

The Birds of Buck Hill Falls Pennsylvania

Frank J. May and Darryl Speicher

At the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Buck Hill Conservation Foundation held on August 29th, the guest speaker was the local Pocono naturalist Darryl Speicher. The subject of his presentation was “*The Birds of Buck Hill*.” The meeting was well attended and Darryl entertained those present with his animated reenactment of the mating dance of a woodcock and imitation of a foraging Spotted Sandpiper.

The occasion proved to be a serendipitous one. At the reception that followed the presentation, we were approached by Ms. Mabel Schneider, an elderly Buck Hill neighbor, who showed us a booklet entitled *The Birds of Buck Hill Falls* by Cornelius Weygandt. It had been published by the Buck Hill Falls Company in 1906. None of us present were previously aware of the existence of such a document. A subsequent search of the archives of the Buck Hill Collection, which has been maintained by the Buck Hill Art Association, turned up several original copies as well as a trove of nature-related material that documented the century-long fascination of Buck Hillers with their natural environment.

Buck Hill Falls is a private community founded in 1901 as a summer retreat by a group of prosperous Philadelphians, all of whom were members of the Society of Friends. Located in what is now Barrett Township, Monroe County, the resort has grown to around 300 “cottages” and features country club amenities including a 27-hole golf course, tennis courts and an Olympic size pool. The community is surrounded by some 4,000 acres of forestland containing over 20 miles of hiking trails.

Cornelius Weygandt was born in 1871 in Germantown, Philadelphia and was a friend and neighbor of the Jenkins family, one of the founding Quaker families. He was educated at Germantown Academy and Franklin and Marshall College. Apparently ornithology was only one of his many interests, as he was a distinguished author and professor of English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania for some 55 years.

He was also among the earliest members of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (DVOC).

Cornelius Weygandt spent the summer of 1905 in Buck Hill living in what he described as a “shack.” His ornithological observations were made at multiple locations in and around the settlement. He was 32 years old at the time and a member of the American Ornithologists’ Union and DVOC. *The Birds of Buck Hill* was originally published as *Summer Birds of Broadhead’s [sic] Creek, Monroe Co., Pa.* in the *Cassinia* in 1905.

There is a tantalizing reference in the article, to a day in August spent in the field with a “Mr. Stone.” This could be no other than Witmer Stone the pre-eminent, regional ornithologist of the day and author of the seminal *Birds of Cape May*. Apparently Dr. Stone was familiar with the area. Further exploration of this connection must await further research into their correspondence.

As spring of 2005 marked the 100th anniversary of Cornelius Weygandt’s sojourn at Buck Hill, Darryl and I proposed to retrace his forays in the area and compare his observations with current ones of our own. The following is an abridged version of a series of articles written for the Buck Hill “Breeze,” a community newsletter, during the 2005 season.

It was a very different landscape that greeted Weygandt on his arrival in Buck Hill in June of 1905. The settlement, at that time, comprised about 65 cottages clustered around the first Inn. He described the vista looking out from “a low mountain,” which may have been Chestnut Mountain, elevation 1,600 feet, as a “great half-bowl scooped back into the Pocono plateau.” Most of the tall timber had been cut-off during the previous half-century leaving only a few remnants of the primeval forest notably around the gorge of the Buck Hill Creek. (The area below the Buck Hill Falls, which is now known as Jenkins Woods, contains one of the last sections of old growth forest to be found

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in Eastern Pennsylvania. It is now part of a 125-acre preserve permanently protected under a conservation easement held by the Buck Hill Conservation Foundation.)

He gives mention to the “great fire of 1882” which must have been fueled by the extensive “slash” left by loggers and bark strippers. The new growth forest at that time was mostly rock oak, chestnut, and hickory. Looking westward the burnt-over plateau was covered with low-lying fire cherry, sassafras, and huckleberry bushes. To the north stretched an “unbroken greenland” as far as the eye could see. He described the visual effect as “somber and desolate...with something in it both of the freedom and menace of the sea.” To the east and southeast towards present day Skytop Lodge, the area was largely made up of small farms and woodlots.

The habitat for birds has changed dramatically in the last 100 years, not only here in the Mountains but also in the vast areas through which they would have migrated. The counties surrounding Philadelphia have mostly become suburbs, as has a good deal of the Lehigh Valley. Houses and shopping centers have replaced farmland and pastures. The winter ranges in the tropical areas of the southern United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America have all undergone dramatic environmental changes as well. We would therefore expect to find significant differences in the population and distribution of the bird species mentioned in Weygandt’s narrative.

Cornelius arrived in Buck Hill on June 15th 1905 and stayed through September 15th. During that time he reported seeing 73 different species of birds. The Pocono Environmental Education Center has published a checklist for the area numbering 264 species. During the seven years I have been keeping a Buck Hill list, I have seen or heard 120 species. Darryl, whose list takes in a broader area than mine, holds the one-day record for Monroe County at 119 species.

There are several reasons for the disparity and relatively low species count tallied by Weygandt. Arriving as he did in mid-June, he obviously missed the migration. Birds passing through to breed further north, such as the Blackpoll and Palm Warblers, would have been long gone by the time he got here. He also would

have missed any lingering northern winter visitors such as Redpolls, although he does, surprisingly, include a crossbill on his list. The absence of any waterfowl may not be so mysterious, as we must remember that there were no large lakes anywhere nearby at that time. He also mentioned several questionable species as well as a couple that he was unable to identify.

We must forgive Cornelius his occasional mistakes and remember that he was, after all, an amateur and even the most observant of us amateurs (ahem!) often make mistakes.

One of the first birds he encountered, the call of which disturbed his sleep the first night, was a Whip-poor-will. Sadly this member of the Nightjar family seems to be on the decline in Pennsylvania and is largely absent from present day Buck Hill. I have only heard and seen one once several years ago. Darryl reported that they can still sometimes be heard around the village of Mountainhome, a mile away, and at Long Pond.

Fortunately most of the birds Weygandt recorded are still to be found locally, many within the confines of the cottage community. These include Ovenbird, Great-Crested Flycatcher, and what he referred to as “Chebecs.” This latter is the old, common, onomatopoeic name for what we now know as the Least Flycatcher. Other examples of dated nomenclature are “Chewinks” (Eastern Towhees) and Cedar Birds (Cedar Waxwings). Weygandt seemed to confuse or combine Phoebes and Wood Pewees, both common today in Buck Hill. Phoebes frequently can be observed nesting on porch rafters or under eaves. Pewees generally prefer the deep woods.

The Ruby-Throated Hummingbird, described by Weygandt as “one of the commonest” of the locality, is still a season-long, breeding resident of Buck Hill.

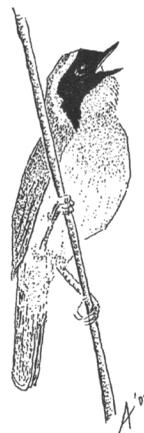
Weygandt expressed his “chief disappointment” in finding so few Hermit Thrushes and Veeries but reported the Wood Thrush as plentiful. The opposite is true today with the ethereal song of the Wood Thrush being a rare treat and the other two species apparently flourishing. Interesting though, he commented about hearing the Wood Thrush around Glenmere, the small, manmade lake, long since drained, which served

as early Buck Hill's swimming hole. It was located on the Buck Hill Creek near its merger with an offshoot of the Middle Branch of the Brodhead Creek in the area now known as Jenkins Woods, where today you can still occasionally hear a Wood Thrush in song.

Absent from the region in 1905 were English (House) Sparrows and Common Grackles. The former are now, of course, ubiquitous and can be encountered in nearby Mountainhome; however, I have never seen one in Buck Hill. Grackles are frequent visitors as are Starlings, another introduced bird that apparently Weygandt didn't encounter. He reported seeing or hearing no owls, which is surprising, and few hawks. The only Red-tailed Hawk he experienced was nailed to a barn door. The propensity for farmers in the 1800's and early 1900's to shoot raptors on sight probably accounts for this phenomenon.

One place that was frequented by Cornelius Weygandt has changed little since the summer of 1905 is the Moravian cemetery at High Acres. Located on Rt. 447 just west of Buck Hill, this quiet, peaceful spot has been the resting place for the local Brethren since 1848. Cornelius reported often seeing a pair of grasshopper sparrows singing from atop mullein stalks and gravestones. It was here also that he saw his only cuckoo of the summer, a yellow-billed. This last sighting is interesting, because this year (2005) we have been plagued with the worst out-break of gypsy moth caterpillars in the past fifteen years. Hot on the trail of the caterpillars have been the cuckoos. Normally uncommon and very illusive, they have been reported all over the County this summer. I didn't find any grasshopper sparrows the morning of my visit, but I was fortunate to spot an Indigo Bunting singing from a tree overlooking the cemetery.

In reading Weygandt's account, it is often difficult to figure out just exactly where he was when he made his observations. The habitat and landmarks have changed considerably over the intervening century. There is some certainty, however, that he spent quite a bit of time exploring the area around present day Skytop Resort. Early in the summer, Darryl Speicher led a group of East Stroudsburg University students for a walk along the Beaver Dam and Upper Falls trails. Coincidentally, some of us with the Buck Hill Conservation Foundation were on the same trail later in



Common Yellowthroat
© Adrian Binns

the morning with Pocono Naturalist John Serrao. The following is Darryl's account of the day's discoveries.

It was quite early in the morning of June 26 when we started off. Just off the road we entered an old stand of Norway spruce planted in the early 1930s in an attempt to reforest the property following the intensive logging of the previous half-century. Although not native to the area, nor present when Weygandt would have visited, these trees do provide suitable nesting habitat for some of our most beautiful summer visitors, including the Blackburnian and Magnolia warblers. The Beaver Dam trail follows the Leavitt Branch of the Brodhead Creek (Weygandt referred to this stream as the "Levi" Branch) as it flows across the Pocono Plateau before tumbling over the escarpment at Indian Ladder Falls. The trail was wet following an intense summer rain. As we proceeded down the trail to the marsh, red-eyed vireos were abundant, and we encountered several Hermit Thrushes and Veerys, although they weren't being particularly vocal. There were no wading birds or waterfowl awaiting us as we approached the marsh, but the expanse of open water and the brushy edge around it made for a more varied structure to the habitat, and bird songs resounded. Black-throated Blue, Yellow, and Black-throated Green warblers along with American Redstarts were all around us. Chickadees, titmice and white-breasted nuthatches seemed to follow us down the trail as we skirted the marsh's edge. Suddenly birds surrounded us. In a small clearing, we found Catbirds, Song Sparrows, and a pair of Scarlet Tanagers, the male in his blazing finery, the female in her oak leaf green camouflage, moving from tree to tree. Occasionally the male would stop on an exposed perch atop a hemlock, face

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the rising sun, and burst into song. And that wasn't all. A pair of Yellow-billed Cuckoos joined the gathering, adding to our excitement. Just the day before, the interns and I had banded one of these incredible birds at the Thomas Darling Preserve in Blakeslee.

One daunting challenge confronted us that morning, an Empidonax flycatcher. Hard to identify by sight, birders train to listen for their diagnostic songs. Unfortunately it wasn't singing that day. Twenty years ago, we would have identified it as a Traill's Flycatcher, but today it could be either the Alder or Willow Flycatcher. Judging by the habitat, we suspected Willow; but, it would have been nice to hear it sing its two-note song. If we had heard one, sneezy, *fitz bew*, we would have known for sure.

After our visit to the beaver marsh we crossed Rt. 390 and walked along the upper falls of the Leavitt Branch. Here we encountered two singing Louisiana Waterthrushes and a brilliant Yellow-throated Vireo. Our morning ended around 10 am.

Darryl and I returned to Skytop together in early August. It was a very humid, though windy, morning that found us on the gravel road that led to Goose Pond. Our destination was about three miles off of Rt. 390 in one of the most remote areas of the resort. Cornelius Weygandt visited this man-made lake when it was "the only piece of water of any size in the vicinity."

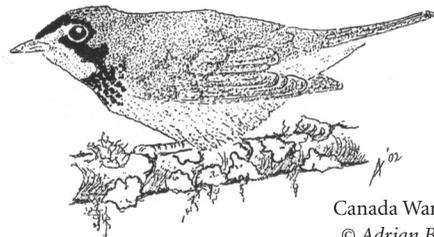
The place has an interesting history, having been the site of an early and short-lived commune in the middle of the 19th century. It later was part of a large private estate and reportedly the site of a rum-running operation during Prohibition. After being acquired by Skytop, it had been used by the local Boy Scout troop as a campsite. Now it has largely reverted to its former natural state, which is actually a combination of several different ecological zones including open lake, bog lands, and forest. This latter zone, what Weygandt referred to as "Canadian" in its flora and fauna, features stands of northern spruce, tamarack, and high-bush blueberry that are unique in our area.

Darryl, along with one of his interns, had visited the site several days before and had seen or heard some 28 species of birds, many of them hatch-year youngsters.

Some of the more notable sightings included a Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, and a Ruffed Grouse with young. When Darryl and I arrived later in the week, the area was mysteriously quiet and devoid of birds. We speculated that the high winds were keeping the birds hunkered down. Darryl commenced "phishing," a technique employed by accomplished practitioners to draw in the curious. It is a liquid, labial sound that is imitative of an alarm call made by certain species when they perceive danger particularly in association with snakes. When done persistently and expertly, it can be very productive. This time the effort only sparked the interest of a couple of Chickadees.

After 15 or 20 minutes of disappointing scanning, we were startled by a quick over-flight of a Sharp-shinned Hawk. This sighting was interesting, as the "sharpie," although the most common of the accipiters, is not that prevalent in our area.

We frequently see the larger Cooper's Hawk, and I have recorded several breeding pairs in Buck Hill. At least we had solved the mystery, as the hawk, which specializes in nabbing unwary songbirds, probably had been roosting nearby and had made the birds understandably nervous.



Canada Warbler
© Adrian Binns

As we walked along the path that paralleled the southern end of the pond, Darryl noticed a series of small holes drilled in the dirt. He suggested that they had been made by Woodcock foraging for worms. As we continued, the birding improved; we were rewarded with good looks at Song and Swamp Sparrows, Yellow Warblers, young Common Yellowthroats, Chestnut-sided and Canada Warblers, these latter showing the "goofy" plumage of first year juveniles. We were happy to see this evidence of a successful breeding season.

On the drive out from Goose Pond, we hit a wave of birds moving through the forest. Hermit Thrush and Blackburnian Warbler were among the birds we found. We spent some time with them, working on identification. This time of year can be more difficult than the spring when they are vocalizing. One bird in particular put our skills to the test, a Tennessee Warbler. They look very much like a red-eyed Vireo, which is one of the most common birds in our forests, but the Tennessee's beak is not as stout and lacks the vireo's hook on the upper mandible.

The morning would have been a thorough success had it not been for the rock we kicked up on the road out which totaled Darryl's fuel pump and necessitated our trekking the rest of the way. At least Cornelius did not have to cope with such a modern day mishap when he visited the location in 1905.

The summer days were "dwindling down to a precious few," when Darryl and I took what was to be the last in our series of hikes in quest of the "birds of Buck Hill."

Cornelius Weygandt remained in Buck Hill until September 15th. One of the areas he frequented was the rolling countryside along Dutch Mill Road including Price's Pond and Gravel Pond. It was in this area, made up of small farms, lying just west of present day Skytop, that he reported seeing a number of birds that so far had eluded us. It is not surprising that all of these species — Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Horned Lark, and Loggerhead Shrike — are birds that are usually associated with plowed farmland and open meadows. Most of the farms in this area have reverted to forest or have been replanted with houses. The Sparrows and the Horned Lark can still be found in the west end of the County where agriculture is prevalent. Interestingly, all three are frequently seen today on reclaimed strip mines.

The shrike is an extremely interesting bird, as it is technically a passerine but acts like a small hawk. Its modus operandi is to perch on a bare branch or twig, not too far off the ground, and sally forth, flycatcher style, to capture insects, mice, or even smaller birds. It also has a Transylvanian predilection for impaling its victims, typically a grasshopper on a thorn bush or even barbed wire. It is easy to see how it earned its

nickname, the "butcher bird." The Loggerhead Shrike is the more southerly ranging of the two species. Weygandt described his bird as the "migrant" variety, most likely a Loggerhead, given the time of year. Its cousin, the Northern Shrike is very similar although larger. It is a rare winter visitor to our area. Darryl described his encounter with one several years ago.

The first winter after I moved back to the Poconos, I signed up for the Christmas Bird Count. I started my route at the Colony Village south of Canadensis on Rt. 447. It was a beautiful December day, brisk and clear. I noticed a bird with a very erect posture sitting atop one of the old, over-turned relics that were once part of a miniature golf course. It had the distinctive mask, wing bar, and hooked beak of the Northern Shrike. Having just spent six years working for Audubon in New England, I didn't realize the excitement my sighting would stir-up in the local, birding community. Shortly afterwards, John Serrao wrote about Shrikes in his weekly column for the Pocono Record. He mentioned in the article that he had never seen a Northern Shrike. That same week my wife and I were returning from La Anna on the Lake Russell Road and spotted another shrike. As soon as we got home, I called John and was able to take him to see his first Northern Shrike, a new "life list" bird. I have the Shrike to thank for introducing me to John — and the friendship we have built up over the years since.

Still in search of these missing species, Darryl and I set off one glorious Sunday morning to circumnavigate Gravel Pond. The going was anything but easy, as there is no defined trail, and we had to "bushwhack" our way around. Next time, we will remember to bring my canoe. As we trekked, Darryl related his sighting of a Black Vulture soaring over the Pocono Avian Research Center in Mountainhome several weeks previous. It was the first time he had seen one in the Township. Sometime later, he saw a pair circling over his home nearby, and this time they were accompanied by an Osprey. Cornelius was unlikely to have seen either of these species a hundred years ago. The Black Vultures have only recently been expanding their range northward, probably due to the warming trend in our climate. No sooner had Darryl mentioned the Osprey, when we heard the unmistakable cry of one as it majestically lifted off the lake. It was my first Osprey in the County and the best bird of the day. We also

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spotted a Winter Wren and three Horned Grebes. I am still looking for my first Buck Hill Shrike.

The last leg of our journey to retrace the path of Cornelius Weygandt led me to the Library of the Academy of Natural Sciences. I had spent many a Saturday as a child roaming through the various exhibits, but this was the first time I had been in these illustrious halls since the late 1950s. Here at last in front of me was an original copy of the 1906 *Cassinia* article. I also took the opportunity to read an earlier (1904) article by John D. Carter, referred to by Weygandt, entitled *Summer Birds of Pocono Lake, Monroe County, Penn.* This tract mentioned a number of the same birds listed by Weygandt including some of our “missing species” such as Vesper Sparrows and White Crossbills. He also reported hearing what he surmised was a “Bicknell’s Thrush” — this latter somewhat dubiously.

The other goal I had hoped to accomplish was to firmly establish the visit to Buck Hill of Witmer Stone in August of 1905. That it was, in fact, “the” Mr. Stone there can be no doubt. Dr. Stone was a founding member of the DVOC in 1890. Cornelius Weygandt was admitted to membership in 1891. The two were good friends and the Academy has no fewer than seventy-five pieces of correspondence between the two in its archives. I hope to research these papers further to see if I can turn-up some more specific information on when Stone came to Buck Hill, where he stayed, and what he did while he was there. Weygandt paid hom-

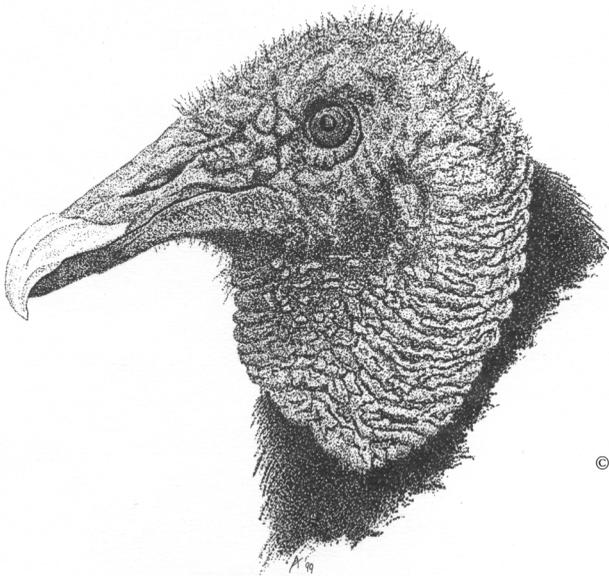
age to Stone in his book, published in 1938, entitled *Philadelphia Folk*, numbering him among his “twelve good men and true.”

In addition to his fondness for birds, he was an authority on and a collector of early American furniture. In another example of serendipity, while conducting research for this article on the Internet, I came upon a notice from Freeman’s of an auction held in October of 2003 that featured some of Dr. Weygandt’s more notable pieces. The same notice advertised several pieces from the estate of Betty Karge Jenkins, the widow of Edward (Ted) Jenkins, grandson of one of the founders of Buck Hill. Betty was the last of the family to reside in the community.

Cornelius Weygandt published another article in *Cassinia* in 1907 entitled *Some Birds of Browns Mills N.J.* Always more of a writer than an ornithologist, he became a distinguished professor of English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania from 1904 to 1942. One of our older Buck Hill residents remembers him well from his student days in the late 1930s. *Who’s Who in America* credits him with publishing some 17 books during his productive lifetime. We would like to think that the summer he spent in Buck Hill in 1905 was one of his most memorable experiences.

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Black Vulture
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