpkins and corn stalks have been composted, replaced by evergreens and glittering lights. Short days have become shorter yet, and our to-do lists have increased, like the minutes of darkness each night.

With all the shopping, decorating, baking, card-writing, party planning, hosting out-of-town guests and traveling on the agenda, why would a person choose to spend a precious day, from dawn until dark, counting birds? Just as importantly, are there enough birds around at this time of year to keep a group of people busy counting all day?

ALL THESE YEARS

*holiday fun and citizen science.*



The weather is often cold, windy, rainy and snowy. The count starts before dawn and ends in the dark. In spite of the challenges, it is always a great day. This red-tailed hawk was spotted at the end of a sudden storm.

Abdolhamid Elbrahimi

Bill Ivy



Black-capped chickadee

While a small group of birders might easily tally 60 species on a pleasant May morning, the challenge of attempting to count every individual bird of every species within a 15-mile diameter circle in December requires a high degree of focus from the entire group. Enough focus, in fact, that for one entire day, thoughts of holiday preparations must be set aside. In other words, this is a break.

The weather is often cold, windy, sometimes rainy or snowy. The count requires an early start in pre-dawn December darkness, and ends in the dark of night. But a break it is nevertheless, in the pleasant company of like-minded birders, and in good years, a surprisingly large number of birds.

The Christmas count was started in 1900 as a protest against an annual holiday bird shoot. Ornithologist Frank M. Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History, an officer in the emerging Audubon society, organized this census in opposition to the “side hunt”—a custom of the Gilded Age in which people



got together during the holidays to shoot as many birds (and mammals) as they could find. Conservation was in its early stages then, and people were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. This count would become a holiday tradition that continues to this day. It represents the best of “citizen science” and is the longest-running ornithological database. Starting with a few dozen counts and about as many counters across the U.S., (including several in New York State), today's CBC has grown into an international effort, with more than 50,000 participants from northern Alaska to Chile. Last year, more than 2,000 counts tallied nearly 70 million birds.

My first memories of the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) were as a young birder on Long Island, where I participated in the central Suffolk count with my father. Beginning at first light to search for short-eared owls, we diligently spent the days counting birds in fields, woods, and along waterways. Our last stop, at dusk, was always

a cedar grove near the marshes, in search of long-eared owls. We would stop the car along the road and “squeak” like a mouse to try to draw in one of these nocturnal hunters. Often it would work, a great cap to a fun day.

Today, there are 73 counts across New York State. Each count has a compiler responsible for recruiting people to conduct the count on its designated day, between December 14 and January 5, and for collecting and reporting the results. The count circle is typically divided into several sectors of more manageable size, each with one or more field parties who spend the entire day in that sector. Territories are typically covered by car and on foot, and occasionally by boat. Reports from feeder-watchers are also welcomed, and added into the final tally. Count participation varies from a few individuals to several dozen, ranging in age from grade-schoolers to senior citizens. After the results from the entire circle are compiled, they are provided to the National Audubon Society, which publishes the count



Short-eared owl

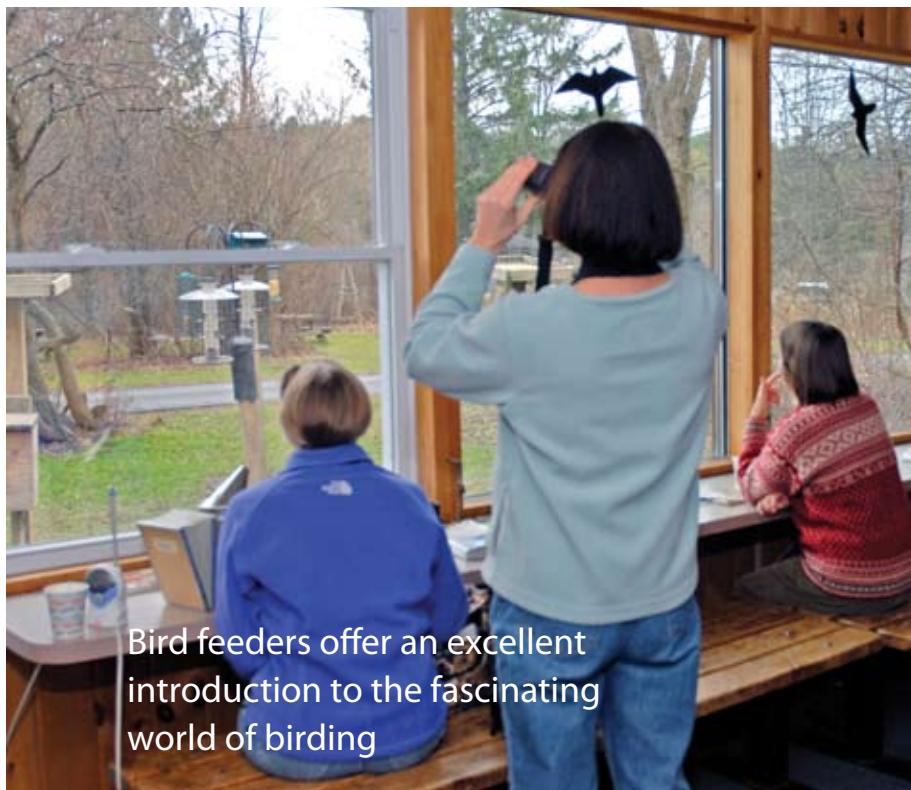
Denise-Hockett-Stoner

online and in *American Birds*.

One need not be an expert birder to contribute. As a six-year-old, DEC's Jeff Mapes spotted an American coot at a reservoir while helping his father, retired *Conservationist* contributor Alan Mapes, with the Albany County count. The coot turned out to be a very unusual species for that count. Similarly, while on her first CBC, my wife spotted a northern shrike, adding an important sighting of an uncommon winter visitor.

Christmas counts are social events, and nowhere is this more evident than at the compilation dinner. People often cover the same sector in successive years, and try to best their previous totals (as well as find birds that the other field parties do not...). While the group's goal is to count birds as thoroughly as possible, there is also a special effort made to find rare, or new birds, for that count. After dinner the real fun begins, as the participants reveal their best finds of the day.

The compiler begins by going through a list of birds that have been seen in the history of that count circle. Species by species, the compiler asks each field party



Bird feeders offer an excellent introduction to the fascinating world of birding



Spotting scopes allow birdwatchers to identify birds at great distances, such as waterfowl on large water bodies.

Because human effort differs from year to year, miles and hours traveled on foot, by vehicle, and time spent “owling”—usually before first light or after dark, are also recorded. In addition to the list of birds of each species seen, results are presented in terms of birds per unit of human effort.

The data collected in these counts have certainly added to the body of ornithological knowledge. Fluctuations in numbers of wintering species, and general growth and decline of a species in an area have become evident over time by examining decades of CBC data.

CBCs can illustrate the presence of irruptive species such as certain “winter finches”—redpolls, pine siskins, crossbills and pine grosbeaks that occasionally travel south in large numbers. CBC data illustrate northward expansion of the range of species such as tufted titmouse, northern cardinal, northern mockingbird, and red-bellied woodpecker. DEC’s Larry Alden, compiler of the count in Troy, notes that CBCs “... indirectly reveal changes that have resulted from our move away from a largely agrarian society. Once-common birds of open fields like horned larks, American kestrels, and short-eared owls have become scarce as open country becomes housing development or reverts to woodland.”

Recently, an analysis of 40 years of CBC results by the Audubon Society helped to document a marked decline in bird populations, revealing an “alarming decline of many of our most common and most beloved birds.” According to Al Caccese, Executive Director of Audubon New York, “the value of the world’s largest all-volunteer bird survey increases each year,” because of its ability to demonstrate massive declines in many common birds and changes in bird ranges.

for their tally. There is often-good-natured discussion about exactly where a bird—or a flock of birds—was seen. If it was at the border of two territories, the final tally may be adjusted to ensure that the same birds are not counted twice. Occasionally, members of one party venture into another’s territory to find a particularly choice bird, which in our Christmas count, is good-naturedly referred to as “poaching.”

The tally of common birds is often interesting, as species may be present in unusual numbers, or absent altogether. For instance, one year Alan Mapes and I counted more than 3,000 American robins at the Five Rivers Environmental Education Center alone. Weather, whether lakes and reservoirs are frozen, snow cover, and the availability of natural food for the birds are some of the factors that increase or decrease the numbers of individuals and species in a particular year. Deep snow may drive some species, such as short-eared owls, further south. Long-term trends may indicate more dire circumstances.

Weather can affect the birdwatchers as well as the birds. We have experienced bitter cold, near-frozen feet, and daylong discomfort that can be remedied only by hours spent before a fire with warm cider and hot chili. We’ve endured torrential rain that made field birding nearly impossible, and even a severe snowstorm that forced an early ending due to impassible roads.

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According to the Audubon society, an analysis of 40 years of Christmas count data revealed an “alarming decline of many of our most common and most beloved birds.”

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When the compiler has finished asking for reports of the species seen in previous years, the question then becomes, “Does anyone have any new birds to add?” Only then are a field party’s best sightings revealed.



CBC data show that cardinals have increased their northern range.

Bill Roboin



Robert Budliger, retired director of environmental education for DEC and co-author of *Birds of New York State*, cites three major values of conducting CBCs. First, to maintain continuity of the 107-year database. Second, to energize birders at all levels to come together, mentor each other, and share in the common goal of citizen science. Third, and most important, CBCs generate publicity for birding, which in turn generates significant revenue for many localities. From newspapers to *Sports Illustrated* to national television, publicity about CBCs

draws attention to birding as an important recreational activity.

But what are the best aspects of participating in a CBC? Spending time outdoors with friends, having fun, and watching birds.

Lifelong birder and past president of both the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club and Audubon Society of the Capital Region, **Scott Stoner** is a veteran of decades of Christmas counts. Scott answers many of the bird-related letters to the *NYS Conservationist*.

**Denise Hackert-Stoner** is also a veteran birder, and a past officer of the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club. She and Scott edited the book, *Birding New York's Hudson-Mohawk Region*, published by the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club.

## Connect to Nature

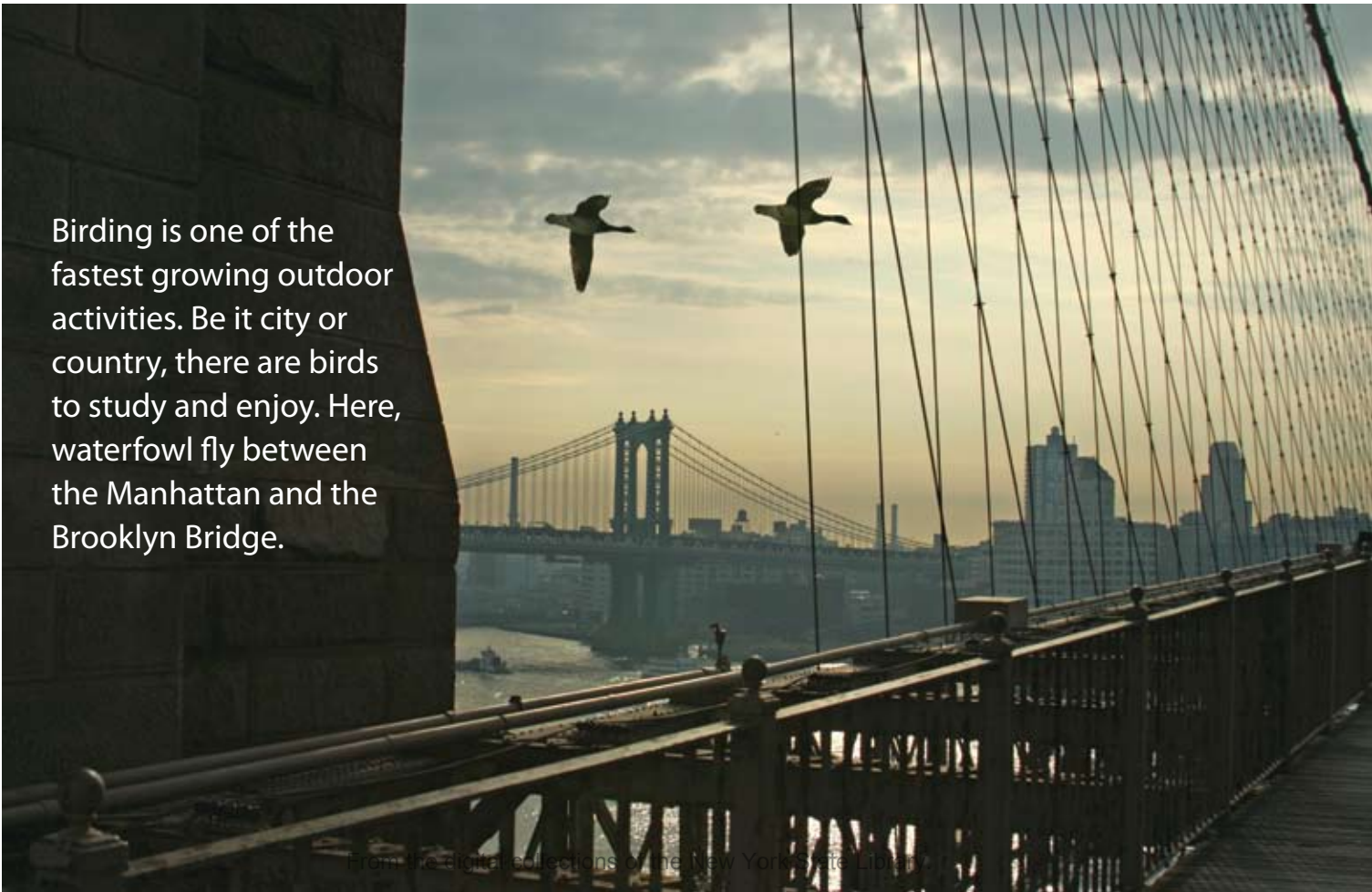
Whether for the sake of science, the fun of birding, or the social experience, the CBC is for everyone. All you need is a willingness to share a day and an interest in birds.

We encourage you to take a break this holiday season. Enjoy the outdoors, feel the crisp air, listen for that first bird song to welcome the dawn. Wait for the last owl to call at night. When you return to the holiday preparations the next day, you'll be refreshed and energized.

If you are interested in learning how you can participate in your local CBC, visit [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc) or call 518-869-9731.

Andrew Cribb

Birding is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities. Be it city or country, there are birds to study and enjoy. Here, waterfowl fly between the Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge.





# On Patrol

*Real stories from Conservation Officers and Forest Rangers in the field*

Contributed by ECO Lt. Ken Didion and Forest Ranger Chris Liebelt

## **Expensive Venison—Delaware County**

ECOs received a tip about a button buck that had been shot from a vehicle with the aid of a spotlight during the early morning hours. The deer was reportedly stashed behind a barn in Hardenburgh. ECOs Vern Bauer and Lt. Larry DiDonato conducted surveillance of the area from a distance.

As darkness fell, the ECOs watched a white Cadillac Escalade stop a short distance from the barn. A passenger got out and ran behind the barn, and the Escalade continued down the road. ECO Bauer followed the path the person had taken past the barn and found him field-dressing an illegally taken deer. The man attempted to flee, but was quickly subdued by the officers. Within a few minutes, the Escalade returned. It was being driven by the father of the man in custody, and he was also arrested. The son provided a full account of the deer jacking that had occurred earlier that day. The two men were fined \$4,000 and ordered to forfeit their rifle. Their hunting privileges are being revoked.

## **Algonquin Rescue—Essex County**

Forest Ranger Dispatch in Ray Brook received a report that a 25-year-old woman had injured her knee during a fall on a steep section of trail below the summit of Algonquin Mountain. She was immobile and unable to descend.

A rescue team led by Forest Ranger Charlie Platt located the woman, placed her in a litter, and began the slow descent down the steep and rugged terrain. After a short time, rangers located an open area that could facilitate a helicopter hoist extraction. The injured hiker was successfully lifted into a helicopter by Forest Ranger Kevin Burns, who was on board the helicopter to aid in the rescue. The hiker was flown to the hospital, where she was treated and later released.

## **Searcher Found—Hamilton County**

Forest Ranger John Seifts was contacted by the caretaker of the Little Sand Point Campground in Arietta. The caretaker reported that a 15-year-old girl was missing. When Ranger Seifts arrived at the campground, the missing teenager was already back at her site, eating and warming up by the fire. After a few questions, Ranger Seifts realized that the teenager's father had left earlier to look for his daughter, and had not returned. He was dressed in a t-shirt, shorts and moccasins. Strong thunderstorms and heavy rain were pounding the area. Ranger Seifts called for assistance and rangers began searching the area.

At 1:30 A.M., rangers located the subject on the trail. He was soaked and shivering. Rangers gave him rain gear, and escorted him on the three-hour hike back to his camp where he was reunited with his family.

## **Cheating Trawler—Queens County**

Lt. John Fitzpatrick received a tip that the captain of a commercial fishing trawler was fishing for striped bass without a commercial license and was committing numerous violations of the Environmental Conservation Law. Lt. Fitzpatrick contacted ECOs Matthew LaCroix and Jamie Powers and set up a surveillance detail. While ECO LaCroix surveilled the vessel's dock, ECOs Powers and James Davey conducted surveillance at sea.

When the trawler returned to dock, all the fish and crustacea aboard the vessel were inventoried. Assisted by ECOs Tim Card and Darcie Dougherty, the inventory uncovered 872 pounds of striped bass, 32.5 pounds of fluke, two Atlantic sturgeon and 27 egg-bearing sponge crabs. All were taken in violation of the Environmental Conservation Law. The captain was arrested for felony-level illegal commercialization of wildlife. Charges are pending.



## BRIEFLY

### Moose Numbers on the Rise

Moose numbers are growing exponentially in New York, with roughly 500 moose in the northern part of the state. That's up from the estimated 50-100 moose a decade ago and a handful of sporadic sightings in the 1980s.

As their population has grown in New England and Canada, *Alces alces*, or the North American moose, have moved into New York. Their advancement has



come as a revelation to scientists such as Chuck Dente, a DEC big game biologist. When the state began documenting sightings in the 1980s,

there was no certainty that the moose would stay—much less grow in numbers. Even if they did stay, biologists thought it would take decades to reach such a large population.

"Basically, it kind of surprised us that these animals were taking to New York," Dente said. "Somewhere along the way they proved everyone wrong. They have adapted quite well."

Reports of wandering moose have become annual events—just recently a young male tramped through Troy, swam across the Hudson River, and moseyed to a backyard in Waterford. DEC officials later tranquilized and relocated him to the wilderness.

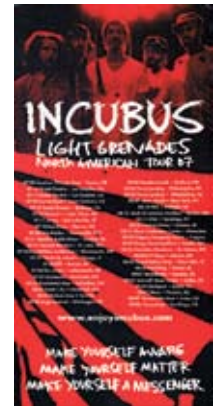
By October 5, the state had recorded at least 12 moose-automobile collisions—a record even before the start of breeding season, when the animals are most active.

### Rocking the Environment

Concerned about the fact that their tours have a large "carbon footprint," some national bands are working to "green" their traveling shows. They are buying carbon credits to offset their airline miles, hiring bio-diesel buses to cut down on their road emissions, and working to recycle and compost the waste from their catered meals.

This summer, DEC participated in aiding two band's efforts at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. John Mayer and Incubus offered DEC opportunities to distribute information and encourage concert goers to recycle, implement other good environmental practices, and sign up to receive email updates about conservation from the bands.

DEC staff working at the events got a chance to give thousands of music fans an environmental message. Incubus also sought DEC's advice on handling their recyclables and compostables when their special containers were left in New Jersey. They used the DEC-recommended brown paper bags for the rest of their 2007 "Light Grenades" tour. For more information, visit Make Yourself Foundation on the web at [www.makeyourselffoundation.org](http://www.makeyourselffoundation.org).



### ECO Honored

Environmental Conservation Officer Thomas Harrington was recently named "Officer of the Year" by the New York State Rifle and Pistol Association (NYSRPA). Harrington is a 19-year veteran.

NYSRPA recognizes one ECO each year, acknowledging the important role ECOs play in hunter education and safe firearms usage among sportsmen and women and youth.

ECO Harrington was responsible for the arrest of two subjects who were jacking deer in Otsego County. The investigation involved the illegal hunting of at least 18 deer which were recovered after being shot and left along roads. It was one of the largest jacking cases in

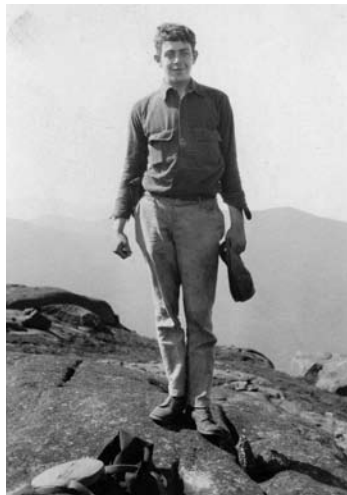


state history, with dozens of additional deer believed to have been shot over the course of a three-week period.

Harrington has also been a driving force in the development of a youth pellet shoot at the Otsego County Fair, and in addition has volunteered many hours on the design and development of a portable target shooting trailer which is used throughout Otsego County.

## Bob Marshall

Bob Marshall (August 2007 *Conservationist*) was a national treasure. In 1929-30 he bestowed the name at the mountain portal leading to the inner recesses of the Brooks Range for what would later become Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska. In 1940, a million-acre roadless area in the Rocky Mountain Front Range was designated in his honor as the much beloved Bob



Marshall family photo

Marshall Wilderness: "The Bob." Despite his fame and achievements, there had never been a memorial to him in his home state of New York until January 19, 2001, the 100th anniversary of his birth. On this day of celebration, two plaques were unveiled at a rededication of Marshall Hall at SUNY-ESF in Syracuse: one in honor of Robert Marshall and the second in honor of his father, Louis Marshall, for whom the building was named in 1933. It is with fervent hope that New York State will have the wisdom to create out of the Adirondack Forest Preserve, a 409,000 acre Bob Marshall Great Wilderness near Cranberry Lake.

Stanley Scharf  
Ithaca, Tompkins County

Thanks for the wonderful layout of my Bob Marshall article. I regret that I failed to credit the sources



Marshall family photo

for the photographs. They came from the Saranac Lake Free Library's Adirondack Room, the Adirondack Museum, the Adirondack Council, Stephen Scholle, Roger Marshall and Simone Kincaid. Keep up the good work!

Phil Brown  
Saranac Lake,  
Franklin County

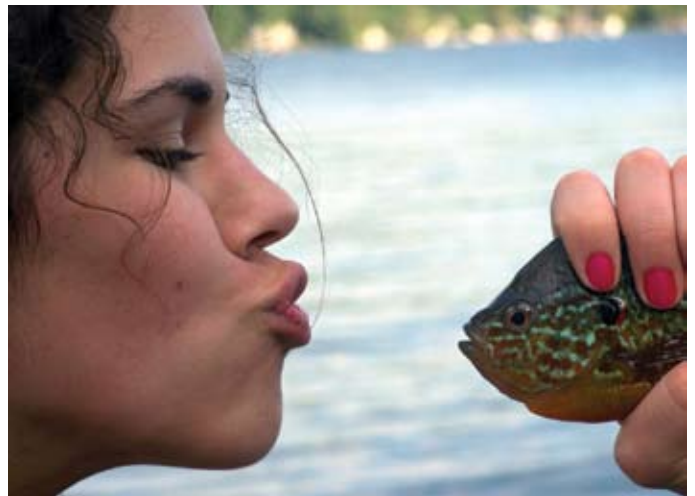
*Thanks for the update, a good reminder that there are great places to go to see those original photos and others like them.*

—David Nelson, Editor

## Kiss A Fish

One of my friends is a longtime *Conservationist* reader and she suggested I send you this photo. My daughter is an avid fisherwoman, and for her AP Statistics project she decided to compare the size of sunfish in Buck Pond (near Lake Ontario) and Conesus Lake. This picture was taken on the west side of Conesus Lake.

Laura Khederian  
via email



*By the looks of the photo, she really enjoyed her work. The pumpkinseed she is holding is a perfect example of the colorful sunfish that inhabit our lakes. As I'm sure your daughter knows, pumpkinseeds are fun to fish for. They are one of the most widespread and easily caught freshwater fish species, occurring in large numbers in shallow water close to shore. They readily bite small pieces of bait, fight hard when hooked, and taste delicious. If your daughter visited the lakes between May and August, she may have been able to see these fish spawning. Pumpkinseeds construct shallow nests close to shore in colonies, usually in 6-12 inches of water in areas of submerged vegetation.*

—Eileen Stegemann, Contributing Editor



## Funky Formation



Mother Nature endlessly does fascinating, creative, bizarre things; this one I must share with you. I understand how these "stalagmites" got their beeswax color from the water dripping through the large, hollow cherry tree. If I had not reached in and touched them I would have thought they had been manufactured and set in the tree and would not have believed they were ice.

Betty Densmore  
Machias, Cattaraugus County

*Nice pictures! However, "stalagmites" are formed from the ground up, while "stalactites" are formed hanging downward like the formations shown in your photos. The terms usually refer to deposits in caves, but in this case the hollowed-out tree is providing the stalactites a home. Conservationist readers, what do YOU think about these formations?*

—Alex Hyatt, Assistant Editor



### Write to us

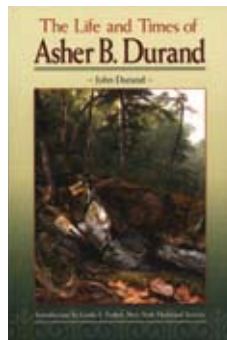
Conservationist Letters  
NYSDEC, 625 Broadway,  
Albany, NY 12233-4502

or e-mail us at:  
[magazine@gw.dec.state.ny.us](mailto:magazine@gw.dec.state.ny.us)

## 📖 REVIEW by Brian Swinn

### The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand

by John Durand  
\$17.95 soft cover  
Black Dome Press  
1011 Route 296  
Hensonville, NY 12439  
(518) 734-6357  
[www.blackdomepress.com](http://www.blackdomepress.com)



Originally published by Asher's son John in 1894, this book is considered to be the standard reference work on the artist, and is again available in reprint.

The book, however, is considerably more than a reference, as it bears witness to the interrelationship among events of the times, the realities of making one's way as an artist, the difficulties of starting an entirely new way of using art to focus environmental beauty, and yes, a son keeping the flame for his father's work. Although not its most famous member, Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) was a founder of the Hudson River School of painting. A commercially successful portrait painter and engraver, Durand in his later years turned to the beauty and freedom of

landscape painting and was drawn to the Catskills, and later, Lake George. He painted *Kindred Spirits*, (1849) perhaps the quintessential Hudson River School painting. Oddly enough, reproduction limitations of the 1890s apparently kept this haunting work out of the book.

Of note is the inclusion of several letters between Durand and Thomas Cole, who is considered to be the most prominent member of the school. In them, Cole opines that the best way to appreciate and paint his subjects is to live in the countryside. Durand, perhaps reflecting his familiarity with the commercial art world, prefers to homestead near population centers.

Ostensibly written for students of art history, and made charming by the curlicues and flourishes of Victorian-era passive sentence structure, there is much to recommend this book. It tells of the times when men of art were using their craft to help forge a national cultural and environmental identity through the establishment of the Hudson River School.

**Brian Swinn**, who passed away in August 2007, was a senior editor in DEC's Bureau of Internet and Publications.



# Back Trails Perspectives on People and Nature

## Of Time and Wool Coats

On Christmas morning, 2006, I open a big box. It holds a new brown-and-gray plaid Woolrich jacket, something I've wanted for years. In my opinion, that plaid is some of the best camouflage ever made for hardwood forests in autumn, and wool is the best material for hunting and woods work. Georgie, my wife, smiles and hopes that, once and for all, I will dispose of my old brown plaid Woolrich. That coat is a tad more than 40 years old, and has been called ragged, even disgusting. The cuffs are tattered, and the leather collar trim has mostly worn away. But it's comfortable and perfect for outdoor work.

*“To an outdoorsman, few things in life are as important as the choice of a coat.”*

Through January, the old coat and my beagle, Molly, accompany me as I work around the farm. In my woodlot, I remove damaged trees to set healthy saplings free. Seedlings and saplings reach for the sun, and I help them with ax and chainsaw. Elsewhere, thickets of crabapple, blackberry and other fruiting shrubs dot the farm's former pastures. Here, I remove the saplings. The thickets are full of wildlife now, but they are ephemeral. Trees will crowd out the berries and shrubs in a decade or two. Nature will eventually turn these thickets to forest, but each winter I cut saplings to delay the metamorphosis so I

can enjoy the berries, shrubs and wildlife for a few more years. All the while, Georgie wonders why I don't wear the new Woolrich. I explain that it's just too nice.

*“February is bitter cold. The old coat keeps me warm around the farm; the new coat is reserved for trips to town.”*

Old coats are a family tradition. My dad's red-and-black plaid Woolrich, circa 1950, passed through me to my oldest son, and is still used during deer season. I gave my first wool coat to my youngest son when it got too snug around my middle. The coat, you see, retains its youthful figure.

March arrives and the new coat gets its first major social outing: the regional fur auction. These events have occurred essentially unchanged since colonial times. Trappers leave the mountains with their furs and assemble at a central location. For two days, they consign their furs, which are inspected and sorted into lots of like species and quality. On Sunday, buyers arrive from exotic places, and the lots are auctioned off.

I assist at the sale, doing paperwork and hanging furs. Over the weekend, thousands of furs, beaver, mink, muskrat, raccoon, fox, skunk and more, fill the racks and floor space behind my work station. The scents are distinctive. Besides fur, dealers sell aromatic animal attractants like fox urine and beaver castor. The new wool

coat hangs on the back of my chair, its natural fibers drinking deeply of all that surrounds it. When I arrive home Sunday night, Georgie hugs me and announces, “You stink.” I hang the new coat on a kitchen chair, and Molly is transfixed. She stands motionless for two minutes, nostrils flaring rhythmically, before greeting me with a full body wag. The new coat is taking on character. I wonder, at age 65, if I will live long enough for this Woolrich to reach the venerable stage of the old coat.

March gives way to spring, and the wool coats spend more time indoors than out. Georgie wonders if I'll ever get rid of that old coat. Not as long as it is still so good, I tell her.

May arrives, and the coats hang side-by-side on the sun porch, awaiting autumn's first frost.

As they wait, I wonder. Perhaps character is being transferred from the old coat to the new.



Retired wildlife biologist and New York native **Bill Healy** releases oaks, hunts rabbits and writes from his farm in rural West Virginia.





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