

THE  
**FRENCH  
 CREEK**  
*watershed*



A COMMUNITY TREASURE

**FACT SHEET**

written by John Tautin

# Important Bird Areas of the French Creek Watershed

Blue Heron



Photo Courtesy of Brian Bechtold

Introduction

The French Creek watershed is renowned for the diversity and abundance of its aquatic resources, including 89 species of fish and a remarkable 27 species of mussels. This great diversity reflects a healthy ecosystem with clean water, good soil, and a varied landscape composed of forests, perennial grasslands, wetlands, and agricultural lands. These same qualities that make the watershed outstanding for fish and mussels also provide great habitat for birds. Currently, 265 bird species occur regularly in the French Creek watershed, as year-round residents, summer breeders, or spring and fall passage migrants.

Birds are found throughout the French Creek Watershed, but four areas stand out enough that they were named as Important Bird Areas (IBAs). These areas are: the Erie National Wildlife Refuge, the Hemlock Hill Research Area, the Cussewago Bottoms and the Conneaut-Geneva Marsh. The IBA program is coordinated by the National Audubon Society and Audubon Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has 85 IBAs in total.

Important Bird Area

To qualify as an IBA in Pennsylvania, a site must satisfy at least one of several criteria, as follows:

- Any site having exceptional concentration or diversity of birdlife
- Sites with a significant population of state or federally endangered or threatened species
- Sites supporting a significant population of one or more species on Pennsylvania's "special concern" list
- Sites containing representative, rare, threatened, or unique habitats, with birds characteristic of those habitats
- Sites where long-term avian research or monitoring is ongoing

The IBA program is a vital conservation initiative designed to help combat threats to bird habitats. By focusing attention on the most essential and vulnerable areas, the Important Bird Area program helps promote proactive habitat conservation, which benefits birds and biodiversity.

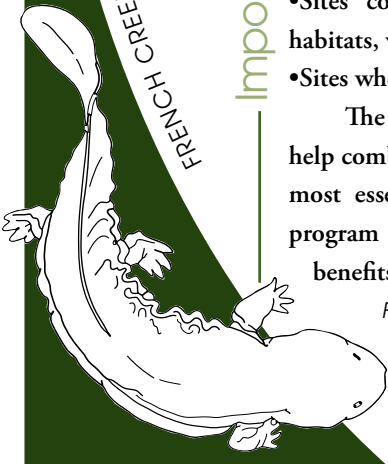
For more information on the IBA program in Pennsylvania see: <http://pa.audubon.org/iba/>



The Bald Eagle is rare in most parts of the country, but the French Creek Watershed is one of its strongholds. Bald Eagles nest on three of the four Important Bird Areas in the Watershed.

Photo Courtesy of Michelle Franz

FRENCH CREEK VALLEY CONSERVANCY  
[www.frenchcreekconservancy.org](http://www.frenchcreekconservancy.org)



Hooded Warbler



Photo Courtesy of Debbie McKenzie

Pennsylvania's  
Important Bird Area  
Program

The IBA program was started by Birdlife International in Europe in the 1980s. Birdlife International is a global coalition of partner organizations in over 100 countries. The National Audubon Society is the U.S. Partner Designate of Birdlife International and administers the IBA program in the United States. An IBA is a site that is part of a global network of places recognized for their outstanding value to bird conservation. An IBA can be large or small, public or private, and must meet one of several objective criteria. Since the IBA program is voluntary, there are no legal or regulatory restrictions.

The Erie National  
Wildlife Refuge

The Erie National Wildlife refuge (Erie NWR) was established in 1959 amid a mixture of forests, wetlands, farms and rural residential land in central Crawford County. It is owned and operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Refuge consists of two separate divisions. The Sugar Lake Division located near Guys Mills is the larger (5,206 acres) and more heavily managed and frequently visited division. It lies in a narrow valley that includes the hydrologic divide between Lake Creek, which becomes Sugar Creek, and Woodcock Creek. Both are major tributaries of French Creek.

The 3,571 acre Seneca Division is located several miles east of Cambridge Springs, and ten miles north of the Sugar Lake Division. It is situated in a forested valley with wetlands associated with low-gradient, meandering Muddy Creek and Dead Creek. Their confluence is at the western-most edge of the Seneca Division. Together, the two Erie NWR Divisions have a wide range of forest, grassland, and wetland habitats. These habitats are home to a number of plant and animal species that are threatened, endangered, or otherwise of special concern. A total of 223 bird species have been recorded at ENWR with 112 species believed to nest there.

Erie NWR qualified as an IBA on several counts: It is an important migratory stopover for waterfowl. Up to 2,500 ducks and 4,500 migratory Canada geese use the Refuge during spring and fall migration, as do small numbers of tundra swans. In addition to migrants, the Refuge hosts significant numbers of breeding ducks, particularly wood



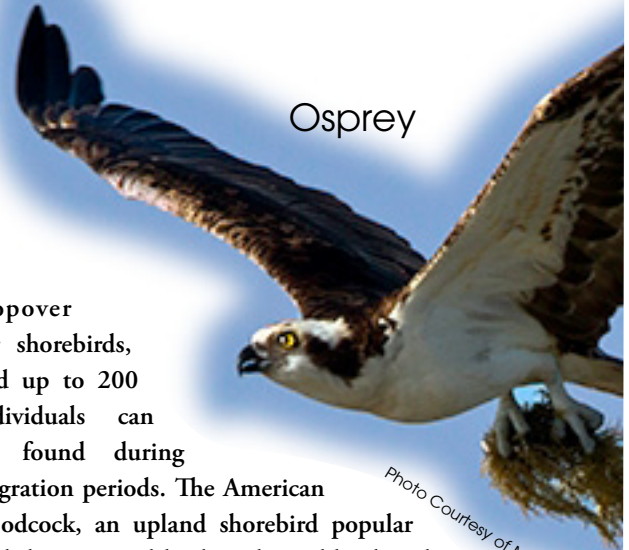
Woodcock

Photo Courtesy of Brian Berchtold

The American woodcock, an upland shorebird popular with hunters and birdwatchers alike, breeds on the Refuge.

ducks and hooded mergansers. These ducks nest in tree holes, and the Refuge operates a nest box program that augments production from natural cavities.

Erie NWR is also an important migratory



Osprey

Photo Courtesy of Michelle Franz

stopover for shorebirds, and up to 200 individuals can be found during migration periods. The American woodcock, an upland shorebird popular with hunters and birdwatchers alike, breeds on the Refuge. Portions of the Refuge are maintained in old field and brushy habitats favored by woodcock.

At least three pairs of endangered bald eagles nest on the Refuge, as do several other Pennsylvania Breeding Birds of Special Concern (sedge wren, northern harrier, pied-billed grebe, common snipe and marsh wren). Numerous others occur at times, some with frequency (American bittern, great egret, peregrine falcon, black tern, common tern, short-eared owl, osprey, upland sandpiper, yellow-bellied flycatcher, black-crowned night heron, green-winged teal, northern goshawk, American coot, Swainson's thrush, prothonotary warbler, long-eared owl and saw-whet owl). Abundant wetlands make the French Creek Watershed's Important Bird Areas especially important to waterfowl.

Erie NWR welcomes visitors. A small visitor center houses displays and other educational and interpretive materials. A well-maintained system of trails, overlooks and observation blinds invites bird watching. A Refuge map and checklist of birds are available. Hunting of game birds is permitted at Erie NWR in accordance with federal and state regulations.

For more information, call 814-789-3585 or visit the Erie NWR web site (<http://erie.fws.gov/>).





Hemlock Hill Research Area is located adjacent to Erie National Wildlife Refuge in central Crawford County. Hemlock Hill itself is a vibrant and verdant 440 acre forested slope comprised of hemlocks and mixed hardwoods such as beech, maple, ash, oak, and black cherry. Unlike many of Pennsylvania's forests that have been ravaged by over-abundant white-tailed deer, the forest at Hemlock Hill has a healthy understory comprised of regenerating hardwoods, viburnums, spicebush, black berry, black cohosh, and other low growing species of plants. This multi-layered structure of the forest makes ideal habitat for a variety of forest dwelling birds, and several species nest in large numbers.

Based on intensive observations of marked birds, it is estimated that Hemlock Hill supports 120 pairs of red-eyed vireos, 100 pairs of American Redstarts, 75 pairs of hooded warblers, 30 pairs each of magnolia warblers, blackburnian warblers, and wood thrush, 20 pairs each of Acadian flycatchers, black-throated green warblers, and blue-headed vireos, and lesser numbers of many other species. By anyone's standards, these are remarkable numbers, and a testament to the quality of this well-managed forest.

To minimize disturbance of the birds and the scientists studying them, Hemlock Hill is closed to the public during the spring and summer. Bird watching, hunting, and other forms of non-motorized recreation are permitted during the fall and winter. Directions: Rt. 408E from Cambridge Springs, cross Erie National Wildlife Refuge on Swamp Road, then south one mile on Teepleville Flats Road.



Cussewago Creek, its floodplain, and adjacent uplands comprise the 4,200 acre Cussewago Bottoms Important Bird Area. A low-gradient stream, Cussewago snakes its way south-southeast through a long (16 miles) and narrow (1 mile) glacial outwash valley, joining French Creek at Meadville. Through the natural processes of stream meander, many cutoffs, oxbows and backwaters have been created in the Bottoms. Side streams dammed by beavers and frequent flooding maintain the Bottoms' abundant wetlands. Emergent herbaceous wetlands occur in the Bottoms, but most of the area is woody wetlands. The combination of wetlands and heavy vegetation make the Cussewago Bottoms distinctly visible on satellite images from space.

Cussewago Bottoms was selected as an Important Bird Area for a number of reasons. It has an exceptional diversity of species. Characteristic bottomland and wet forest species such as yellow-throated vireo, warbling vireo, northern waterthrush, veery, and cerulean warbler, a species in decline over much of its range, are found in the Bottoms. Ovenbirds, scarlet tanagers, rose-breasted grosbeaks and other mature forest-dwelling neotropical migrants nest there. Common yellowthroat, yellow warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, blue-winged warbler, and indigo bunting are common to abundant in the brushy fields and early-successional forests along the Bottoms. Common snipe, lesser yellowlegs, greater yellowlegs, dunlin and other shorebirds, some bound for distant Arctic nesting grounds, can be found in the



flooded pastures and fields during spring migration. Waterfowl occur during all but the coldest part of winter, and they are abundant during the spring when

Canada geese, tundra swans, and 12 or more species of duck can be found. Bald eagles frequent the Cussewago Bottoms, and at least one pair regularly nest there. Oddities such as sandhill cranes have been observed in the Bottoms.

Although best known for its birdlife, Cussewago Creek and the Bottoms have diverse and abundant populations of mammals, amphibians, fish, and mussels. Some fish found in Cussewago Creek, for example the central mudminnow, redbfin shiner, and brook silversides, are species of special concern. One species of fish, the pugnose minnow, is found nowhere else in Pennsylvania.

Most of the Cussewago Bottoms is privately owned, and access varies, depending on landowner sentiments and proximity of road. Fortunately, though, for the bird watcher or hunter, nearly 700 acres of Pennsylvania Game Commission's State Game Lands 269 are open to the public, with more than a mile of the Creek accessible. The small lake off Lake Road on Game Lands 269 is the single best place in the Cussewago Bottoms to see waterbirds. It is just large enough to attract the occasional common loon, Caspian tern, horned grebe, or long-tailed duck during spring migration. A bald eagle's nest at the north end of the lake is easily observed from the parking area on the west side of the lake.

To get to State Game Lands 269, take State Highway 98 north or south along the west side of the Valley to West Road. Go east 0.5 miles on West Road, crossing over Cussewago Creek to Lake Road, then 1.0 miles north on Lake Road to SGL 269. From Highway 98, Rogers Ferry Road, State Highway 198, Creek Road, and Center Road, also cross Cussewago Creek, but with the exception of Center Road, do not offer public access. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission maintains a public access site on the lower Cussewago at Meadville. Birding by canoe or kayak on Cussewago Creek can be rewarding, but arduous and sometimes hazardous because of fallen trees in the water.

The Conneaut-Geneva Marsh is a large (5,559 acre) wetland complex running approximately 13 miles from the outlet of Conneaut Lake almost to French Creek. About one third of the Marsh is covered by emergent marsh vegetation such as cat-tail and spadder-dock. This is the largest emergent marsh in Pennsylvania. Forested wetland and shrub-scrub swamp comprise most of the remainder of the Marsh. A number of rare plant species can be found in the Marsh. The view from the Interstate 79 bridge near Exit 141 gives one an appreciation for the botanical composition and extent of Conneaut-Geneva Marsh.

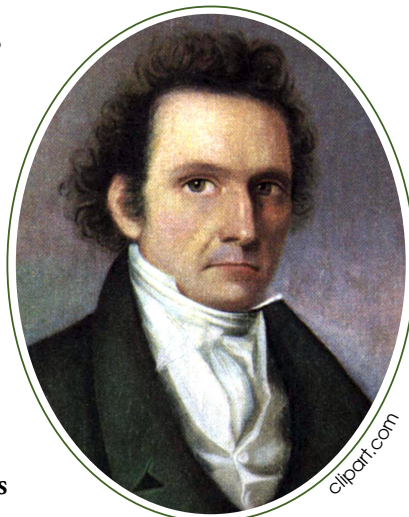
Conneaut-Geneva Marsh is especially important to wetland birds. Up to 10,000 waterfowl use the Marsh during spring and fall migration. Ring-necked duck, black duck, mallard, American wigeon, wood duck and hooded merganser are common during migration. Wood ducks nest in large numbers. Several species of wetland birds uncommon in Pennsylvania also nest at Conneaut-Geneva Marsh, including American bittern, least bittern, black tern, prothonotary warbler, and marsh wren. Two pairs of bald eagles nest there, and additional individuals frequent the area. The forested

wetlands and shrub-scrub swamps adjacent to the open, emergent marsh host good numbers of many species of flycatchers, warblers, vireos and thrushes.

Conneaut-Geneva Marsh, also known as State Game Lands 213, is owned almost entirely by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and, except for seasonally closed areas around bald eagle nests and a propagation area shown on maps, it is open to the public. Starting with US Route 322 at Conneaut Lake, various roads (Brown Hill Road, Watson Run Road, US Route 19, Towpath Road and Mercer Pike) cross the Marsh and afford good access. However, foot travel from these points can be very difficult because of water and dense vegetation. Serious birdwatchers and hunters often access interior portions of the Marsh by canoe or kayak. Boat launches are available at three locations. The Marsh is one of the more popular birding destinations in western Pennsylvania. Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania (<http://www.aswp.org/>) sometimes posts notices of bird-watching outings at the Marsh.

To get to Conneaut-Geneva Marsh, take I-79 to exit 141. For more information on the Marsh (State Game Lands 213), call the Pennsylvania Game Commission at 814-432-3188.

John James Audubon, namesake for the National Audubon Society, and America's best known naturalist and bird artist, might himself have approved the designation of four Important Bird Areas in the French Creek Watershed. Audubon's journeys brought him to the Watershed in 1820.



John James Audubon

*"They enjoyed their journey. The country through which they passed was covered with glorious trees, principally evergreens - the pine and cucumber trees being loaded with brilliant fruits, and the spruces throwing a cool shade over the land which harmonized admirably with the other details of the picture. At length they came in sight of a stream called French Creek, and soon afterwards, they reached Meadville."*

Anonymous. 1886. The Story of Audubon the Naturalist. T. Nelson and Sons. New York. p 120.

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- McWilliams, G.M., and D.W. Brauning. 2000. The Birds of Pennsylvania. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY. 479 p.
- Sibley, D.A. 2000. The Sibley Guide to Birds. Alfred A. Knopf. New York. 544p.

## Bird Species You May Find in the French Creek Watershed

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|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Alder Flycatcher       | Hooded Merganser        |
| American Kestrel       | Hooded Warbler          |
| American Redstart      | House Finch             |
| American Robin         | House Wren              |
| American Widgeon       | Indigo Bunting          |
| American Woodcock      | Killdeer                |
| Bald Eagle             | Lesser Yellowlegs       |
| Baltimore Oriole       | Magnolia Warbler        |
| Barn Swallow           | Mallard                 |
| Black Capped Chickadee | Northern Water-Thrush   |
| Black Duck             | Osprey                  |
| Blackburnian Warbler   | Ovenbird                |
| Blue Jay               | Pileated Woodpecker     |
| Blue-headed Vireo      | Red-eyed Vireo          |
| Blue-winged Teal       | Red-tailed Hawk         |
| Bobolink               | Red-winged Blackbird    |
| Canada Goose           | Ring-necked Duck        |
| Cardinal               | Rose-Breasted Grosbeak  |
| Cerulean Warbler       | Rufous-sided Towhee     |
| Chimney Swift          | Savannah Sparrow        |
| Common Grackle         | Scarlet Tanager         |
| Common Moorhen         | Sora                    |
| Common Snipe           | Tufted Titmouse         |
| Common Yellowthroat    | Tundra Swan             |
| Dark-eyed Junco        | Veery                   |
| Downy Woodpecker       | Vesper Sparrow          |
| Dunlin                 | Virginia Rail           |
| Eastern Kingbird       | Warbling Vireo          |
| Eastern Meadowlark     | Whip-poor-will          |
| European Starling      | White-breasted Nuthatch |
| Field Sparrow          | Wild Turkey             |
| Grasshopper Sparrow    | Willow Flycatcher       |
| Great Blue Heron       | Wood Duck               |
| Greater Yellowlegs     | Yellow Warbler          |
| Henslow's Sparrow      | Yellow-Throated Vireo   |