



The Conservancy Corner

by Dick Byers

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New Discoveries at PV Park

Pleasant Valley Park is turning out to be one of the most interesting places in Murrysville. Ever since the Westmoreland Bird & Nature Club conducted a winter ecology outing there in early February, people have been returning to check out its other features as spring unfolds. Debbie Bryant and Tom Pearson stumbled onto three American woodcocks doing their bizarre courtship flight after that last snowfall in March. I was surprised at this because the field they found them in didn't look like very good woodcock courtship grounds. This is a game bird species that has been steadily declining in the past few decades due to habitat loss across the Northeast. It is a migratory game bird that breeds here in Pennsylvania, and then moves to the southern states in October and November. In these days of climate change we have been finding a few on the local Audubon Christmas Bird Counts. They used to breed on a farm right over the hill from my home when I lived in Murrysville, but development of that farm eliminated them. The American wood cock is a monument of evolutionary specialized adaptation. It has a long 4-6 inch sensitive bill for probing the soil for worms and insect larvae. Large eyes, set far back on the head, give it better binocular vision to the rear than to the front. Its vision covers a 360 degree arc. You cannot sneak up on them. Its cryptic coloration is camouflage perfection. Even when sitting in the open, some people cannot see it. Tom and Debbie also saw big brown bats patrolling just before dusk. Those warm nights in mid-March brought them out of hibernation. Just where the PV Park bats spend the winter is unknown, probably in a hollow tree or a building somewhere in town. On the night of March 26, two club members were in the park in the rain with flashlights searching for the rarely seen yellow spotted salamander and found two of them along with egg masses in the first pond. This is an important find because this species migrates long distances to find clean water in which to breed. The only time you can see them is in mid-March to mid-April. They disappear for the rest of the year. In the distribution map in "Amphibians and Reptiles of Pennsylvania," by Arthur C. Hulse, there is no dot for this area in Westmoreland County, so this is a newly discovered population that was not included in the Atlas of Pennsylvania Amphibians. I found yellow spotted salamanders in the wetlands at the bottom of Meadowbrook Road where Turtle Creek gorge ends back in the 60's and 70's, but that wetlands was destroyed by construction of the sewage plant and the population died out. I had hoped a few might hang on by using the vernal pools along the railroad ditches, but I never found any of their eggs there before I moved out of town. It is only March 28 as I write this and the spring season is about to blossom. I look forward to more reports from the ever increasing biodiversity of this Murrysville Park.