



Highlands Lookout

www.njhighlandscoalition.org Newsletter of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition Spring/Summer 2014

Message from the Executive Director

I can't help but be excited about how we are building on the success of last year's Highlands Festival at Waterloo by making this year's Festival even better! Everything that worked so well last year will return; two stages of live music, local food court, crafts and vendors showcases, a fine arts show, canal rides, guided nature hikes, workshops, etc. And we will try some new things: A children's area with art, music and ecological activities; an expanded music lineup to include jazz, reggae and American Songbook; craft beers from the Highlands; and other exciting attractions and activities still in the planning stages. So please mark September 20 & 21 on your calendars and check the Festival website for the latest information: highlandsfestivalatwaterloo.org.

It is important that we take the time to celebrate the wonder, beauty and bounty of the Highlands' diverse resources, especially as we devote

so much of our focus on defending against the many threats—the ongoing debacle of the Fenimore Landfill and the re-emerged threat to develop the last remaining forested ridge in the Ramapo Mountains in Oakland, come to mind. We should not lose sight of a fundamental tool we have for protecting the Highlands—municipal conformance to the Highlands Regional Master Plan, even if the Highlands Council isn't going out on a limb to promote it. Highlands municipalities that want to tackle the very difficult task of balancing

economic growth with natural resource protection—the mechanisms, the expertise and the funding are available to those that request it. For towns that have given up the ratables chase in favor of a community where people actually prefer to live, or who had bought into the myth of home rule until a litigious developer made confetti out of its master plan, the Highlands Regional Master Plan, at least for now, is truly good planning, and as bullet-proof as plans can be.

Warmest regards,

Julia Conuel 

State House News *Elliott Ruga, editor*

In the past few months we have seen several remarkable developments in the ongoing debacle of the Fenimore Landfill in Roxbury. As the NJDEP proceeds with its controversial capping plan, the citizens group REACT continues to build momentum with its call for an investigation into DEP's handling of its failed Solar-on-Landfill project—which resulted in the current environmental catastrophe in Roxbury.

On May 14, the chairs of the Senate and Assembly Environment Committees, Senator Bob Smith and Assemblywoman Grace Spencer, issued a joint letter to Governor Christie calling for an investigation of NJDEP, calling its capping plan “greatly flawed” and that it “will create long term environmental and health hazards,” citing DEP’s “suspicious

refusal to provide soil samples” and among other concerns, “are very serious issues that demand accountability.”

On May 22, Nobel Prize-nominated Love Canal activist, Lois Gibbs, in a much publicized talk told a packed

Roxbury community meeting, “In the 36 years I have been doing this, I have never, ever, ever seen such an outrageous, insane thing happen as what’s happened here. Governor Christie has broken all the rules.”

It has come down to a race: Can an investigation convene before DEP

completes its capping operation, thus burying along with the still secret waste material, any questions about its culpability?

In mid-April we learned of a proposed Settlement Agreement between NJDEP and Bi-County

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Statehouse News *cont'd*

Development Corp to construct 200 residential units on the Preakness Range in Oakland. Part of the Ramapo Mountains, Preakness is the easternmost ridge of the Highlands (providing an iconic view of the distant NYC skyline). The development was roundly, and we thought finally, denied state permits in 2008, when NJDEP and the Highlands Council denied a required amendment to an areawide Water Quality Management Plan. They found that construction would destroy habitat for the endangered barred owl, unacceptably impact a Natural Heritage Priority Macrosite, which NJDEP considered “some of the best remaining habitat for rare species and exemplary natural communities in the State,” and a “globally imperiled ecological community.” In addition, providing water and wastewater utilities for the development would necessarily result in an unacceptable depletive strain on water resources in a subwatershed already in a water deficit.

We submitted considerably researched, comprehensive and persuasive comments opposing the agreement (that may be viewed via a link on our home page). We are considering further actions if the proposed agreement is adopted. [NJRC](#)



Drone camera view of Lopatcong Creek in Lopatcong Twp. by Flying Turtle Studio, which has donated its services to help map watershed features for Lopatcong Creek Initiative

The Lopatcong Creek Initiative (LCI)

Juniper Leifer, LCI Coordinator

Most of the surface water of the New Jersey Highlands eventually flows into New York Harbor via the Passaic or Raritan rivers. However, six Highlands rivers flow into the Delaware River. One, the Lopatcong Creek, and its watershed, which is shared by five Warren County municipalities, is the focus of an exciting expansion of our advocacy work. Philadelphia’s William Penn Foundation (WPF), has made a major financial commitment to improving water quality in the Delaware River. WPF is funding environmental and conservation projects throughout the Delaware Basin. Nine organizations working in the Highlands, including the NJ Highlands Coalition, have projects funded under the WPF initiative. In the Lopatcong Creek watershed we are joined by New Jersey Audubon and North Jersey Resource, Conservation & Development (NJRC&D) in launching WPF-funded projects.

Through our program, the Lopatcong Creek Initiative, we aim to educate area residents, businesses, farmers, students, municipal officials, service organizations, recreational, and other groups about the inherent connections each have with the Lopatcong Creek. Through community engagement and education, our goal is to improve trout habitat as a measure of improved water quality.

We want to instill an understanding of the impacts that individuals have on the health and wellbeing of the river; if we succeed, the community will in turn develop an appreciation of how the health and wellbeing of the river is directly linked to their own.

This is a departure from the Coalition’s usual advocacy work of protecting natural and cultural

resources through legislation and regulation. This is a softer approach—through connecting people with the resource, behaviors will fundamentally change. As an example, in the several years that I have been a resident of Lopatcong Township, I would pass over the Lopatcong Creek by bridge and by culvert many times each day, never mindful that it is part of a complex and unified riverine system, or that it even has a name. Today, however, I am aware of its contribution to our drinking water supply that, because of the predominance of limestone geology, is one of the finest trout streams in the State, and that there are places along it of breathtaking beauty. As such, I have learned to respect the river and I am mindful of the need to maintain and restore its ecological health.

We will provide information to the community on how they can improve the river’s ecological health and increase opportunities for recreational access to the river. A better informed community is far more likely to act responsibly and make better choices where their actions might impact the river.

Despite being revered by area fisherman, the river is largely unnoticed by the greater community. We will increase the public’s awareness of the river with programs developed by the Musconetcong Watershed Association that have a track record of success in nearby communities.

Our WPF-funded partners share in our goals: NJRC&D aims to produce a comprehensive Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan. They have also designed and proposed a project to separate the Lopatcong Creek from the path of the Morris Canal in Greenwich Township, where the river and canal had merged after the canal was decommissioned in 1924, and to re-establish its natural floodplain.

Continued on page 3

LCI *cont'd*


NJ Audubon is preparing a project of riparian restoration to stabilize eroded



Drone photo of Lopatcong Creek at Harker's Hollow Golf & Country Club, Harmony

stream banks and to cool the water with the shade of native trees. Their focus will be on the farming community with whom they hope to implement a program of Riparian Corridor Best Management Practices.

We will initiate our community outreach at the Warren County Farmer's Fair at the end of July. Late in the fall we will partner with Trout Unlimited and other organizations to sponsor the first Lopatcong Creek River Clean Up. Looking ahead, we are planning to offer classroom programs to teachers in the area schools.

The Creek is often referred to as the hidden jewel of Lopatcong. It is renowned by those who are acquainted with it. Yet it has been overlooked by the communities through which the river flows. 

Program Coordinator Juniper Leifer would like to hear from anyone knowledgeable about Lopatcong Creek from the conservation or outdoor recreation/sports communities. Please email juniper@njhighlandscoalition.org if you have any expertise, ideas, or information that might benefit the program.

Birding with Dennis *Julia Somers, Executive Director & amateur ornithologist*

Indigo bunting, yellow-billed cuckoo, scarlet tanager, Louisiana water thrush, rose breasted grosbeak, and on and on ... In fact, 90 different species were spotted in just one morning spent in the Highlands with birding expert Dennis Miranda. The names are poetry: blackpoll warbler, golden crowned kinglet, alder flycatcher, rough winged swallow ... like being in a fairytale!


I am a novice, but it was my great privilege to go birding with Dennis, Coalition trustee and Executive Director of the Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association in PA (<http://www.wvwa.org/>). For years Dennis lived in Vernon and he knows where to go to find birds. He was kind enough to get up before the crack of dawn to return to his old stomping ground and lead our 2014 Birdathon.

On a sunny May morning, clear with a moderate temperature and not too windy, we met up with trustee Ciny MacGonagle and headed towards Clinton Reservoir. It was perfect conditions for someone as clueless as I about birding. For the next few hours, we drove to different spots in West Milford, Vernon and Hardyston, to hike, to listen and to watch. Dennis chose

each spot we visited because of its varied habitat, seeking different birds, where he would explain what kind of bird we were looking for and why.

Dennis is a serious birder; twice his team won New Jersey Audubon's World Series of Birding, where competitors typically identify more than 200 birds in 24 hours. Competitive birding takes place at considerable speed, sometimes from a car window as one drives around the state. Certain places like Clinton Road in West Milford and the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Harding Township are hot spots for birders, particularly during migration in the spring and the fall. Dennis was an ideal guide to help us identify as many species as possible in a short amount of time. A bird may be identified either by sight or by sound. Dennis identified the unique sound the species of bird made as we heard it, and whenever possible we also spotted the bird through binoculars. He would imitate the calls of a bird of prey to flush birds out from hiding, or mimic calls to elicit a locating response (like the owls he hooted at), or simulate the mating calls of

other no doubt disappointed birds. In Vernon we visited one place Dennis knew cliff swallows could reliably be seen. We were not disappointed.

By lunchtime, we had climbed out of the car countless times and were feeling quite proud of ourselves for logging 90 different bird species. It had been a very satisfying and thoroughly enjoyable way to spend a few hours outdoors in the New Jersey Highlands among some of its most glorious inhabitants. And to all those who participated by pledging donations based on the number of species we identified, it was also an excellent way to raise funds for the Coalition. 



Scarlet Tanager photographed by Blaine Rothausser



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Spring/Summer 2014 Newsletter

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Your water
Your future

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is a nonprofit organization made up of groups and individuals committed to a common goal of helping protect, enhance and restore the New Jersey Highlands.

You can help.

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New Jersey Highlands Coalition
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Yes! I am interested in volunteering for the Coalition.