

Environment

Web site dedicated to green education

by Jill Gomez

Parents and teachers looking for an engaging environmental Web site to get their kids hooked on learning more about animals here in central Pennsylvania can check out the free Web site of the Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education (PCEE).

For those who work in education, agriculture, business or local government, PCEE, an almost entirely Web-based organization, may be the answer to finding workshops or making connections for support in the classroom or elsewhere. Those who teach environmentally-related units might want to skim around to locate some useful tools for the curriculum, or sign up for a professional development workshop. The Web site keeps an extensive calendar of state-wide activities and events, and it's possible to subscribe to PCEE's free monthly on-line newsletter, which currently reaches 13,000 recipients.

An interactive online game called Critter Quest PA was developed to help people in Pennsylvania "better understand and appreciate the natural diversity that surrounds them," according to the organization.

"Adults and kids find this site addicting," said Melissa Reynolds, the PCEE Educational Programs Coordinator. "It was originally intended to target middle school students, but now it's being enjoyed by many more people in the general public."

To play Critter Quest, one would select "PCEE Online Activities" on pcee.org, choose Critter Quest PA, then click on Map Page. This presents the option of choosing a particular Pennsylvania county allowing users to explore the amphibians, birds, mammals, reptiles and fish species found right in one's own back yard. Each animal is featured with a stunning color photo and beneath it is a map its distribution in Pennsylvania, with a link to information about habitat, diet and more. Pennsylvania cities, roads, rivers, parks and other base map layers can be added to make it more interesting. This can be an invaluable resource to both students in the classroom and kids at home who may be contemplat-

ing the Eastern Gray Tree Frog or another animal of interest.

"We've just received a grant to help us expand Critter Quest PA to include Wikis and curriculum materials," added Reynolds. The hope is that teachers will be able to extend the learning their students are doing on the Web site directly to the outdoors surrounding the school.

Another online activity that teachers may find useful for class discussion and research is the "Question of the Week." While this option is on summer hiatus, "Last Week's Question" reads: "How much do you know about the various methods of fishing?" The particular question includes a game to challenge anglers to match the fishing method to its description. What is the difference between gillnetting, trolling and long-lining, for example? Pack a picnic, check the Web site, then head for the lake—or river—with new knowledge.

Reynolds has witnessed an increased awareness of PCEE's existence over the last year, she said. She credits newer leadership under Kathleen Paul for the program's more recent expansion and better visibility. The improved Web site was launched a year ago and usage has continued to balloon since then. PCEE is repeatedly approached to send guest speakers to conferences around the state.

This year, the people at PCEE presented at a watershed workshop in western Pennsylvania as part of a Maryland organization called Environmental Concerns. This succeeded, Reynolds said, in increasing PCEE's visibility while educating the public about the importance of the watershed.

The Pennsylvania Center for Environmental Education began as a government agency 12 years ago. While it is still a line item on the state budget, it is run more like a non-profit organization. Four full-time employees are based in Slippery Rock, and depending on the season, a handful of Slippery Rock undergraduate and graduate students work at the headquarters too, helping to maintain the Web site by gathering information to keep it current.

PCEE's Web site has also expanded its reach.

"We now cover more categories of users on the Web site, beyond servicing kindergarten through 12th grade students and non-profit organizations, as was done in the past," said Reynolds. Professionals in agriculture, business and industry, and local government can all now benefit from resources on pcee.org.

The general public is encouraged to take advantage as well. The stated goal on the site is "to provide you with easy access to information and resources that can help your life become more energy efficient, environmentally-friendly, healthy, and sustainable."

Under "Local Government," for example, one will find the following listings: Services & Support, Products & Resources, Connections & Partnerships, Funding, Educational Opportunities and Employment. Each of these categories leads in turn to connections to blogs, journals and networks.

One interesting feature of the site is a map-style Nature Center Directory for all of Pennsylvania. A county of choice can be selected from either a colored map or an alphabetical list. Under each nature center listing is its own convenient link.

For more surfing, go to www.pcee.org.

'CAT'alyt for change



photo by Katie Ombalski

Gleim Environmental Group installs the first rock cross vane at the former location of the McCoy-Linn Dam. The vanes help stabilize the stream banks by concentrating the flow towards the center of the stream. The dam was located on Spring Creek between Bellefonte and Milesburg and was removed in 2007 by ClearWater Conservancy, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and American Rivers to improve water quality, provide free passage for migratory fish and eliminate a public safety hazard. The second phase of the project began in early August and will include the installation of four rock cross vanes and several instream habitat enhancement structures such as mudsills and log deflectors. This second phase is being completed by a partnership between the Spring Creek Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and ClearWater Conservancy. Trees and shrubs will be planted in October to establish a riparian buffer along Spring Creek.

Goldfinches and cedar waxwings fill the autumn day air

by Alice Fuller

Autumn has arrived and is beginning to show its authority with blotches of bright colors here and there. The leaves of the Virginia creeper climbing up the huge oak in the backyard have turned crimson, making a striking contrast with the darkness of the oak's bark.

The dogwood foliage shows touches of a subtle pinkish-red, and the large leaves of the wild grape are gradually being touched with yellow. It is almost as though color compensates for the quietness of the countryside.

By contrast, nights, at least those following hot September days, blast forth with a variety of sounds. The darkness almost reels with the volume of noise produced by the continuous debate of katydids - katy did, katy didn't, katy did it and on and on and on.

While working in the yard one evening, my husband Ted called me outside to see if I could identify a call he had been hearing. Through the din of the katydids, I thought I picked up the wail of a screech owl, but in frustration I felt like shouting, "Shut up just a darn minute, so I can hear something else!" Of course I was sure to be ignored, and I should only be wasting my vocal efforts trying to compete with those teeny green monsters.

Days actually are not quite as quiet as they seem at first. One may become aware of the low hum of insect music punctuated by the chirping of crickets.

Now and then a blue jay breaks the silence with a hoarse "thief" or a mellow bugle tone. A downy woodpecker sounds his rattling call from a tree while from deep in the woods comes the laughter of a pileated woodpecker. For a few moments a tufted



titmouse appears to be in a snit.

One of the most common sounds is the monotonous piping of young goldfinches. Long after most birds have finished with domestic routines, goldfinches are only now in the midst of rearing their broods. They wait until thistle crowns produce fluffly down with which to line their nests. They also use the seeds to feed their hungry babies.

Another species which waits until the waning days of summer to begin house-keeping is the cedar waxwing. Once an acquaintance called to see if she and her son could bring by a bird they had rescued for me to identify. The bird was a juvenile waxwing.

Even while being held, the youngster comported itself with the poise and dignity of an adult. It had buffy streaks on the breast and back as shown in Dorothy Bordner's drawing of a young cedar waxwing. The tail was stubby but already had a yellow band adorning the tip.

The fruit-loving cedar waxwings rear their families at a time when the countryside abounds with their favorite foods.

Once when discussing with a former Penn State professor of ornithology which birds nest late in the summer, I learned that scientists believe there is a reason for the bright splashes of color which appear in advance of the main flaming foliage.

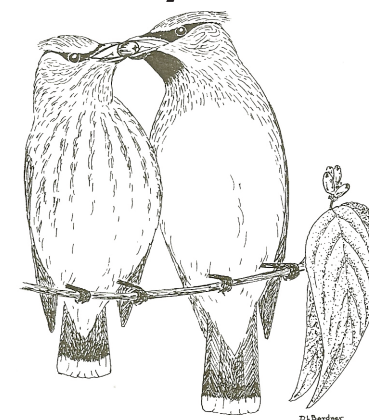
Just as flashy neon signs are designed to catch the eye of prospective customers, so a number of shrubs and vines advertise their

products to passing birds. The leaves of Virginia creeper, flowering dogwood, bittersweet and some plants change to brilliant shades at about the time the bird migration peaks.

The timing of color changes to coincide with bird movement is one of many fascinating plant-animal relationships. The plants benefit by attracting migrating birds to feed on the bounty they produce. After dining, the birds move on.

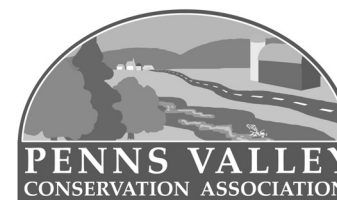
The fleshy parts of the berries are utilized by the bird while the seeds pass through the digestive tract and may be eliminated some distance from the parent plant. Under favorable conditions, the seeds take root and the species has propagated itself once more in an uncertain world.

The fruits of these plants are often high in fat or carbohydrates which the bird's system can convert to fat. A build-up of fat is vital to birds in their long migration flights. In



this curious world plants almost literally wave red flags to attract birds to the bounty they produce which in turn will help ensure their propagation.

Birds such as goldfinches and waxwings start their nesting so that the young will hatch at just the right time: when plants supply a profuse amount of fruits, berries, seeds and nuts.



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