

# Erie Times-News

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GUEST VOICES/BRIDGET STUTCHBURY AND EUGENE MORTON

## Land purchases needed as songbirds cry out for wilderness areas

By BRIDGET STUTCHBURY and EUGENE MORTON  
Contributing writers

Our songbirds are gradually disappearing, and the silent spring that Rachel Carson feared does not seem like such a far-fetched fable after all.

At least two dozen species of songbirds have suffered a significant drop in numbers since the 1980s, more than 30 percent in some cases, and include birds like the rose-breasted grosbeak, wood thrush, eastern kingbird and bobolink.

It's almost impossible for a migratory bird to live out its short life without coming face to face with our modern civilization and all the changes this has brought to the lands we share with them.

Migrants are forced to dodge their way over and around farms, cities and suburban sprawl as they leapfrog south to their wintering grounds each fall, and face the same human-made obstacle



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course on their way north in spring.

Songbirds pay a high price for nesting in landscapes where the forest remains only as scattered fragments. At our study area in northern Pennsylvania, hooded warblers fill the forest with their crisp, beautiful songs "wheeta wheeta weet-ee-o," giving no hint of their struggle to produce young. Nest predators like squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, cowbirds, blue jays and crows are more abundant in fragmented landscapes and destroy most of the eggs and young.

Despite frantic nest building,

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quiet tending of eggs and seemingly endless trips to feed the demanding young, hard-working warblers living in small forest fragments raised, on average, only half an offspring per summer. This is not enough to offset the number of adults expected to die each year.

This same bleak scenario affects many other forest songbirds. Without healthy large tracts of forest where songbirds can breed normally, the population is doomed.

The solution? We must protect the precious wilderness areas that still exist in Pennsylvania. Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is working hard to have an additional 54,460 acres of the Al-

legheny National Forest protected by Congress as wilderness and added to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Once designated, the areas will only become more natural and wild, and more valuable to birds and other wildlife that thrive in mature forests.

Unfortunately, the campaign for wilderness designation and protection of these lands is complicated by private ownership of the mineral rights and our thirst for oil and gas. The mineral rights beneath more than 90 percent of the Allegheny National Forest are privately held, including beneath the eight proposed wilderness areas. The owners of the oil, gas and other minerals have the absolute right to access their

holdings, meaning they can put in access roads and dig and drill largely wherever they want to get to their property.

High oil and gas prices have led to a drilling frenzy in the Allegheny National Forest, which blankets one of the world's first oil and gas fields. The drilling is already encroaching on several of the proposed wilderness areas. If it continues, the proposed areas will be lost as natural areas and the forest heavily fragmented.

The only solution is to buy the mineral rights, a costly but not impossible proposition.

Our federal and state governments, land conservancies, and land trusts need to assist in this effort.

It is quite reasonable to think that we can find a way to obtain the mineral rights beneath these very unique tracts that represent little more than 10 percent of the entire 513,000-acre national forest. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, about one

in five adults in the United States — more than 40 million people — consider themselves a bird watcher.

We need songbirds not only for our own enjoyment, but because birds are nature's blue-collar workers who sustain a healthy ecosystem by controlling insects, pollinating flowers, and eating fruit.

The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness deserves our support for its campaign to keep nature wild.

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