



December Meeting: Native Plants in Your Garden



Thursday, December 14th at 7:30 pm

(for location and directions, see page 2)



Would you like to attract more birds and wildlife into your backyard? Learn how using native plants in your landscape can do just that. This program, presented by Penn State Master Gardener, Lorrie Preston, of Cumberland County, will explore ways to incorporate some specific native trees, shrubs, perennials, vines and groundcovers into your property that may attract some pretty interesting creatures as a result.

Lorrie Preston's property in Hampden Township is certified as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat through the National Wildlife Federation, and was one of the first Monarch Waystations in the US through Monarch Watch and the University of Kansas. Lorrie is passionate about teaching others how to take care of their properties in an environmentally healthy manner and re-establishing native plant communities for the benefit of our native birds, insects, and other creatures.

Barn Owl Population Decline

by Hannah Plumpton

For the past several generations, worldwide barn owl populations have decreased. Luckily, the decline of this species can be prevented through the use of some simple solutions.

The Barn Owl is not a federally listed species, but several states have declared them endangered or worthy of special concern because of population declines caused by modern farming practices, the use of pesticides, and collisions with vehicles. As farmers have shifted from cover crops to row crops, valuable shelter and food have been lost for voles and mice - the Barn Owl's primary food source. The loss of hedgerows, the draining of wetlands, and the conversion from old-style wood barns to new metal farm buildings has also destroyed much of the owl's habitat. Modern barns and silos are often sealed to prevent owl access and nesting.



Another main factor for the population decline is the use of pesticides. For some unknown reason, pesticides appear to affect Barn Owls more than any other owl species. Pesticides often cause eggshell thinning, which has greatly contributed to population decline for various bird species.

The last main factor in the decline is the collision of owls with vehicles. In Idaho, for instance, 2,500 owls were killed along one roadway in two years. It is believed the owls were hunting when they died. Apparently, they followed their prey to the roadway and across it, then were hit by vehicles. Barn Owls are being killed by vehicles at a rate ten times greater than other birds. One theory as to why is that the birds may receive non-lethal poisoning from eating rodents containing pesticides, which could affect the owl's central nervous system, making them slower to react to oncoming vehicles.

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Barn Owls

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In addition to these negative impacts, many people don't see the value of owls, and sometimes even deliberately kill them. Education is the most important step in changing this mentality. Show people, especially farmers, that Barn Owls are helpful and not harmful. Barn Owls are often blamed for poultry loss, which most likely does not occur, as a Barn Owl's primary food source is rodents. A nesting pair of Barn Owls can consume three thousand rodents per breeding season, saving farmers thousands of dollars in pesticides. Every rodent eaten by an owl means less grain consumed by a rodent, leading to a larger profit for farmers.

Barn owls have proven themselves to be extremely adaptable in the past, but now, if they are to survive, landowners must provide and maintain the habitat. Woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, and farmlands need to be protected, not just for Barn Owls, but for other animals as well. Another proven way to prevent further decline, and possibly help increase the population, is the use of nest boxes similar to ones made for wood ducks and bluebirds. In areas where large amounts of owls are killed by vehicles, speed limits could be lowered or a sign could be put up to warn drivers to watch out for owls. We can also learn from European countries to gain valuable techniques and information on the Barn Owl. One technique they have used is to line the roads where owls are being killed in high numbers with high shrubs, hopefully encouraging them to fly higher.

As you can see, the Barn Owl is a valuable creature that must be preserved. Their decline stems from many human causes, but luckily there are some simple solutions we can use to ensure their survival.



Appalachian Audubon monthly (Sept-May) programs normally take place on the 3rd Thursday of each month in Christ Presbyterian Church, 421 Deerfield Road, in the Allendale neighborhood of Camp Hill, at 7:30 p.m. Exceptions are announced in this newsletter, as are field trips and other activities.

**PROGRAMS ARE FREE AND
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

Directions: Take New Cumberland exit off I-83; cross Carlisle Road. Turn left onto Allendale Way; take first left at Deerfield Road (from the south, take New Cumberland exit, turn left onto Carlisle Road, left onto Cedar Cliff Road, left on Allendale Way, then left onto Deerfield Road) to the church.

Living Garde



by Lorrie Preston, Penn State Master Gardener, Cum-

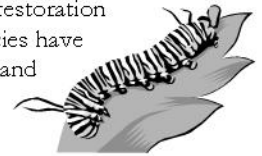
Sometimes, at first glance, native plants can seem to come up short in the "Wow!" department. Such was the case the first time I saw our native shrub, the Spicebush. When I went shopping for it mid-season, it looked a bit boring...green mid-sized leaves and lots of stems. I ended up going home without one. In comparison, large vibrant flowers bloomed on nearby exotic shrubs in the garden center. Brought to Pennsylvania from far-away places, the beauty and sales-appeal of exotic ornamentals attract attention away from the native plants that our wildlife need to survive. But when I began to REALLY understand the connection between the birds and wildlife I love and their need for native plants that provide just the right food at exactly the right time of year, I began to see native plants in a whole new light. Six new Spicebush have been planted in my little woodland strip this summer, and I can't wait to see who comes to visit next year as a result.

***Lindera benzoin*, the Spicebush, is one of the first native shrubs to bloom each spring, and offers much for Pennsylvania wildlife.** The multi-stemmed plant grows as tall as it does wide – most often topping out at 10 to 12 feet. It thrives in both sun and shade, although it seems to appear most often in nature as a shaded woodland understory plant. Moist soil is best, but it is quite tolerant of dry and wet soils. Although the individual flowers are very small and not showy, the numerous clusters of bright yellow blooms along the stem are a cheerful sight in late April and May – especially when planted in mass, the way they are found in nature. These highly aromatic flowers provide nectar for early season pollinators. All parts of the plant produce a unique and spicy aroma when crushed or broken. After the flowers fade, the 3 to 5-inch-long leaves emerge.

During the summer season, the plant becomes the host plant for four different caterpillars: the Spicebush Swallowtail, Tiger Swallowtail, Tulip-Tree Beauty Moth, and the large Promethea Moth, which lay their eggs on the Spicebush, and the larvae feed on it as they grow. In the early stages of development, the caterpillar of the Spicebush Swallowtail resembles bird droppings as protection from predators. Later caterpillar instars are green with two large false eyespots on top of the thorax, mimicking a snake. Should a hungry bird happen upon a hiding caterpillar, it will quickly decide not to mess with "a snake" of that size. Still, caterpillars and insects with less camouflage do become an important food source for backyard birds through the year.

In the fall, the leaves of the Spicebush turn bright yellow, and the previously pollinated flowers of spring become oval, bright, scarlet red berries about one third of an inch long, borne in clusters along the stem. They do not last long on the plant, however, as they are anxiously feasted upon by many of our native berry-eating birds. It is a favorite food of the American Robin, Cardinal, Common Flicker, Eastern Kingbird, Gray Catbird, Great Crested Flycatcher, Veery, Red-Eyed Vireo, White-throated Sparrow, and Wood, Hermit, and Gray-cheeked Thrushes.

The native Spicebush is not necessarily a foundation or front yard plant, but I highly recommend it in a mixed border or woodland edge. It makes an excellent restoration plant in areas where invasive plant species have been removed – particularly as a woodland understory plant. Plant several...your backyard wildlife will be glad you did!



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December 2006

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December Field Trip—Bald Eagles

Saturday, December 2nd at 7 AM. The Conowingo Dam crosses the Susquehanna River in Maryland, just above the Mason-Dixon line. It's not unusual to see 25 Bald Eagles feasting on fish below the dam. Many winter gulls may also be seen. Contact trip leader Pete Fox at 583-2639 (*before 9 PM*) or pfox@raiderweb.org.



AAS— Sponsored Christmas Bird Counts



Harrisburg Bird Count—*Saturday, December 16*—Contact Deuane Hoffman at 564-7475 or corvuscorax@comcast.net

New Bloomfield Bird Count—*Saturday, December 23*—Contact Ramsay Koury at 761-1871 or rkoury123@aol.com

Curtin Bird Count—*Thursday, December 28*—Contact Scott Bills at 896-8859 or sbills@state.pa.us

Newville Bird Count—*Saturday, December 30*—Contact Bill and Linda Franz at 776-4463 or wlf Franz@earthlink.net

MOVING? TAKING AN EXTENDED VACATION?

To receive AAS mailings when away on long vacations or after moving, PLEASE contact our AAS chapter Membership chair (see p.2) with your address change. This saves us money while keeping you current with our activities. Giving a change of address form to the US Post Office (USPS) **will NOT help**; our USPS addresses are handled by National Audubon. We incur a \$.39 charge per item for each piece of incorrectly addressed, returned mail. Please help us help you!