

**PENNSYLVANIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREA #4
CUSSEWAGO BOTTOM**

**Phase I Conservation Plan
(Prepared By: John Tautin; May 2004)**

Purpose of the Phase I Conservation Plan: This phase I conservation plan is a preliminary document to: 1) catalogue the natural resources and built environment for each Important Bird Area (IBA), 2) identify site boundaries, 3) document the criteria for which it was selected, 4) describe the birds and wildlife habitat which occur on the site with special reference to the species for which the site was selected as an IBA, 5) identify any conservation issues or threats to the site, and 6) provide recommendations for conservation actions to conserve or enhance habitat for bird populations, especially for those species for which the site was selected as an IBA. This Phase I Conservation Plan is intended to augment and expand the one-page site report contained in “A Guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania” (Crossley, 1999). The recommendations are presented from the perspective of bird and wildlife habitat conservation. It is acknowledged that not all the recommendations contained herein may be feasible or affordable. However, the plan is presented as an initial position from which to plan for and implement bird conservation on the site.

Site Name: Cussewago Bottom

Size: 12,682 acres (5,132 hectares)

Ownership:

The 660 acre (267 hectares) State Game Lands 269 (SGL No. 269) in the northern portion of this IBA is owned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC). The remainder is owned privately by many individuals. Parcels range in size from small home lots to farms of a few hundred acres.

County/Municipality:

Crawford County/Cussewago, Hayfield and Vernon Townships.

Physiographic Province/Bird Conservation Region/Watershed:

The IBA is within the Glaciated Pittsburgh Plateau Section of the Appalachian Plateaus Physiographic Province. The IBA is part of the Lower Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Plain (U.S. portion only) Bird Conservation Region (BCR) # 13. The IBA is within the French Creek watershed. French Creek, Pennsylvania’s 2003 River of the Year, is renowned for the abundance and diversity of its aquatic resources. Cussewago Creek is one of the major tributaries of French Creek, joining it at Meadville.

Legislative Districts:

3rd Congressional District, U.S. Representative, Phil English (R) – Crawford County
50th Senatorial District, State Senator, Robert D. Robbins (R) – Crawford County

6th House District, State Representative, Teresa Forcier (R) - Cussewago, Hayfield and Vernon Townships

Stewardship Adoption Status:

This IBA is not yet formally adopted, but the Conneaut Lake/French Creek Conservancy has a strong interest in Cussewago Bottom and is developing a conservation initiative.

IBA Selection Criteria:

- (1b) The site regularly supports numerous shorebirds during migration periods including Common Snipe, Lesser Yellowlegs, Greater Yellowlegs and occasionally Dunlin, SM*;
- (1e) The IBA is recognized as having exceptional concentration and diversity of birdlife in Pennsylvania with nearly 200 species identified, including a high number of neotropical migrants;
- (2) The site supports the federally threatened and state endangered Bald Eagle (B – 1 pair, W- 2-5 individuals.);
- (4b) The IBA represents a prime example of a lowland stream, floodplain and wetlands-uplands complex in glaciated northwest Pennsylvania, with extensive bottomland hardwood forest and a high diversity of habitat types.

Note: Numbers indicate single season maximum documented in recent years.

* SM=spring migration; FM=fall migration; B=breeding; W=winter

Important Avian Habitats:

Emergent, scrub-shrub and forested wetlands, open waters of Cussewago Creek and a small lake on SGL No.269, seasonally flooded pastures and agricultural fields.

General Site Description:

Cussewago Creek, its flood plain, and adjacent uplands comprise the 12,682 acre (5,132 hectare) Cussewago Bottoms IBA (referred to as the Bottoms). 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. Some emergent herbaceous wetlands occur in the Bottoms, notably at SGL 269, but most of the wetlands are shrub-scrub or woody wetlands. The combination of wetlands and heavy vegetation make the Cussewago Bottoms distinctly visible on satellite images from space. Tracts of upland forest, and agricultural lands add diversity to the landscape. The most common land uses are rural residential and agriculture, primarily dairy and row crop farms. In recent decades the number of dairy farms and cultivated acreage has declined. Considerable acreage is reverting to forest. Old fields with coarse herbaceous vegetation, brush, and small trees are common. State Highway 98, the west boundary of this IBA, affords good views of habitats.

Shrub-scrub, forested and emergent wetlands comprise the most important avian habitats in Cussewago Bottoms. The open waters of Cussewago Creek and the small lake at SGL

269 are especially important to Bald Eagles and waterfowl. Adjacent upland forests, and an abundance of land in early successional stages are important to a variety of neotropical migrants. Seasonally flooded pastures and agricultural fields provide most of the habitat used by migrating shorebirds.

Although best known for its birdlife, Cussewago Creek and the Bottoms have diverse and abundant populations of mammals, amphibians, fishes, and mussels. Some fish on the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory list of fish species of concern are found in Cussewago Creek, for example, the Central Mud-minnow, Red-fin Shiner, and Brook Silversides. One species of fish, the Pug-nosed Minnow is found nowhere else in Pennsylvania.

Summary of Birds:

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, and Veery breed there, along with at least seven species of Flycatchers. Ovenbirds, Wood Thrush, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and other mature forest-dwelling neotropical migrants also breed there. Cerulean Warbler, a species in decline over much of its range, is found in the Bottoms. Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Blue-winged Warbler, Indigo Bunting, and American Woodcock 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, occur in flooded pastures and fields during spring migration.

Waterfowl occur during all but the coldest part of winter, and are abundant during the spring when Canada Geese, Tundra Swans, and 20 or more species of ducks can be found. Marked birds from the Southern James Bay population of Canada Geese have been observed in the Bottoms (Tautin, personal communication). Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Mallard and Canada Goose breed in Cussewago Bottom. The importance of Cussewago Bottom to waterfowl has earned it Sub-Focus Area recognition and emphasis under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Some Pennsylvania Breeding Birds of Special Concern

(<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/pndi/fullvertebrate.asp>) occur at Cussewago Bottoms. Virginia Rails occur at this same lake throughout the nesting season, and reasonably can be presumed to nest, but nests have not been found. Pied-billed Grebe, Green-winged Teal and Common Snipe occur regularly during spring and fall migration but are not confirmed nesters. Bald Eagles frequent the Cussewago Bottoms, and at least one pair regularly nests there at the lake on SGL 269. Two young fledged from this nest in 2003 (Tautin, personal communication).

Great Blue Herons are common in Cussewago Bottoms, and a small rookery occurs along the lower portion of the Creek. A sizeable rookery is located within the watershed, but outside the formal IBA boundary. Also in the watershed, but outside the formal IBA boundary is a large (100 pair) Purple Martin colony. This colony has been monitored and

studied for years by the Purple Martin Conservation Society. An extensive bluebird nest-box trail runs through the Cussewago Bottom IBA. Up to 300 Eastern Bluebirds and 200 Tree Swallows are produced annually.

Avian Monitoring Efforts:

No avian inventory or monitoring activities occur in the Cussewago Bottoms IBA.

Education/Recreation/Ecotourism Activities and Opportunities:

Hunting is the most popular form of outdoor recreation in the Cussewago Bottoms. Waterfowl and Wild Turkeys are the primary avian quarry. Hunting for American Woodcock can be good, but this species is not well known to most hunters and is sought by only a few specialists. The once popular and abundant Ruffed Grouse is now scarce. Recent years have seen the development of Regulated Hunting Grounds on private lands along the lower stretches of Cussewago Creek. Pheasants and other propagated species are released on these areas. Various habitat enhancements, including the creation of wetlands, have accompanied these developments.

Although rich in birdlife, Cussewago Bottoms is not well known for bird watching, with the exception of the small lake off Lake Road on Game Lands No. 269 where a few people go to see Bald Eagles. The Eagles' nest at the north end of the lake is easily observed from the parking area on the west side of the lake. The lake at SGL No. 269 is also 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.

Birding by canoe or kayak on Cussewago Creek can be rewarding, but arduous and sometimes hazardous because of fallen trees in the water. Public launch sites are limited to SGL No. 269 and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission's site on the lower Cussewago at Meadville.

Most of the Cussewago Bottoms is privately owned, and access varies, depending on landowner sentiments and proximity of roads. Fortunately, though, for the bird watcher or hunter, 660 acres of SGL No. 269 are open to the public, with more than a mile of the Creek accessible, and much of the privately owned land in this IBA remains open.

Environmental educational facilities in the Bottoms are lacking, but nearby Meadville is home to the French Creek Outdoor Learning Center.

Ecotourism in the Bottoms is undeveloped, and opportunities appear limited.

Management/Conservation Issues and Opportunities:

No single, obvious, imminent threat to birds and bird habitats currently exists in Cussewago Bottoms. However, the long-term cumulative effects of various activities could become detrimental. Siltation and pollution from agriculture, gas well development, gravel mining, logging, land clearing, and filling occur with varying frequency and effect in the Bottoms. Invasive species, particularly Common Reed and

Reed Canary Grass, have taken over some areas. Residential development is perhaps the greatest future threat to this IBA. Idle farms that currently provide a diversity of bird habitat are beginning to be sub-divided when sellers cannot find buyers who want or can afford the entire parcel.

Fortunately, though, opportunities for protecting lands in Cussewago Bottoms exist. The all-around, good environmental qualities of the Bottoms are becoming recognized. Cussewago Creek is a major tributary of French Creek which, through the efforts of the French Creek Project <http://frenchcreek.allegheny.edu/> and others, has gained national prominence for its qualities. Its designations as an IBA and a NAWMP Sub-focus area have also brought attention to Cussewago Bottoms. Several groups have expressed interest in, or are now actively involved in conservation efforts in the Bottoms. The French Creek Project, Crawford Conservation District, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service are promoting “Best Management Practices”. The local land trust, the Conneaut Lake/French Creek Valley Conservancy, is developing an initiative to protect lands in Cussewago Bottoms through acquisitions and conservation easements. The Conservancy recently acquired 100 acres bordering the Creek and transferred ownership to PGC for addition to SGL 269. PGC has a keen interest in working with its nongovernmental partners to conserve lands in Cussewago Bottoms. Hayfield Township, one of three township municipalities covering Cussewago Bottoms, recently enacted a zoning plan which includes the Bottoms in a “Conservation Overlay” zone where developmental and extractive activities receive greater scrutiny than in other zones. Similar zoning is needed in Vernon Township, and in Cussewago Township which has no zoning.

Conservation Actions: *The following conservation actions describe **current and ongoing efforts** by PGC and private landowners:*

- PGC maintains a large wetlands complex and adjacent upland habitats on SGL No. 269.
- A few private landowners have enhanced their lands for wildlife by creating wetlands, planting food plots, and maintaining land in idle and early successional stages.
- A bluebird nest box trail is maintained.

*The following conservation actions are **recommended** for consideration by PGC, private landowners, and other interested organizations, agencies and groups for the maintenance, improvement and enhancement of habitat for bird species especially to optimize habitat value for IBA target species as well as for the promotion of bird conservation through educational outreach:*

- Develop an avian inventory and monitoring initiative; more definitive information on birds in Cussewago Bottoms is needed, especially for shorebirds. Surveys will likely find more species of special interest. Include monitoring for species of special concern such as the Marsh Wren.

- Encourage complementary survey and inventory efforts, e.g., for mussels and plants.
- Protect lands through acquisitions and conservation easements from willing sellers; continue land conservation efforts with the Conneaut Lake/French Creek Valley Conservancy.
- Develop an information/education package aimed primarily at informing landowners and municipalities about the mutual benefits of conservation and options for realizing them.
- Increase efforts to initiate and maintain “Best Management Practices” for farmers, loggers, landowners and others with production oriented interests, in coordination with interested agencies such as the French Creek Project, Crawford Conservation District, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- Develop a bird checklist and update every five years.
- Place IBA signs at public access points, distribute materials (IBA brochures) regarding bird conservation and the IBA program at educational outreach programs. Promote such programs through the French Creek Outdoor Learning Center.

Institutional Partners and Key Contacts:

- Conneaut Lake/French Creek Valley Conservancy (CL/FCVC), Virginia Crowe, 814-337-4321
- Crawford Conservation District (CCD), Lynne Sandieson, 814-724-1793
- Ducks Unlimited (DU), Chris Clouser, 814-832-4675
- French Creek Project (FCP), Brian Hill, 814-332-2946
- Hayfield Township (HT), Steve Hoegerl, 814-763-2026
- John Tautin (JT), Landowner/conservationist 814-763-6461
- Northwestern Pennsylvania Duck Hunters Association (NWPDHA), Bernie Pauley, 814-455-9392
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) 814-332-6875
- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP), Freda Tarbell, 814-332-6816
- Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC), Shane Hochlander, 814-432-3187
- Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC), A. Woomer 814-755-3890
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NCRS), Carl Pelino, 814-724-1852
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC), Todd Sampsell – 814-739-9991

References:

Crossley, G. J. 1999. A Guide to Critical Bird Habitat in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Audubon Society. Harrisburg, PA. 219 p.