

The Chat



Newsletter of the Robert Cooper Audubon Society, serving East Central Indiana

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Jan./Feb. 2013

January 14

Hughes Nature Preserve



One student's idea for the HNP entrance

One of the largest habitat restoration projects ever tackled by our chapter is the Hughes Nature Preserve (HNP).

Located in Muncie between the White River and Cardinal Greenway, the site was once home to the Gill Clay Pot Co. and Muncie Pottery factories. In recent decades, though,

it had become overrun by invasive plant species, with Asian bush honeysuckle blanketing the site in a dense maze of branches.

Starting in 2010, with the help of two major grants, our chapter led an intensive project to clear those invasives, plant thousands of native plants, and honor the site's history.

On **Jan. 14**, at our regular monthly meeting, you'll learn about ongoing restoration work at the HNP, as well as some creative visions for its future.

Jon Creek (RCAS co-president) and Jeff Ray will first update us on the latest restoration efforts. They'll be followed by several Ball State landscape architecture students, who created design ideas that celebrate the preserve's past, present, and future.

Chapter business and refreshments will begin at **7 pm at Kennedy Library**, followed by the program at **7:15**.

February 11

Human dimensions of natural resources & forestry

Concerned about land development?

As land near urban and suburban areas is increasingly parcelized and fragmented to make way for housing and other forms of development, forest ecosystem services are compromised.



On **Feb. 11**, Dr. Josh Gruver, Asst. Prof. of Natural Resources & Environmental Management, will address results from a recent study concerned with how private forest landowners make decisions about the future of their forest land. The talk will address factors landowners consider as they make decisions to subdivide, gift, or conserve their forested parcels.

Chapter business and refreshments will begin at **7 pm at Kennedy Library**, followed by the program at **7:15**.

Conservation Award Winners Honored

Our conservation awards banquet, held November 19 at MCL Cafeteria, was an inspiring evening, as our chapter honored this year's award winners.

The **Robert H. and Esther (Munro) Cooper Conservation Award**, our chapter's highest honor, was given to **Bill Grummer**. A resident of East Central Indiana from 2005 to 2011 and now living in California, Bill was an active member of our chapter and worked passionately for the interests of bird conservation through various projects.

He was the chief field researcher and compiler of Delaware Co. data for the

Breeding Bird Atlas, a project of the Indiana DNR. He also coordinated the Christmas Bird Count for Delaware Co. every year he was in Indiana, and he served as the chapter's expert for those with questions about bird territory, identification, and migration.

Bill was an equally dedicated participant in every major habitat restoration project undertaken by the chapter during his years in ECI, including invasive species removal, tree planting, and tree watering. Drawing upon his career long experience as a California State Parks Ranger, Bill was particularly helpful to

volunteers who had less experience.

Jennifer Peters, Director of Exhibits and Education at the Muncie Children's Museum, won the **Clyde W. Hibbs Conservation Education Award** for effectively educating hundreds of children about the natural world.

Jennifer worked at Minnetrista for several years as Natural Interpreter, Animal Caretaking Coordinator, and Educator, eventually overseeing all of Minnetrista's educational programs for area schoolchildren.

Since 2010, she has worked at the

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Conservation Award Winners, continued from p. 1

Muncie Children's Museum, where her initiatives have included the Animal Families Program, development of an Outdoor Learning Center garden, and a new project to bring nature indoors at the museum. She also served twice as Education Chair for the Living Lightly Fair.

The **Phyllis Yuhas Wildlife Habitat Preservation Award** was presented to **Limberlost Swamp Remembered / Friends of the Limberlost**, in Geneva, for their work in restoring part of the former Limberlost Swamp.

The Limberlost, made famous in the books of Gene Stratton-Porter, originally covered 13,000 acres in Jay and Adams Counties, but was drained and largely clear-cut in the early 20th century.

In their 20 years of existence, the two organizations have helped restore 1,500 acres, which are home to a vast range of birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles, including nesting bald eagles and several species that are endangered or of "special concern" in Indiana.

Recently, the Loblolly Marsh (part of the Limberlost) was named Indiana's 250th Nature Preserve.

Motivate Our Minds (MOMs), Muncie, received the **Richard Greene Public Service Award** for addressing environmental concerns in its educational programs for children and in its facilities.

In a courtyard micro-climate growing environment, children at MOMs learn how to grow their own herbs, vegetables, and other edible plants. Small (3'x3') garden plots educate children and allow them to take pride in growing their own food and flowering plants.

Motivate Our Minds also boasts a solar collector that generates energy for



Front row, L-R: Marilyn Marks (MOMs), Malachi Brown; Jennifer Peters; Ken Brunswick (Limberlost).
Back row: Willy De Smet and Dave Cramer (Limberlost); Neil Spotts and Allen Kidd (Muncie Central Recycling Club)

its sound and lighting system; rain gardens; an additional rain collection and composting system; and the largest permeable parking lot in Delaware County, which decreases rainwater run-off.

MOMs educates others about its conservation-minded initiatives at the Living Lightly Fair and Garden Fair each year.

The **Charles Wise Youth Conservation Award** was given to the **Muncie Central High School Recycling Club** for its dedication in sorting trash and reclaiming recyclable materials.

Since its founding in 2008, the club has sorted and recycled 108,000 pounds of cardboard, newspaper, magazines, and paper; 1,200 pounds of plastic bottles; 130 pounds of aluminum; 450 pounds of steel; 35 pounds of copper wire; 90 ink and toner cartridges; 25 cell phones; 50 pounds of household batteries; and 300 pounds of assorted e-waste.

The club uses at least 50% of all proceeds from selling recyclables to expand its recycling efforts.

As part of its award, the Recycling Club received a \$400 scholarship from

the Audubon Society, to use for a conservation project of its own choosing.

A **Junior Audubon Charles D. Wise Youth Conservation Special Recognition** was also given to **Malachi Brown**, a fourth grader at Heritage Hall Christian School. Since completing a research project on John James Audubon, ten-year-old Malachi has been re-enacting Mr. Audubon to educate and inform the public about his life.

He delivered his re-enactment in front of 97 people at Kennedy Library during an owl program for children, and then again at the Audubon banquet. He is the son of Jacqueline and Justin Nelson, Muncie.

Many thanks go to Seedy Sally's (Pendleton), Cheryl Leblanc (www.cherylleblanc.com), and Charlie Mason for donating the evening's door prizes.

For photos of the award winners' work and the evening's events, visit www.cooperaudubon.org.

Prairie Creek trip

Plans are in the works for a **February 23** field trip to Prairie Creek Reservoir, starting at **9 am**.

The exact meeting place is to TBD. Keep an eye on our website (www.cooperaudubon.org) or contact Rose Jeffery, Field Trip Chair (rosemariejeffery@gmail.com), in February.

Book Sale Results

Thank you to everyone volunteered at the book sale and also those of you who donated books! This year, we made a total of \$215.06.

Although the sales weren't as high they were last year, we have contact with a local bookseller who gave us some good advice on growing the book sale. He informed us that our book sale is now one of the biggest held in Muncie and that we should stick with it and try to expand in future years.

Canada geese topped our Christmas Bird Count! Full results at www.cooperaudubon.org and in the next *Chat!*

Chapter-only membership sign-ups & renewals due January 1

If you are a member of the Robert Cooper Audubon Society, your donation goes entirely to the support of our chapter and its work in East Central Indiana. **Your membership dues support the following activities:**

- Monthly program meetings, with speakers and presentations about nature, natural history, and conservation
- Conservation and habitat restoration activities
- Education activities and a youth scholarship fund
- Our annual fall picnic and conservation awards banquet

Please NOTE: If you do not opt for chapter-only membership but maintain your National Audubon Society membership, you will remain a member of the RCAS. Nothing will change in your membership or the publications you receive.

Support your chapter at the following levels (please check your choice):

Student - \$15 Basic - \$20 Supporting - \$50 Partner - \$100

I plan to maintain my National Audubon Society membership, but here is my gift for the local chapter: \$ _____

Please make your check payable to the **Robert Cooper Audubon Society** and send it, along with this form, to:

Phyllis De Smet-Howard, RCAS Membership Chair, 2884 S. Blaine Pike, Portland, IN 47371

Name _____ Telephone _____

Address _____ City _____

State _____ Zip _____ Email _____

** I want to receive the chapter newsletter, the *Chat*, ___ in print form, via the U.S. Postal Service, or ___ in electronic form, as an email attachment. (Please check the box of your choice. **Email saves us money!**)



Bird of the Month: The American Coot by Helen Twibell



Fulica americana

Formerly known as mud hens (because of the bobbing of their heads as they walk) or as crow ducks, American coots are the most abundant and widely distributed species of the rail family in North America. The

name "coot" originated from the Middle English *coote*, meaning waterfowl.

Although commonly mistaken to be ducks, American coots come from a distinct family. Unlike ducks, they have broad lobes of skin that fold back with each step in order to facilitate walking on dry land. In fact, their feet appear chicken-like or turkey-like and are a greenish hue. Coots are gray to black all over, with a small white patch near the base of the tail. The bill is white, with what is called a frontal shield. Above the bill and between their prominent red eyes is a small red patch.

The American coot males, which are smaller than most other waterfowl, measure 13-17" in length and 23-28" across

the wings. The females are somewhat smaller. The average lifespan is about 5½ years, but the oldest known coot was said to have lived 22 years.

Though shown on some habitation maps as a year-round northern resident, many coots migrate to southern states and Central America in winter months. The heaviest migration periods in northern Indiana are March and April and then October to perhaps December or January. Migrating coots travel in large flocks called "covers" or "rafts," for socializing and protection.

The American coot lives near water, typically inhabiting wetlands and open water bodies, particularly water-reed-ringed lakes and ponds, open marshes, and sluggish rivers. While preferring freshwater, they may live in saltwater environments during the winter months, where waters are not frozen over.

No matter where a group of coots are found, there will be a commotion. The noisy, amusing birds, with loud guttural voices and varied calls, never seem to be quiet. Their sounds are described as croaks, toots, grunts, cackles, coughs, quacks, coos, whistles, squawks, chuck-

les, clucks, wails, frog-like plunks, and grating sounds.

Some of this din comes from fighting, as those involved control each other with their powerful, sharp-clawed feet. Fighting may involve defense of themselves or of territory at any time of the year but especially during nesting time. The American coot is highly territorial, with both males and females fighting with neighbors to maintain a small territory where they obtain all their food.

Coot mate pairings are monogamous throughout their lives, provided they have a suitable territory. They have a long courtship period involving touching of bills, bowing, bobbing and nibbling. A pair bond is made permanent when they secure a nesting territory, usually in tall reeds that will conceal the nest.

The coot is a prolific builder of multiple structures: a display platform, egg nest, and brood nest. Copulation takes place on the display platform. Then eggs are deposited in the egg nest, which is usually 12" in diameter with a 12-15" ramp. (One coot may build many such nests.) Although the female does most of the nest-building, the male... (*Cont'd p. 4*)

Robert Cooper Audubon Society

Robert Cooper Audubon Society
P.O. Box 1635
Muncie, IN 47308-1635



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helps with a great deal of the incubation. After hatching, the young are moved to a brood nest, which is actually a large raft that must be constantly added to.

Much research has been done on the brood parasitic strategy of the species. A coot mother selects chicks to keep that she believes are hers and have certain qualities; the others are severely pecked and drowned so they cannot enter the brood nest.

The American coot is the most aquatic member of the rail family. The expanded toe pads aid in swimming, and it is as much at home in the water as a duck. It swims buoyantly on an even keel, nodding its head as it goes. To fly, it has to patter over the water a while to take off, but once airborne it is a sturdy flier.

In feeding it may tip up like a duck and, if necessary, can dive for food. Underwater plants are a staple, but the coot's fondness for chara (or muskgrass) and other algae lessens competition with

ducks. Coots also feed on land, eating grass, sprouting grains, and, in the fall, waste grain. They feed on arthropods, mollusks, fish and other aquatic animals and insects.

In Louisiana, coot meat may be used in cooking Cajun gumbo. A relative of mine reports said that the coot's dark meat has a liver taste.

American coots are widespread, sometimes considered pests. Scientists use them to monitor toxins and pollution in wetland environments.

Dates for Your Calendar

Jan. 14: Hughes Nature Preserve program
Feb. 11: Human Dimensions of Natural Resources and Forestry program
Feb 23: Prairie Creek Field Trip

Chapter Website: www.cooperaudubon.org
Facebook: "Robert Cooper Audubon Society"
Email: cooperaudubon@gmail.com

Program meetings are held on the second Monday of each month (except July, Aug., Sept. & Nov.) at the
Muncie Public Library Kennedy Branch
1700 W. McGalliard Rd., Muncie, IN



7:00 pm: chapter business
7:15 pm: scheduled program

The Chat is published 5 times a year by the Robert Cooper Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society, serving Blackford, Delaware, Grant, Henry, Jay, Madison, and Randolph Counties.

Officers

Co-Presidents:	Sarah McKillip	765-287-8464
	Jon Creek	765-348-4019
Recording Sec.:	Jennifer Wagner	845-536-3285
Treasurer:	Robert Williams	765-730-8427

Directors

2011-2013:	Joel Jeffcoat	765-286-2896
	Phil Tuttle	765-289-4251
2012-2014:	Dave Cramer	260-726-9492
	Willy De Smet	260-726-6693

Committee chairs

Conservation:	Charlie Mason	765-288-9937
Education:	Deborah Brown	765-747-9332
Field Trip:	Rose Jeffery	765-716-0299
Hospitality:	Doris Cheney	765-288-0981
Membership:	Phyllis De Smet	260-726-6693
Newsletter Ed.:	Meredith Sims	317-640-8205
Program:	Jennifer Wagner	845-536-3285
Publicity:	Kevin Barnes	660-864-5024
	Sasha Auer	508-221-7963