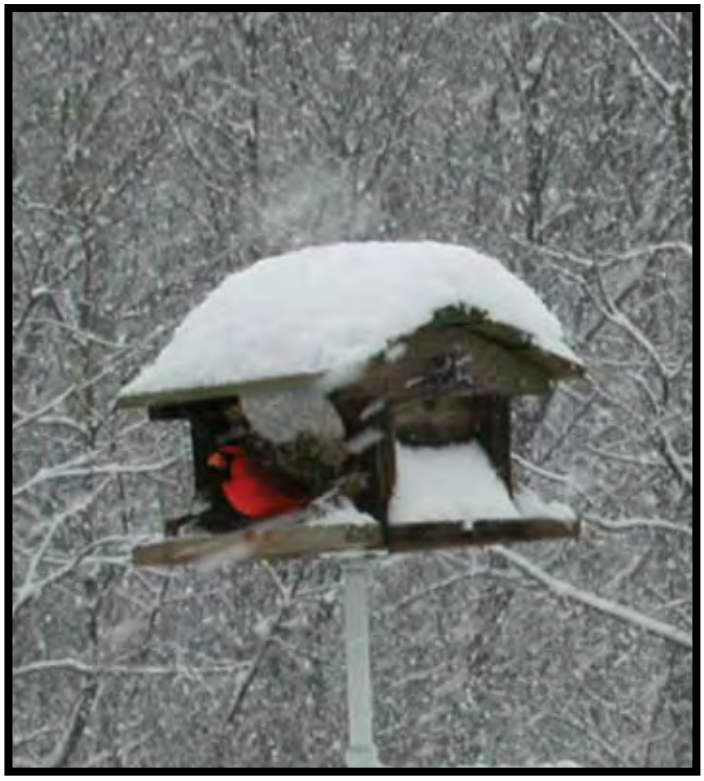
A Winter Wonderland
for wildlife

By **Caitlin Stone**, Trainer, Animal Programs



With cold days and a limited food supply, winter is a difficult time of year for birds and other wildlife. You can do a few simple things to make your yard into a haven for wildlife in the long winter months by providing for their three basic needs — food, water, and shelter. Once you get to know some of your wild neighbors, you might even want to provide for a fourth need in the spring — a safe place to raise young, such as a birdhouse. Turning your yard into a backyard habitat not only gives wildlife a safe place to call home, it also brings nature right to your door to observe and enjoy.

Food

Birds need a lot of food to stay warm and they rely heavily on high-calorie foods like sunflower seeds and suet to make it through the cold winter days. Feeding the birds can be as simple as putting some seed mix onto a tray in the snow, or as complex as setting up elaborate seed and suet feeders around your yard. No matter how you choose to feed the birds, you'll find that it's a rewarding and entertaining way to bring wildlife up close and personal. There are just a few things to keep in mind:

- Place feeders 5′-12′ away from bushes and ground cover. This allows birds to fly or dash to safety if need be, but does not allow ground predators, such as cats, to sneak up too close to the feeder.
- Make sure to clean your feeder regularly and check that your seed is fresh; old or moldy seed is bad for the birds.
- Once you've decided to feed the birds, keep your feeder full. The birds in your area will come to rely on you and the food your yard provides.

One of the easiest types of feeders that you can make at home is a pine cone feeder. It's a great project for kids on a chilly day. Just take a large pine cone and spread vegetable shortening or suet (unrendered animal fat that can be purchased at the butcher's counter) all over the pine cone. Then roll it in seeds of your choice (black oil sunflower seeds are a favorite), attach a string to the pine cone's stem, and hang it outside. It may take the birds a while to find it, but your pine cone feeder will be a welcome treat in the middle of winter. You can also make a similar feeder using half of a stale bagel. You might find black-capped chickadees, tufted titmice, woodpeckers or even a hungry squirrel at this feeder!

Water

Water is another necessity for winter wildlife. A reliable source of drinking water is both rare and valuable in the freezing winter months. Simply offer a shallow dish of water daily, or provide a heated drinking bowl so that your visitors can have a drink all winter long. Most birds won't bathe during the winter, but drinking water is a must.

Shelter

In the cold winter months, having a place to get out of the snow is important for wildlife. Consider planting hardy native plant species in your yard. Many native plants also have fruits or seeds that wildlife will eat. These natural shelters in your yard not only provide valuable cover, protection, and food for birds; they also make your yard look great! For a list of native species that are good choices for wildlife, check the National Wildlife Federation website at www.nwf.org/backyard. For a quick and easy temporary shelter, consider recycling your Christmas tree by placing it outside and letting your local birds enjoy it for a while longer.

If you would like more information about turning your backyard into a haven for wildlife, please go to www.nwf.org/backyard. The National Wildlife Federation also offers official certification if your yard qualifies as a backyard habitat – providing food, water, shelter and a place to raise young – for your wild neighbors!

Wildlife Without Borders – US Fish and Wildlife Service

notes from the field…

Following the Louisiana Waterthrush from Pennsylvania to the Dominican Republic

by **Steven C. Latta, PhD**, Assistant Director of Conservation and Field Research

The use of birds as indicators of ecosystem health has been of growing importance to conservation because monitoring a single, easily censused bird species may be much more cost-effective than monitoring a large number of other environmental variables. The Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*) is a large warbler found near fast-flowing, forested headwater streams in the eastern United States. They are especially common in the Allegheny and Adirondack mountains near the center of their breeding range. The species has been proposed as an indicator of change in riparian or stream habitats, and consequently a number of federal and state agencies are interested in understanding how closely it is tied to particular habitat variables, especially water quality. Waterthrush are also a priority species for conservation and management action because their populations appear to be declining. In a new study that co-principle investigator Bob Mulvihill of Powdermill Avian Research Center of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and I initiated this year, we seek to identify threats to this and other species sharing their riparian habitat, and identify key conservation and management issues for riparian birds.

Birds that breed in Pennsylvania only spend 4-5 months of the year here before departing for tropical wintering grounds. To understand factors influencing the population trends of any migratory bird species such as the Louisiana Waterthrush, we need to study these birds on the breeding grounds, on the wintering grounds, and during the twice-yearly migrations. This has seldom been accomplished with any species, but if we truly want to understand the impact human populations have on birds, it is critical to evaluate avian life history throughout the year, not exclusively on the breeding grounds. This study is one of a number of cutting edge projects that attempt to do just that.

The goal of the Pennsylvania component of our project is to assess factors affecting reproductive success of Louisiana Waterthrush, and to compare characteristics of territories of birds that are successful at nesting with those that are unsuccessful. In addition to finding nests and monitoring chick growth and breeding success every three days, we are also measuring a number of features of the territories of breeding birds. These features include physical measures of the stream, water quality at

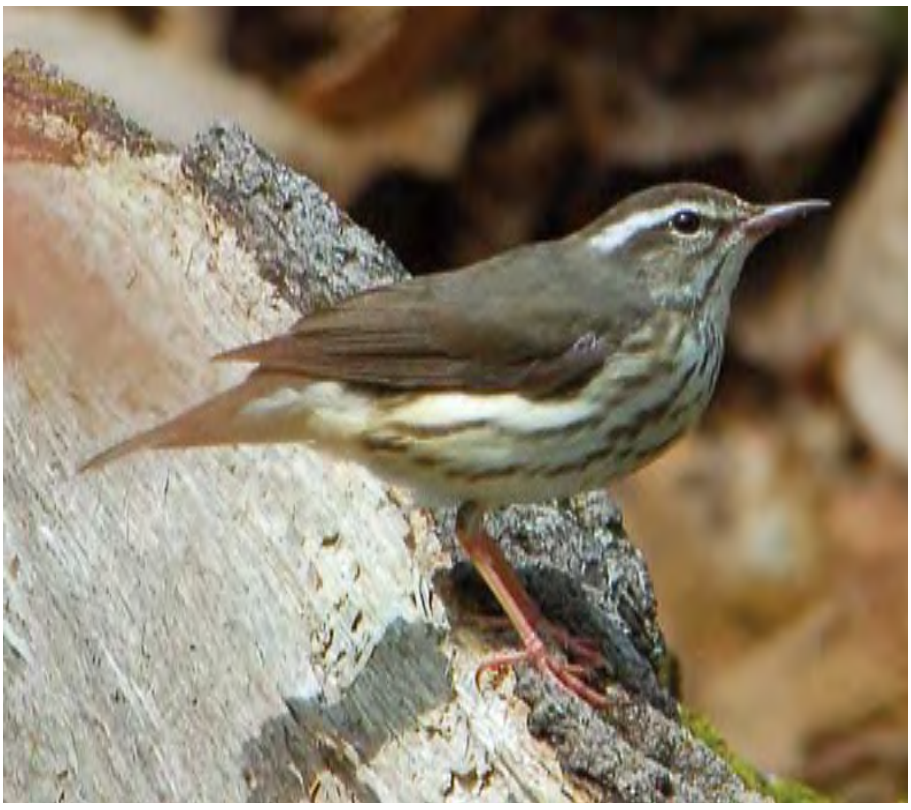


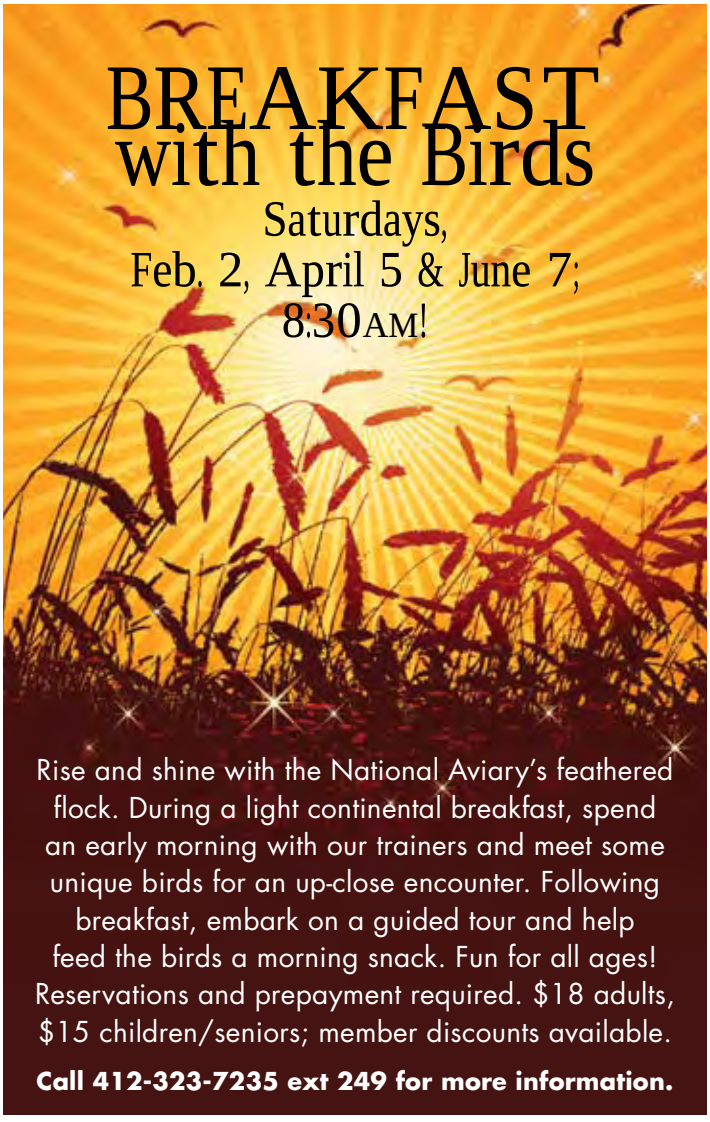
Photo © Steve Shaluta

The Louisiana Waterthrush.

each site, and quantifying macroinvertebrate assemblages and flying insects (food for waterthrush). All of these factors will help indicate what components of the territory help to insure success in raising chicks.

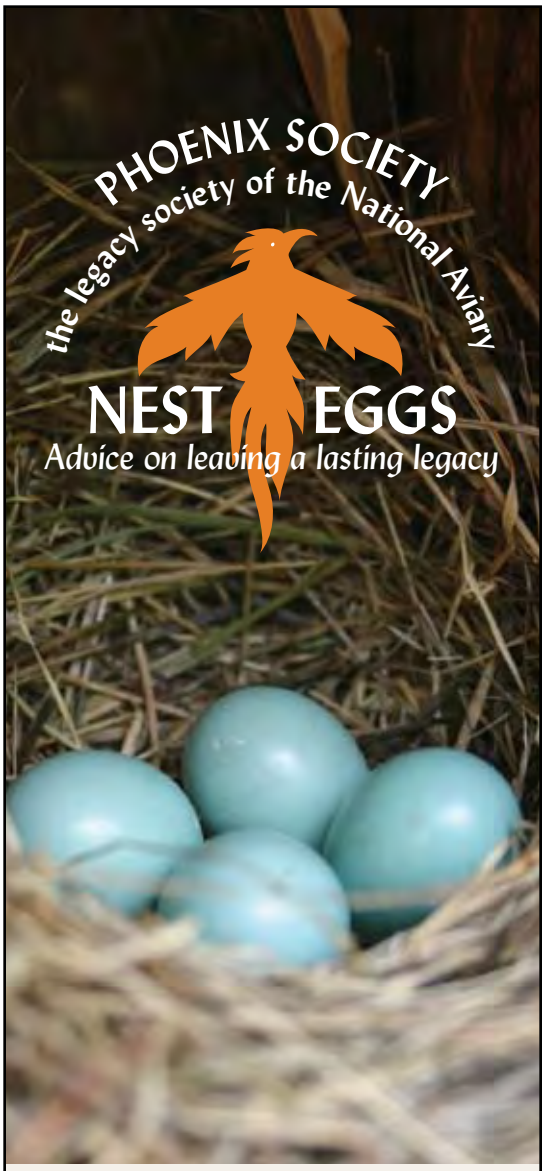
There is also a critical need for understanding the effects of habitat change on over-wintering waterthrush on the tropical wintering grounds in the Caribbean and Central America. In September, 2007 we followed the birds south and began to collect information on their habitat and survival at over-wintering sites in the Dominican Republic. At these streams we are capturing waterthrush and marking each with a unique combination of colored leg bands. Throughout the winter we can then quickly identify which individuals are still alive, how big their territories are, and where they spend most of their time. We will then be able to determine what qualities in a territory help to insure survival throughout the long winter.

The Louisiana Waterthrush study has benefited from the participation of two Dominican biologists who have served as project interns. Members of the Hispaniolan Ornithological Society, Danilo Mejía and Marisabel Paulino, have worked with us for a number of years on a variety of projects in the Dominican Republic. With the development of our new long-term project focusing on waterthrush, we recognized the advantage of having a full-time field team that knew the birds, their behavior and habitat, and our research protocols, and we invited Danilo and Marisabel to be a part of our breeding season studies in Pennsylvania. In addition to learning more about waterthrush, Danilo and Marisabel have had the opportunity to participate in bird banding at Powdermill, to see how successful field stations operate, and have come to know Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. They have now returned home to the Dominican Republic and are coordinating our studies on the wintering grounds. Together we expect to learn much more about the ecology of this unique species, and understand its value as an indicator of ecosystem health.



QUESTION: When should I take down my hummingbird feeder? Will I keep them from migrating if I leave it up too long?

ANSWER: Usually a good time to take down your hummingbird feeder is mid to late October. You will probably notice the number of hummingbirds drop off soon after late August, but you may see an occasional bird later. These fall visitors most often are hummingbirds heading south from northern places like the upper northeast and Canada. Hummingbirds are triggered to begin their migration by the slow decline in our light cycle and cooler temperatures. You don't need to worry about keeping them from migrating, because the instinct to head south is much stronger than any desire to stay and feed. Actually, the best reason to take down your feeder in the fall is to prevent the liquid from freezing and breaking the feeder.



Time is **Running Out**

The Pension Protection Act of 2006 is about to expire. The act allows people 70½ years of age or older to make cash gifts totaling up to $100,000 from a traditional or Roth IRA to qualified charities — such as the National Aviary — without incurring income tax on the withdrawal.

We encourage you to consider IRA charitable transfers this year, as this provision expires on December 31st. Be sure to consult your tax advisor for details.

What's New?
at the National Aviary

For up-to-the-minute information on classes, programs, special events, and everything else that's going on, see our website at **www.aviary.org**.

For the Holidays—The National Aviary is open on Thanksgiving Day. Come visit with our Ocellated Turkey, *Oscar*. Plan to ring in 2008 with the National Aviary flock on January 1st. *The National Aviary is closed on Christmas Day.*

Around the Aviary—Our facelift continues with a new backdrop for the Atrium stage and bright new flooring in Hornbill Hall.

Coming in 2008—See *Sarabi* and *Gryphon* in free flight in the Atrium during Raptor Encounters, and meet *Wookie*, a most unusual (hint: *non-avian*) Aviary resident!

QUESTION: I have seen several cardinals at my feeder that are missing all of their head feathers. Is there some sort of strange illness that cardinals got this summer? I feed these birds all year long and do not want anything to happen to them.

ANSWER: In late summer and early fall cardinals seem to have a seasonal run-in with feather mites. Feather mites feed off of feathers and are not blood sucking mites. The cardinals can preen (cleaning and organizing their feathers with their beak) just about every feather on their body except on the top of their head. The mites can then flourish in this area, and consume almost every feather that exists on the head, making the bird bald. But nature has a defense against this mite infestation—cold weather. When the temperature drops in late fall and into winter, the mites are exposed to the cold and die, and the bird then will have beautiful feathers again. Luckily for birds, they constantly grow new feathers when one is damaged. There is nothing you can do to help but wait for cold weather and watch your cardinals transform back into their natural beauty with a fully feathered head.