

Delaware Wild Lands

NEWS



SPRING 2020



NOTES FROM

Kate Hackett

Delaware Wild Lands'
Executive Director



Next year, DWL will celebrate our 60th anniversary, and six decades of remarkable success in land conservation and restoration. And what extraordinary accomplishments we have to commemorate and celebrate...none of which would have been possible without you! Though it may seem contradictory in the world of land conservation and restoration, DWL's greatest assets have always been the people who work for and with us. We are scientists, ecologists, researchers, lawyers, investors, entrepreneurs, managers, educators, accountants, farmers, foresters, hunters, birders, photographers, optimists, idealists, pragmatists, and rebels. And we are fortunate to draw on decades of knowledge, expertise, and experience from our Board, staff, volunteers, and associates.

Though we are small in staff size (and administrative expenditures!), everyone contributes mightily to our mission and day-to-day operations, extending the reach and impact of our work well beyond the acquisition, protection, and restoration of critical wildlife habitat and important natural resources. To that end, we cannot overstate how immensely we will miss Kathy Harvey, who recently announced her retirement from DWL (due to health reasons). More about her contributions to DWL's hallmark characteristics and culture can be found later in this newsletter. Her insight, candor, and humor continue to be invaluable to DWL.

Ours thanks to Kathy and all of you for helping DWL advance our work and mission in difficult times. The photos, partnerships, and research projects highlighted in this newsletter are possible only because of you and your commitment to DWL. Please read on, feast on the photographs taken on DWL properties by DWL staff, and learn more about how our work persists and new ways we are collaborating with partners. And, as always, thank you for your steadfast support!

Kathy Harvey: A quiet but mighty force

I have the impossible task of writing a tribute fitting for someone whose contributions to DWL and conservation far surpass my writing abilities! How can one really convey the unique character of a woman who is adept in the field, at the Board table, and in developing signature events? Who swaggers through the office each time she masters new computer capabilities and software? Who is as good of a shooter as she is as a strategist? Who remembers everything, from minute details to macro trends...and who can "super sleuth" anything from the earliest givers to DWL to those who might now be interested in DWL's mission and work?

Kathy Harvey is remarkable, in every sense of the word: an exceptional person, treasured friend, and integral part of DWL.

When I first started as Executive Director at DWL, friends and colleagues shared many stories about DWL's revered history, unprecedented achievements in land protection, charismatic leadership, and comradery. Those who knew DWL well also shared I would be working with Kathy Harvey, my predecessor's widow, and described her as "quiet but mighty", "wickedly smart with great wit, and a clever sense of humor", "spirited", and a "force to be reckoned with"! Some of these reports may have been embellished or sprinkled with gentle hyperbole but they were nonetheless intimidating! I didn't know then how much I would relish working at DWL and with Kathy, and what a privilege it would be to work alongside Kathy for nearly a decade.

I cannot begin to describe the immeasurable contributions Kathy has made to DWL, our conservation work, fundraising, new endeavors, our staff, and to our lives individually and collectively.



**“wickedly smart
with great wit,
and a clever
sense of humor”,
“spirited”, and
a “force to be
reckoned with”**

Her unwavering commitment to DWL and level of integrity are inspirational...and her dedication to conservation, creativity, and realism are defining characteristics, even hallmarks, of Delaware Wild Lands' work.

Kathy has always been an invaluable asset to DWL – and she has bolstered DWL, our staff, hunters, supporters, and volunteers on good days and on bad days. After Rusty's passing, she forged an invaluable bridge between the past and the future of DWL. Rigor and resiliency are important at DWL, as is ensuring the economic and environmental productivity of our lands. We remain grateful to Kathy for always holding us and our work to these standards. We thank Kathy for all she's done, in the past weeks, months, and decades, to make each day at DWL better than the last. Kathy imbued DWL with her dedication to conservation, creativity, realism, good judgment, and great humor.

We will forever be indebted to Kathy, to Rusty, and to the Harvey Family. Because of their extraordinary commitment, humor, and dedication, Delaware's landscape is forever changed for the better and waterfowl and wildlife will thrive forever! On behalf of DWL, those who live in and visit Delaware, and all the critters and creatures that depend on DWL's work, we will protect, forever, the legacy you created for us all.

We wish Kathy all the best and many wonderful days enjoying all she and the Harvey Family helped create!



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An Oasis For Turkeys




Drake Hardman

Graduate research assistant at the University of Delaware Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology

Delaware's wild turkey repopulation efforts began at DWL's Great Cypress Swamp and Milford Neck in the 1980s

Today wild turkeys abound in DWL's hardwood and conifer forests up and down the State, but that wasn't always the case for North America's largest gamebird. From the time of European settlement to the 1930s, habitat loss and overharvest resulted in a dramatic decline of turkeys throughout most of their range. As repopulation and restoration efforts began, there were many unfortunate failures. Ultimately, persistent collaborative efforts between government agencies and private organizations yielded some successful trap-and-transfer programs for wild-caught birds.

Delaware's wild turkey repopulation efforts began at DWL's Great Cypress Swamp and Milford Neck in the 1980s, and continued throughout the state for 20 years. Today, turkey sightings are a common occurrence on DWL's protected lands, but there is still much to be learned about this reclusive species.

Early last year, the University of Delaware (UD) initiated a statewide study of male wild turkeys to investigate range, movement, and re-use of roost sites (turkeys roost in trees overnight). This research includes placing GPS backpacks on male turkeys and letting them go about their business.

During their first research season, UD researchers captured birds at DWL's 400-acre Sharp Farm. Drawyer's Creek and the Appoquinimink River form natural barriers that limit movement of turkeys on this property. Interestingly, the Sharp Farm appears to provide an oasis of sorts for wild turkeys as all males captured during the first year remained on the property throughout the year. Researchers also discovered turkeys use different parts of the property seasonally. After breeding season, the males occupied a more open oak stand on the north end of the property and remained there through the fall.

During winter, they shifted to the riparian areas located along the Appoquinimink River. With another study season on the horizon, DWL will learn more about how male turkeys use DWL's Sharp Farm and how we can enhance our restoration efforts accordingly.

For DWL staff, encountering turkeys on our properties still inspires awe and excitement. Turkeys are quite secretive and quick on their feet, so spying them in the fields and forests managed by DWL instills a sense of pride in the conservation and restoration work we've accomplished. To date, DWL has restored more than 1,600 acres of wetland, meadow, and forest habitats across our protected land complexes, and we've planted more than 200,000 trees. With insights gained from this research, DWL will enhance and expand habitat and provide oases and longevity for wild turkey and Delaware's native wildlife.

A brief history of Sandhill Cranes in Delaware

Anthony Gonzon

Life-long Delawarean, birder,
hunter, angler and biologist.

Several hundred years ago, as European settlers reached the Mid-Atlantic coast, the landscape was totally different from what we see today. As we changed our landscape, we also changed the diversity of the wildlife, especially birds, that occurred here. Some birds, harvested for food and for market, disappeared from the region, like the Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkey. Other species, particularly songbirds, had a positive reaction to changing habitats, like the American Kestrel and Brown-headed Cowbird that expanded well into our area as we cleared land for farming and grazing.

Work by state and federal agencies and important organizations like Delaware Wild Lands has led to the return of some of those iconic species like the turkey and work continues to conserve and restore populations of other birds like Northern Bobwhite. But it is a rare event to have a species return on its own with little human help, reestablishing itself as part of our local bird fauna. Yet, right here in Delaware, we have been seeing that happen and Delaware Wild Lands has played a big role in the continuing return of the Sandhill Crane.

Historically, Sandhill Cranes were a common sight in Delaware during migration with evidence that they had a population that may have wintered well into New York. However, as their critical wetland habitats were lost or degraded and hunting pressure increased in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the eastern population of these birds declined significantly. Resident populations remained in Florida, but migratory cranes were few and far between. Cranes migrating through the Atlantic Flyway to and from the Southeast and Canada dwindled and was all but lost from Delaware. The passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1916 and again in 1918 curbed the pressure on these eastern cranes, but it would be decades before they once again began to show up with any frequency in the Mid-Atlantic. Even today, the presence of a Sandhill Crane is enough to draw out bird watchers, photographers and wildlife enthusiasts with the hope of catching a glimpse of this majestic bird.

In Delaware, specifically, cranes have been very rare for quite some time, with only ten records between 1969 and 2009. However, something changed in 2010 and reports began to become more regular. By late 2013, two Sandhill Cranes appeared in the Port Penn/Augustine area south of Delaware City. These birds were seen regularly throughout the winter into February 2014 but then disappeared again, leaving biologists and birders unsure if they would appear again. During 2015, there were no sightings in Delaware at all but that changed in 2016. That year, three cranes showed up, again, in the Port Penn area and sightings have continued since.

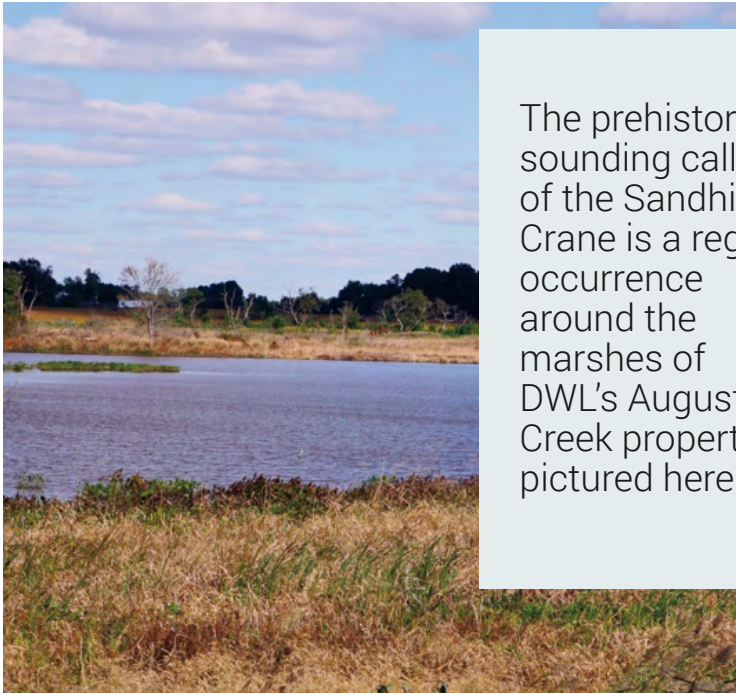
But where did they come from? Are these migratory birds that have elected to stay in Delaware throughout the year? It's possible, but more likely, the cranes around the Port Penn area originated from a resident group across the Delaware River in nearby New Jersey.

A small population of cranes has persisted in western New Jersey for nearly two decades. Most likely, the population reached a size that pushed a few individuals out and they simply flew to "greener pastures" on the Delaware side.

Now, in 2020, the question to be answered is "Are they breeding here?" Over the last decade, Sandhills have been found nesting in almost every state around us. But where? And are they successful? It hasn't been proven yet, but we have our suspicions about the first part – Delaware Wild Lands! These cranes typically nest over open water on small tussocks or clumps that stick up above the water line. They use the adjacent vegetation to build up a nest bowl and may lay 1-2 eggs anytime in spring, but most likely in May. Hatching occurs about 30 days after egg-laying and the young cranes will leave the nest within the first day, walking or swimming to nearby marsh and uplands. Sandhill Cranes are excellent parents, keeping close watch over their chicks until they are large enough to defend and fend for themselves, often remaining in family groups long after the breeding season.

So, where does Delaware Wild Lands come in? Simple – DWL protects important habitat and waterways critical to the success of our new resident population of cranes! Over the last two to three years, the cranes have ranged from the marshes of Augustine Creek north to Thousand Acre Marsh, observed in every month but far less frequently from late May through August. This might suggest that they don't move around much during that time and, perhaps, that is due to the presence of little ones? Delaware Wild Lands provides the birds with large expanses of freshwater marshes, suitable for nesting. Unlike many of the other suitable habitat sites in the area like Thousand Acre Marsh and Dragon Run north of the C&D Canal, limited access to DWL lands greatly reduces disturbance to nesting cranes making the chances for success increase substantially!

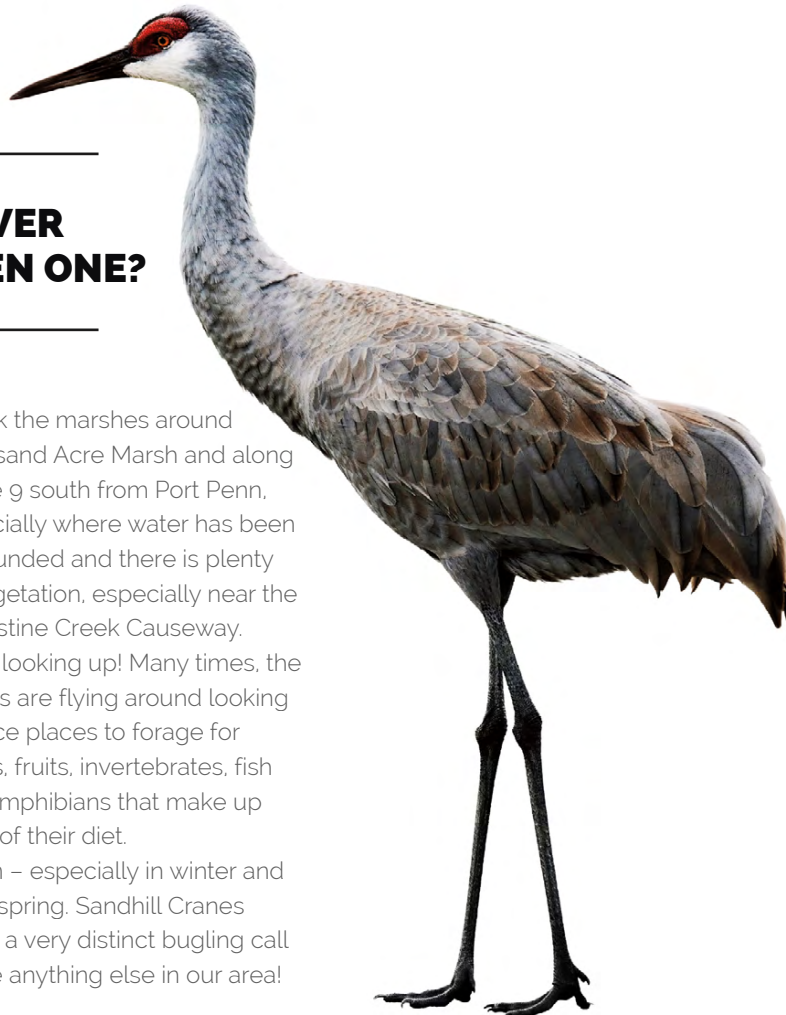
This is a great story to tell – how protecting and managing the lands for the benefit of wildlife and our shared natural resources can lead to the self-restoration of a lost part of Delaware bird life! Perhaps it is part luck, but I prefer to put my trust in the conservation ethics of organizations like Delaware Wild Lands and experience the rewards of their hard work as our local diversity improves and is enhanced to allow species thought gone to return and once again be a part of our amazing and charismatic landscape. Your support goes not only to protect the wildlife we have, but also the wildlife yet to return!



The prehistoric sounding call of the Sandhill Crane is a regular occurrence around the marshes of DWL's Augustine Creek properties, pictured here.

NEVER SEEN ONE?

- Check the marshes around Thousand Acre Marsh and along Route 9 south from Port Penn, especially where water has been impounded and there is plenty of vegetation, especially near the Augustine Creek Causeway.
- Keep looking up! Many times, the cranes are flying around looking for nice places to forage for seeds, fruits, invertebrates, fish and amphibians that make up most of their diet.
- Listen – especially in winter and early spring. Sandhill Cranes make a very distinct bugling call unlike anything else in our area!



Visit www.allaboutbirds.org and search for Sandhill Crane. This site will provide a lot of great information about cranes and even has recordings of the calls.



Cantwell's Culinary Talent and Creativity Shine Through... again!

What makes DWL's Annual Wild Game Dinner at Cantwell's Tavern a repeated success? Certainly, it's the unique ability of Cantwell's Tavern to deliver a custom menu that blends tradition and innovation. Certainly, it's the enthusiasm of our guests and their commitment to high quality land conservation and habitat restoration. Certainly, it's DWL's value for delivering exceptional results. And this year's event was no exception. Highlights of the evening included DWL's progress in restoring habitat for Northern bobwhite quail; two multi-year, multi-phase restoration projects at Taylors Bridge and the Great Cypress Swamp; and the crucial role of citizen scientists and volunteers in making our work possible. And, of course, Smoked Duck with Parisian Pecan Gnocchi, Beer Braised Venison in Filo Tart, and other savory delights provided the perfect accompaniments for an evening filled with good will and future focused projects!



Evening festivities began with a feature cocktail: "In The Reeds".

A hearty, full-belly thanks to our sponsors who make this hallmark event a continued success and those who shared their bounty with us including Rob Piascinski, Porter Schutt, Ron Haas, Bud Holland, and Chip West!

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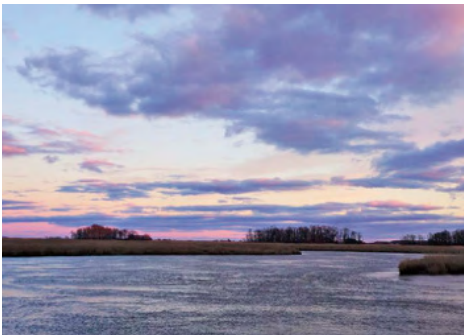
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Out and About on DWL's Properties



Hooded Merganser



Sunset Over Blackbird Creek



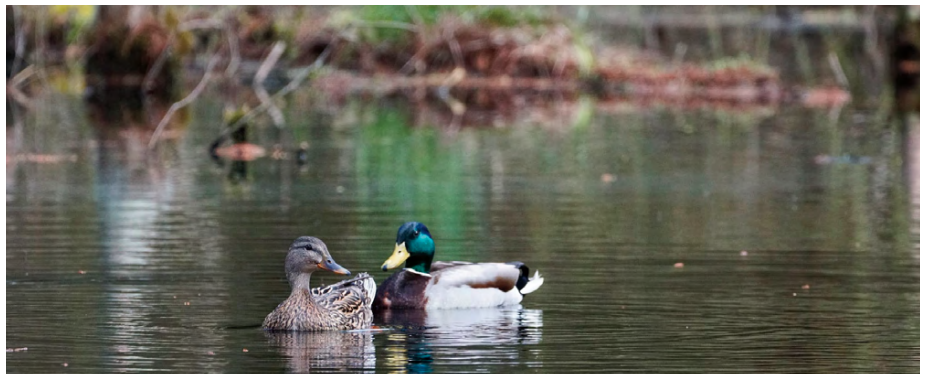
Black Vulture Chicks



Great Blue Heron



Cutleaf Toothwort



Mallard Duck Pair

NATIVE PLANT PROFILE

High Bush Blueberry



Wild Turkey



Sand Hill Cranes



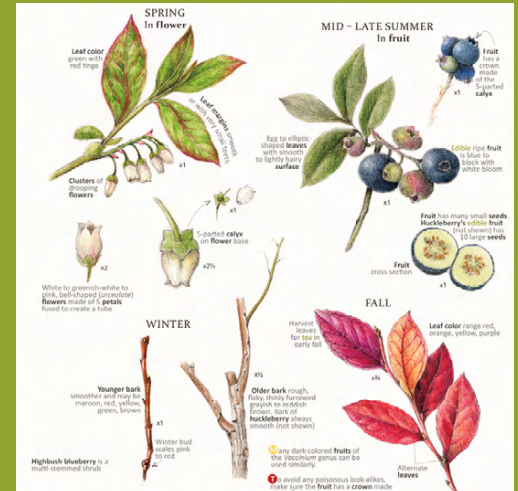
Ribbon Snake



Pileated Woodpecker (male)



Emerging Mayapple



Flowers of the High Bush Blueberry are generally white to pinkish in color and vase shaped.

High Bush Blueberry is an acidic-soil loving shrub and is one of the co-dominant shrubs along with Sweet Pepperbush. Both are found in the Great Cypress Swamp and other fresh-water wetlands owned by DWL and throughout Delaware.

High Bush Blueberry has arching woody branches that sprout in a cluster and can reach a height of 8 to 12 feet. The structure of the plant makes it a natural trellis (for plants like greenbrier) and its leaves alternate and are roughly elliptical with some variation. Two unique attributes of High Bush Blueberry leaves are their leathery texture and bright red color in autumn. Flowers bloom in early spring, just as the leaves are expanding. The flowers appear in clusters and are quite a beautiful site framed by the lime green of the shrub's new spring foliage. These flowers attract bumblebees and other pollinators.

The shrub's eponymous spherical berries generally ripen in June. The fruit is a major component in the diet of many songbirds, mammals, and even species like Wild Turkey. Because of its value as a source of wildlife food, DWL staff in the Great Cypress Swamp often prune away greenbrier, which can shade or choke out a Blueberry bush when left untended.

A snapshot from **60 years** of DWL's conservation work



Pictured here are Ken Reynolds and Greg Moore of Delaware Fish and Wildlife getting ready to release a Wild Turkey in DWL's Great Cypress Swamp circa 1984. Photo by Peter Martin



Meet DWL's youngest supporter, Anya! Already she is working to ensure a brighter future for Delaware's wildlife and open spaces. A hearty thanks for your support and inspiration, Anya!

Looking for a unique way to support DWL's conservation and restoration efforts, or our stewardship and community outreach work? Check out our spring wish list:

- 4-ft Wooden Stakes (Tree Planting)
- Wood Duck Boxes
- Red Cedar Pet Bedding (Wood Duck Boxes)
- AA Batteries (Wildlife Surveys)
- Headlamps (Wildlife Surveys)
- 6-ft Center Folding Tables (Outreach)
- Loppers (Stewardship)
- Work Gloves (Stewardship)
- 16 GB SD Cards (Wildlife Monitoring)
- Plastic Storage Totes (Outreach)
- Binoculars (Outreach)
- Life Vests (Paddle Tours)

Delaware Shorebird Project

Henrietta Bellman,
Coastal Avian Biologist, Delaware
Division of Fish & Wildlife

Nicole Schwarz
Biological Aide, Delaware Division
of Fish & Wildlife

Each spring, thousands of shorebirds and horseshoe crabs embark on their migration to the beaches of the Delaware Bay. Of particular interest, and concern, is the Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), a robin-sized shorebird that transforms from grey to cinnamon-red for the breeding season. The Red Knot, listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act, migrates from as far south as Tierra del Fuego in Argentina where some spend the non-breeding season.

The Delaware Shorebird Project was established in 1997, following concerns about declines in shorebird populations in the Delaware Bay. Training of the earliest Shorebird Project researchers was provided by the British Trust of Ornithology and the Wash Wader Ringing Group (an organization that has been monitoring shorebirds in the U.K. since 1959). Today, the Shorebird Monitoring Project is coordinated by the State of Delaware Division of Fish & Wildlife and supported by partners including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Delaware Museum of Natural History.

Shorebird Project members monitor shorebirds at strategic points along the shores of the Delaware Bay, including sites on Delaware Wild Lands' Milford Neck properties. Project researchers and personnel capture shorebirds and band them with small plastic colored flags placed around the bird's leg which identifies the location of its first capture (See map to right). These two bands enable researchers to collect data about individual birds, aggregate data, and better understand migratory patterns, habitat use, and survival. In Delaware, more than 14,500 of these uniquely coded flags have been deployed on Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*) or Semipalmated Sandpipers (*Calidris pusilla*).



The Delaware Shorebird Project has a core group of motivated volunteers who return each year (despite the humidity, heat, and insects!). Since the project began more than 1,300 volunteers have contributed to valuable data collection. In 2019 alone, volunteers logged more than 4,200 hours and hailed from Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Netherlands, the U.K., and Argentina.

Although shorebirds face several threats globally including harvesting and the loss, degradation and development of coastal habitats, we remain committed to monitoring and conserving shorebird populations during their short but crucial visit to Delaware. And we thank our dedicated volunteers and committed partners for their continued support!



DELAWARE WILD LANDS

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