

Gloucester County Nature Club

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

Nature Club meetings are open to the public

January 2002

Note the change of date for this month only from our usual second Thursday of the month

REGULAR MEETING – Wed. , January 2, 2002 – 7:00 pm – EIRC, 606 Delsea Dr. Sewell

Bob Cassel, Program Coordinator, 478-2496

Spring Migration in Ammarnäs, Sweden

Description: Our January program takes us to Sweden. The small town of Ammarnäs is located in northern Sweden, just south of the arctic circle. A team of researchers from Lund University in southern Sweden have been monitoring bird populations (through censuses and mist-netting) and conducting research on bird migration there for over 30 years. One topic they have focused on is the importance of fat to both migration and breeding. Our presenter, Jeff Mollenhauer, is a Teaching Research Assistant at the University of South Mississippi Migratory Bird Lab. Jeff is currently conducting his project on the relationship between song rates and fat score in male Bluethroats (*Luscinia svecica*) that migrate from Africa to the Swedish Arctic. Can the fat birds spend more time singing?



FIELD TRIP – Sat., January 5, 2002 - 9:30 am - Noon

Kris Mollenhauer, Field Trip Coordinator, 589-4387

Field Trip - Insectarium, Philadelphia, PA

The Insectarium is the only all-bug museum in the Philadelphia area. People of all ages enjoy visiting this unique attraction. The museum is filled with thousands of mounted insects from all over the world. View live species in naturalized habitats. Enjoy the interactive exhibits that challenge children and adults alike. It is truly a fun learning experience. It is the perfect place for our January field trip!



There is no other place where you can touch and hold a Madagascar hissing cockroach, a Whip-Tail Scorpion, a giant African millipede and eat some tasty mealworms all in one field trip!

The idea to open a museum filled solely with insects was inspired by an idea that Steve Kanya once had.

In the front window of Steve's Bug Off Exterminating Company, there was a "catch of the day" display, filled with various insects and rodents. Cars and people would stop by the window to see the newest display crawling with activity. After that the idea of an insect-based museum blossomed. In January of 1992, the only insect museum in the tri-state area first opened its doors to the public. The museum's mission is to teach everyone about the importance of insects to the balance of nature, the environment, and our economy. Since January of 1992, numerous busloads of children, numerous Boy and Girl Scouts, thousands of teachers and visitors have walked through the museum.

Today the museum is two floors of live and mounted insects from all over the world. There are approximately 6,500 feet of Madagascar Hissing cockroaches, Mexican Red Leg tarantulas, Emperor Scorpions, Goliath beetles, Indian walking sticks, Praying Mantis, centipedes, African millipedes, Thorny Devils, Human Face Stink Bugs, Waterbugs, Velvet Ants, Camel Crickets and a world wide butterfly collection. On display, there is a kitchen and bathroom crawling with American cockroaches, a tank filled with glow-in-the-dark scorpions, a working beehive and a live termite colony. There are also many interactive games, quiz boards, puzzles, microscopes as well as a crawl-through spider web made of bungee cord.

We will meet at Timberline Shopping Center in Mantua. They do have a cafeteria so bring your lunch. Admission price is \$5.

Upcoming Field Trips:

Feb. 9: Cumberland County's Second Annual Raptor Festival with lectures, field trips, demonstrations and vendors

March 16: Sterling Hill Mine, Ogdensburg, NJ- tour of underground zinc mine with spectacular mineral fluorescence display

April 13: Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve

May 4: Bird Quest

June 13: Annual Picnic at Red Bank Battlefield Park

Environmental Info/Nature Notes – January, 2002

Gloria Caccia, Environmental Coordinator, 582-0980

House Finches (extracted from Cornell University Plantation news)



Many people are familiar with the house finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), a small, common songbird that frequently visits backyard feeders. Originally native to the West, house finches have expanded rapidly across the eastern United States ever since pet dealers released a small number of them in New York City in 1940. Eastern house finches attracted the attention of scientists in 1994, when birds with swollen, crusty eyes began to appear throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Researchers discovered that a tiny bacterium, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* (MG), causes this eye disease, called conjunctivitis, which eventually causes infected finches to become blind. Within only a few years, MG has spread through the house finch population, reaching epidemic levels.

Soon after MG was first detected in house finches, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology implemented a nationwide citizen survey to assess its large-scale impact. Because healthy house finches are easy to distinguish from infected ones at feeders, birdwatchers across the nation were able to track both the spread of MG and its effect on the house finch populations.

House finches may be particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases like MG because of their gregarious lifestyle. These social creatures form large flocks during the fall and winter. Furthermore, house finches are seed eaters, causing them to congregate at backyard feeders. These two traits may be a deadly combination: MG seems to spread easily between birds at feeding stations, where contact is most likely.

Currently, researchers are conducting a detailed local study of house finch ecology and behavior. They hope to discover why rates of MG infection seem to peak in the fall and winter, then fall to low levels during the summer

breeding season. House finches feed in large flocks during the winter but are less social during the breeding season; this behavioral shift may cause the striking seasonal disease patterns observed. Further studies are needed.

For information about the house finch disease survey, visit: www.birds.cornell.edu/hofi/index.html

Let Fallen Branches Lie (extracted from Cornell University Plantation news)

Many people are constantly tidying up their lawns and gardens. We often remove the “messy” dead vegetation, and as a result we are forced to feed our garden plants, adding fertilizers, compost, and mulch to restore what we have taken away. But too much fertilizer and light encourages weeds, which can crowd out less aggressive native plants.



For natural areas, the balance is even trickier. Some plants thrive only in the bare mineral soils exposed when a tree tips over. Others take root in the rotting wood of an ancient tree fall. Still others need a thick leafy cover to survive cold winters. Chickadees tuck emergency supplies of winter food under flaps of loose tree bark. Dead branches on the forest floor provide shelter for birds and small mammals. Fallen branches also can protect plants from deer browsing.

What would happen if we tried to tidy up our streams and forests? Rearranging or removing gravel and large rocks in a creek bed would disturb the aquatic insects living there, and in extreme cases, might obliterate the whole community. This would destroy not only small insect larvae but also larger animals like fish and frogs, and the birds that feed on them. Removing standing dead trees from a forest would eliminate homes for birds such as woodpeckers, owls, and chickadees that nest in tree cavities. It also would remove the insects that burrow into the dead wood, which serve as a potential food source for many birds. Finally, much of the nitrogen in forest soils is produced by tiny organisms living in the decaying wood. So, removing dead vegetation from the forest floor also removes a nutrient source essential for forest growth.

To protect the full diversity of flora and fauna in our natural areas, we need to be aware that plants and animals may thrive in, or even require, a certain degree of “messiness.” We need to let gravel and rocks shift naturally in creek beds, let dead trees stand, let fallen trees and branches lie, and remember that plant and animal life that may be hidden where we least expect it. So, you can ease up on over-tidying your lawn and garden this year with a clear conscience. In fact, you may even want to consider messing them up a bit!

**A Happy
New
Year!**



Executive Committee Meeting: The next Board of Trustees/Executive Committee Meeting will be held on Sunday, January 6, 2002 at 7:00 pm at the home of Gloria Caccia, 161 Brookfield Avenue, Pitman, NJ 08071. Members are invited to attend the Executive Meetings.

Club News: The Nature Club is always looking for ideas for future programs and field trips. Please contact the program and/or field trip coordinators with your ideas. For information about the Gloucester County Nature Club, call:

Brian Hayes, President 468-9272

Mimi Glass, Membership Chair, 589-6435

Information for next month's newsletter should be sent, by the 15th of each month, to:
Erik Mollenhauer, 606 Delsea Dr. Sewell NJ 08080, 582-7000 X128

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c/o EIRC
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