

Half a Century and Counting – Saw Mill River Audubon Turns 50

By Andrew Mackie and Sean Mahar

WHAT COULD BRING words of praise from Governor George Pataki, such as “With this important valuable objective, you accept a remarkable level of stewardship reflected in the lives and legacies of such great conservationists as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and Paul Schaefer, who are honored for their foresight and wisdom in this area,” or a Proclamation from Westchester County Executive, Andrew J. Spano, or words of congratulations from Audubon New York’s Executive Director, David J. Miller?—nothing less than the 50th Anniversary celebration of the Saw Mill River Audubon Society.

On April 26th (also just happened to be John James Audubon’s birthday), Saw Mill River chapter members, board members, past board members and friends got together at the meeting room of a church in Pleasantville to celebrate and reminisce about 50 years of dedicated service to the environment. All in attendance enjoyed dinner and then participated in the program with songs, slide shows, and reflections on Chapter history. Guiding the program for the evening was current Chapter president, Richard Saravay.

The genesis of Saw Mill River Audubon was from the Bedford Audubon Society. In the early 1950’s, Bedford Audubon was the only chapter in Westchester County. At that time, Bedford Audubon member, William G. Fennell, suggested the creation of a separate chapter that would be centered around the communities of Chappaqua and Pleasantville. In cooperation with National Audubon and Bedford Audubon, the new Saw Mill River Audubon Society was born on April 24, 1953. Today, the Chapter has over 900 members in a territory stretching from Tarrytown to Peekskill.

Over the years, Saw Mill River Audubon has faithfully carried out its mission “to maintain environmental quality for all living things by protecting natural ecosystems through education, advocacy, and habitat conservation”. It has accomplished this by acquiring eight sanctuaries (Brinton Brook, Choate, Graff, Haas, Pinecliff, Prun, Cameron-Murfieldt, and Chernick), protecting 338 acres in Westchester County. The Prun Sanctuary started from an initial donation by Dr. F. Morgan and Agnes Prun in 1966. Today, this sanctuary houses the Chapter office and is a hub for the environmental education programs. In addition, Saw Mill River Audubon employs an education director housed at the Sanctuary, maintains a natural history library, and boasts a wonderful butterfly/hummingbird garden planted under the leadership of Midge Arnold.

Environmental education has always been a major focus for Saw Mill River Audubon. This commitment turned into action in 1968, when the Chapter hired a part-time Naturalist, Kaye Anderson. Her position was increased to full-time in 1977. She conducted countless programs and field trips, and started the volunteer group known as “Monday Walkers”. She retired in 1988. The following year, Anne Swaim was hired as Education Director. Working with schools, she has developed a variety of programs that are based on the ecology of Westchester County, while conforming to New York State Education requirements. Today, Anne oversees a program that reaches 8,000 students a year!

Two important events for the Chapter include the first Earth Day celebration and the first outbreaks of gypsy moths in Westchester. Saw Mill River Audubon took a lead role in organizing the Earth Fair in Chappaqua on October 18, 1970. Co-chairs, Rita Wecker and Joan Gass, coordinated numerous committees and volunteers. The day was a huge success with an attendance of 10,000 people. Around the same time in the early 1970s, New York State was experiencing the first outbreaks from gypsy moth caterpillars. Westchester County’s response was to spray with a pesticide known as Sevin. Saw Mill River Audubon opposed this spraying based on ecological damage caused by the pesticide. Carol Coggeshall (a founding Chapter member and still active today) chaired the study group to present alternatives to the County. As part of that effort, former Chapter President, Dr. Stan Wecker, drafted “*Parks, People and Pesticides: Recommendations for a Balanced Public Policy*”. The report was rejected by the County, but, as predicted by Saw Mill River Audubon, spraying was not the answer. Natural controls ultimately halted the tide of gypsy moths.

On the Audubon front, Saw Mill River Audubon has helped set the state conservation agenda. As Executive Director of Audubon New York, David J. Miller stated in his letter to the Chapter, “On environmental issues, you have made a difference on a local, county, state and national level.... I especially would like to thank the chapter for its leadership in creating the Audubon Council of New York and your support and involvement in the state programs of the National Audubon Society—Audubon New York.”

The celebrations for the evening ended with a limerick written by Stan Wecker. The last verse is fitting for the continuing story of Saw Mill River Audubon:

So back in the present, after tripping through time
Saw Mill is still looking for new mountains to climb
With standards set high
This bird’s ready to fly!

Our Chapter at fifty is just entering its prime.

The mission of Saw Mill River Audubon is to maintain environmental quality for all living things by protecting natural ecosystems through education, advocacy, and habitat conservation.

GIS Analyst Joins Audubon

By Graham Cox

JAMES (JAMIE) HALPERIN has started work for Audubon New York as Geographic Information System (GIS) Analyst. His first and most pressing assignment is working with the staff of the Bird Conservation unit to generate the maps and analysis for the second round identification of Important Bird Areas.

Jamie comes to Audubon after completing his Masters degree in forestry at North Carolina State University. His research involved work in Tanzania on reforestation planning using GIS and remote sensing technology. He compiled and assessed spatial information on the environmental need, the ecological potential and the social

acceptability for forestry intervention.

His most recent work was a habitat-mapping project for the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker in the North Carolina sandhills area, working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. He has also worked in the Pacific Northwest as a biological technician at Crater Lake National Park, mapping potential habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl, Wolverine and Canada Lynx. He has also worked in the Peace Corps in Togo, West Africa and as an AmeriCorps Volunteer in Maryland. Jamie is a native of Augusta, Maine and received his undergraduate degree from the University of Southern Maine, in Portland.



New Audubon New York staff members Sean Mahar (left) and Jamie Halperin (right).

Audubon New York Intern Grows Into Grassroots Coordinator

By Audubon New York Staff

SEAN MAHAR, a recent graduate of Siena College, started interning with Audubon over a year ago. He has now been working for Audubon full time as a Legislative Assistant, and as the Grassroots Advocacy Coordinator. In his time with Audubon, Sean has helped to pass such legislation as the Lead Sinker Bill and amendments to the Bird Conservation Area law. He has also been very active on advancing Audubon’s pesticide education campaign. Sean is interested in learning more about politics and how it can be a useful tool to save our environment.

He is also eager to learn new ways to involve the chapters and members of Audubon in the political process.

When not at Audubon, Sean enjoys being outdoors as much as he can, and especially likes hiking and canoeing. He also enjoys helping out with a long-term amphibian population study on the Saratoga Battlefield, which he started while attending Siena, and participating in local theatre productions. Sean is also looking to get out and visit all the chapters, so look to hear from him soon.