

Environment

Spring Creek Canyon fight not over yet

by Leslie Rosenbaum

Environmental activists in the Centre County area continue to be concerned with the current proposal to split Rockview State Correctional Institution land among Penn State University, Benner Township and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

The proposal to give an estimated 1,200 acres to Penn State and 380 acres to Benner Township jeopardizes Spring Creek Canyon, home of a world-class trout fishery, unique limestone cliffs, and some endangered communities of plants and animals, environmentalists say.

Environmentalists didn't expect the issue to come up in the General Assembly until autumn.

"State level legislation must pass in order to make the plan go through, and that hasn't happened yet," said Ed Perry of the Sierra Club.

Then suddenly on June 27, Rep. Mike Hanna introduced Senate Bill 740 that would approve the transfer.

Environmentalists kicked into high gear mobilization to stop the move. ClearWater Conservancy, joining a number of other groups, sent a stern letter to legislators in Harrisburg stating forcefully that the land should go only to an owner whose mission it is to conserve the land.

The next day, a Sierra Club representative was in the local daily paper insisting that the Pennsylvania Game Commission get the land and not Penn State, which will likely, the writer said, sell it for development some time in the distant future.

As of press time, the issue was unresolved, but environmentalists told *Voices* exactly why they are fighting this battle.

"We wanted an entity whose mission is to preserve the land in its natural state," said Perry. The only possibility is the Game Commission, according to the Sierra Club.

Last year Gov. Ed Rendell authorized the sale of 135 acres of land from Rockview to the Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County (CBICC) for \$1. The CBICC intends to put an industrial park on it. This is in addition to the Benner Township and Penn State allocations.

"This is not the same piece of land they are talking about now," said Katie Ombalski, a conservation biologist for ClearWater Conservancy. "But it is right

across the street and it is related. This was the first of many acres to be divested."

Without an owner whose mission is conservation, the land will always be at risk of development.

"Penn State is a business, not that it's a negative thing," said Perry. But if in the future Penn State wants to cash in, the land could be sold and then developed, he added. The recent Penn State sale of Circleville Farm to developers makes that scenario seem all the more likely.

"If the Game Commission gets the land, they are not allowed to sell it for development," he explained.

Buildings and agriculture next to streams have adverse effects on the streams. Pesticides and other pollutants run off into the water every time it rains, Perry said.

"Any other major stream in Pennsylvania has houses next to it. This is unique because the two and a half or three miles along the bluff is undeveloped, so we don't have to worry about pollution."

This area is considered a High Quality-Cold Water Fishery, meaning that this area's special attributes are recognized by the EPA.

Environmentalists are also concerned that if the university gets the land there will be a conflict between the agricultural use and the need to protect the stream's biodiversity, ClearWater's Ombalski said.

"Spring Creek Canyon contains large contiguous areas of rare mature native forests; rare and endangered species and natural communities; dramatic two hundred foot high limestone cliffs....," according to published materials from ClearWater Conservancy.

A December 2006 report by ClearWater charges that the many communities of trees, shrubs, animals, fish, and insects are at risk. There are also six species of special concern that are found in no other place in the state than Spring Creek Canyon.

"Spring Creek Valley contains some of the most intact examples of limestone dependent natural community types to be found in Centre County and these communities host a number of plant and animal species that are extremely uncommon in Pennsylvania, several of which are globally

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Photo by Doug Bauman

Spring Creek is home to rare and endangered species and natural communities that are at risk of development in light of a planned Rockview land transfer to PSU and Benner Township.

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Catbird offers entertainment, free of charge

by Alice Fuller

BIRD Watch

Evergreens grow outside our bedroom windows, and some of the trees reach well above the tops of the windows. The trees make good cover for birds, especially those who use them as a staging base from which to attack their reflections in the windows. Even though I try to discourage such activity by attaching to the glass some small bird figures and a paper silhouette of a hawk to break up the reflection of the birds, these measures usually fail to stop determined individuals.

Cardinals, both male and female, are the birds I most frequently see banging against the window; however, a few mornings ago, I was surprised to see a quite different bird fighting his image: a gray catbird. From what I have read, the catbird vigorously defends its territory from fellow catbirds and other birds, so I should not be surprised to see one attacking one of our windows. We frequently see a catbird walking the railing of our patio or beneath on the opposite side of our house, so I suspect we have a pair nesting nearby.

The article on the gray catbird in the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Pennsylvania begins this way: "Known for its inquisitiveness, lively disposition, and variable song—which includes rich melodious notes interspersed with pauses, mewes, and imitations—the gray catbird was the fifth most frequently recorded species in Pennsylvania during the Atlas Project. Volunteers found catbirds in 96 percent of the Commonwealth's blocks." We hope the catbird will be found to be doing as well in the breeding bird atlas that is currently underway.

While not so colorful as some of my other bird neighbors such as Baltimore orioles, cardinals and goldfinches, still the catbird is an attractive little chap in his simple gray outfit with dark gray cap. In his *Life Histories of North American Birds*, A. C. Bent gives a pleasing description of the catbird: "Though modestly colored, the catbird is exquisitely tailored and always presents a

trim appearance. He is intelligent and friendly and possesses a lively and restless temperament, ever ready to be helpful to others of its kind in trouble of any sort, often coming to the aid of distracted parents in the defense of their homes and little ones."

The article in the last Atlas also noted that catbirds breed in a variety of habitats, including woodland undergrowth, shrubs growing near streams, ponds and open alder swamps, hedgerows and the edges of forests. "They readily adopt yards, gardens, cemeteries and parks for their nest sites and feeding areas."

The name "catbird" comes from the cat-like "mew" note often uttered in its varied song. The article in the Bent series includes this interesting description of a singing catbird: "A good catbird song needs no apology. The bird sits on some tall spray rising above the general tangle of shrubs, its tail depressed and body held low to the perch, and pours forth its medley of song." Dorothy Bordner's drawing nicely demonstrates the singing stance of a catbird.

On pleasant summer evenings, our family often dines on our patio. A couple of nights ago, a catbird was singing in a nearby tree. He sang and sang all the time we were sitting there; there's nothing like having our own entertainment, free of charge. In fact, I have been thinking I might include the catbird as one of my select group of incessant singers. So far this rather exclusive list includes the red-eyed vireo, scarlet tanager, indigo bunting and field sparrow.

Catbirds feed on a variety of insects. In the Bent account, one observer reported that he found the catbird to be one of the most important destroyers of Japanese beetles, and another reported seeing catbirds feeding extensively on gypsy moth larvae. Apparently, they like also carpenter ants and a variety of harmful beetles, wood borers, leaf hoppers—well the list goes on.

As summer begins to wane, the catbird adds a variety of fruits to his diet. Once I spotted a catbird in a shrub that had grape vines wrapped around it, with some grapes still clinging to the vines. I suspect the catbird was having a winey feast. Several years ago, I read an article in *National Wildlife* which was titled "Eating on the Run," and the head-note read, "For songbirds, migration not only means getting where they're going, it also means finding the right food and lodging along the way." The catbird, like many other small bird species, finds eating fruit to be more effi-



cient than chasing insects.

By mid- to late August, catbirds can find a variety of plants offering colorful fruits. These may range from the bright red fruits of dogwood, the dark blue of wild grapes, the blue-black of elderberries, the yellow-orange of honeysuckle and the white berries of a variety of shrubs. We landowners can help both resident and migrating birds by providing them with bed and breakfast. Chances are the catbird will return again and again to become one of our pleasing bird neighbors.

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rare," said Ombalski in a 2006 talk.

ClearWater's stated goals for the divestment are to protect the biological diversity, to increase the viability of these habitats and to encourage responsible recreational use of the canyon.

"ClearWater Conservancy supports a planning process to find out how to best protect the natural resources then determine who the landowner should be," said Ombalski. "A management/land use plan should be encouraged to occur and the outcome would identify appropriate and capable landowners to best protect the resources."

One proposal is for 100 acres to be developed for residential use near the Shiloh interchange. The YMCA is seeking a segment of the land for a sports complex, said Ombalski.

The group had hoped to bring people together for a public discussion about what to do with the land.

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