

Conservation Committee Report for 11 October, 2011

Land Trust bird survey planning:

Russ has been communicating with Curtis Smalling and Christine Kelly (NCWRC) regarding suggested methods for surveying for 'priority' species of birds on parcels of land of interest to the land trust. I hope several of us can meet with Curtis sometime this month (perhaps after the mini-retreat if there is enough time) and benefit from his experience. Chris Kelly's valuable email advice includes:

"Working in small areas, it's hard to say much about abundance or population trends for any species, so I wouldn't make that your goal/objective or focus on the easement. That's a quandary we've been scratching our heads over for the last few years with regards to bird monitoring on our NC Game Lands. Even monitoring bird populations on the 14,000+ acre Green River Game Land tract is problematic, in part because habitat there is intensively managed, so it's not clear what the changes in abundance can be attributed to. Birds could be responding to local management or their numbers could be changing across their range, perhaps on breeding grounds, perhaps on wintering grounds, or on migrations. As such, we've been shifting our focus more and more to (1) priority species surveys WHERE APPROPRIATE- i.e., for rare or declining species in designated focal areas (examples are golden-wg warbler and cerulean warbler, with guidance from the respective species Working Groups and the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture) and (2) reporting bird monitoring data to regional databases (such as eBird) that have the power to quantify abundance across a broad geographic range. THAT is where/how we expect to see population trend changes. I'm in the process of uploading all my game land bird data (going back to the mid 1990s) to eBird. There's also been recent talk about doing a NC Breeding Bird Atlas eventually.

So what to do on the easement?...

- Definitely develop the baseline data, via informal birding or a combo of birding and more formalized point count surveys. You could make it easier on volunteers by selecting certain focal species to count during point counts, rather than volunteers having to know the song of every species that could be present.
- For point counts--- Time of detection methods are the route most folks are going these days, so you can obtain estimates of detection probability (see pubs by Ted Simons of NCSU for more info). For ex, a 10 minute count could be broken into four 2.5min segments. Data collected in that manner can be analyzed with program PRESENCE (free software download at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center).
- Choose a suitable species, based on predominant habitat or conservation concerns.

- If you have the resources (interns, volunteers, etc) or interest, you could try to answer questions about nest success and productivity. Those are extremely informative pieces of data that I rarely have the time or resources to collect. “

Curtis Smalling has also kindly loaned/provided a GPS unit that should be useful for documenting surveys. HPAS will not therefore need to purchase such an item.

Duke Energy right-of-way herbicide initiative:

Conservation Committee members have been communicating with other individuals and partner organizations including both of our local land trusts and Audubon North Carolina. As one might anticipate, there are many various histories of interaction with Duke Energy regarding herbicide application to ROW's (e.g., try Googleing “Duke Energy Herbicide”) which include the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee's input to management of the Franklin Greenway. Consequently, there is a lot of information available on these issues, and with which we have only begun to become familiar. For example, Ed Swartzman (NC Natural Heritage Program Biologist) has developed a list of native plants that don't threaten power lines and hence should not be sprayed); this list will be provided by LTLT's Sunny Himes, however, how much attention Duke pays to this list is not clear yet, or whether it is assumed to just apply to the Greenway. One 1999 reference that Curtis passed along states that there are 75,000 miles of utility ROW's in North Carolina alone! There has been some recent activity by Audubon chapters in Pennsylvania relating to this same issue and apparently this was discussed at National Audubon this summer's gathering at Hog Island, Maine. The Pennsylvania activity may hopefully help us with access to 'expert advisors' regarding application and specificities of herbicides (one of the Pennsylvania primary advocates is a plant biochemist).

With Jean McCormick's assistance I hope members of HPAS can participate in collecting pertinent references and post them to our HPAS web-site as a repository of information.

At this juncture there seem to me to be at least alternative 'strategies' as we move forward.

- 1.) Offer Duke Energy the opportunity to 'do the right thing' and be environmentally responsible, i.e., give them the chance to be the 'good guys'. For this approach to be successful and binding it would benefit greatly by support from ANC and even National Audubon. Importantly, Heather Stark (Director of ANC) is supportive of this approach and is eager to work with us. Whether this will develop into a regional or national initiative waits to be seen.

- 2.) If the first plan is unsuccessful, we could approach the NC Utilities Commission and try to convince this public body to make Duke be more environmentally responsible.
- 3.) Enlist larger numbers of private citizens to follow existing Duke Energy protocols that theoretically restrict spraying on private lands in NC if the properties are so designated and posted. This has been problematic for a variety of reasons in the past (and will continue to be in the future), is essentially unenforceable, and completely fails to address issues of non-selective herbicide use on public lands.

Obviously, the herbicide use on ROW's is an environmental issue of considerable magnitude. I believe it is appropriate for HPAS to begin to consider alternative strategies to non-selective herbicide application on ROW's. As Glenda has pointed out previously, when factored over the tens of thousands of miles of ROW's in NC, this issue dwarfs anything we will ever do to influence bird habitat in our own back yards and it is also recognized that this initiative is 'larger' than just our zip-code! Hopefully, we will be able to join forces with other interested partner organizations. Whether we are joined by other partners or not, we need to learn as much as we can about the various histories and parameters of the problem so we can be as educated as possible as we draw closer to interacting with Duke Energy, the Utilities Commission, large numbers of private citizens, and other potential partner organizations. We need to determine if this is an activity that HPAS is willing to take on as a project that will necessarily involve more of our energies than the Conservation Committee alone. We need to consider if we are willing to try to tackle a major goal as agents of environmental stewardship. Hopefully, we will have some time at the retreat on October 11 to discuss this.