

Revolving Resource Fund – Mini-Loan Program
Support Agricultural Heritage/Habitat Conservation Plan with Applicant Startup
Resources

**By Troy Ettel, Director of Conservation and Stewardship
and John Parke, Stewardship Project Director-North Region**

In 2005, NJAS received funding from the Beneficia Foundation, in support of a plan to protect the agricultural culture of the northwestern region of New Jersey. This program is part of a larger strategy to work closely with farmers and landowners to seek alternative means that will protect the agricultural heritage of the Delaware Valley region of NJ. NJAS has recognized that for wildlife to continue to exist in New Jersey, an innovative initiative that considers farm economics and wildlife conservation is needed. NJAS discovered that frequently farmers have neither the upfront money nor the expertise to initiate implementation of conservation practices, even though government programs offer eventual reimbursements. In fact, through discussions with successful partners in other agencies, NJAS has determined that one of the greatest sources of project failure is lack of follow-through. Farmers in the Delaware Valley told NJAS that in some cases they have had to use credit cards or bank loans to purchase materials or rent equipment to implement conservation practices funded through a program. These particular sources of funding charge high interest rates and/or require lengthy approval periods.

In respond to this need, in 2006 NJAS obtained funding for a pilot mini-loan program to aid farmers interested in enrolling in existing government-sponsored conservation programs to promote agricultural sustainability and improve wildlife habitat. The program provides start-up money to farmers until they are reimbursed by the Federal or State agencies for implementing the conservation practices. For tax purposes, NJAS cannot distribute these funds directly to an applicant without charging interest. Therefore, each allocation of the mini-loan funds to an applicant is accompanied with an Agreement for Payment which indicates they must repay the loan with a minimal interest of 1%. Any interest accumulated through the mini-loan is far less then the interest charged by a credit card and/or bank loan. All interest collected goes directly back into the fund for the next farmer to use.

The mini-loan fund has generated much interest, creating a waiting list of farmers in need of the temporary funding. With only \$15,000 in the fund in 2006, and an additional \$15,000 in 2007 from Beneficia, several projects were able to be executed. The mini-loan program has:

- Provided \$8,000 to a farmer in Harmony Twp. which allowed her to rent proper machinery and hire another local farmer to clear hedgerows and invasive vegetation and plant marginal fields with warm season grass for habitat.
- Provided \$11,500 to a farmer in Hope Twp. to purchase and install exclusionary fencing thus allowing him to implement a prescribed grazing plan which will benefit habitat.
- Provided \$27,900 to a farmer in Franklin Twp. to build a Pesticide Containment Structure thus allowing him to complete his EQIP contract and guard against potentially harmful discharges of chemicals into the environment.

NJAS envisioned this option to provide start-up loans to approved applicants as a “revolving resource fund because all of the conservation programs available have a cost-share and/or reimbursement plan after projects are finished. Once practices are implemented, the

applicable conservation program then distributes reimbursement. The loan from NJAS is then repaid and funds are again available for the next property.

Due to the great success of NJAS's initial program, in October 2007, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture awarded a \$50,000 grant to NJAS to increase the "pot" of available money for its mini-loan program. This allows additional farmers in the state to participate in the program and receive a loan to assist them in initiating implementation of even more conservation practices.

"We are pleased to partner with the New Jersey Audubon Society to encourage farmers to undertake these projects that not only protect soil and water resources, but increase productivity and profitability for the farmer," said New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus. "The mini-loan program provides the seed money to help farmers take the next step toward implementing practices that improve water quality, soil health, and diverse habitat."

The fates of farming and habitat for grassland birds in New Jersey are inseparable. If both are to survive here, the farming and conservation community must work together to develop innovative strategies to promote economically viable farm communities and conservation goals. This project does just that.

"In New Jersey's shrinking rural landscapes, significant overlap exists between the concerns of the environmental community for the preservation of rare wildlife and water quality and the agricultural community's concern for viable agricultural policy," said Tom Gilmore, President of the New Jersey Audubon Society. "Implementation of sustainable farming practices dramatically improves environmental conditions at the local level, protecting watersheds and habitat for wildlife. Many farmers opt out of federally subsidized conservation programs not because they lack the interest but rather because they cannot afford the large upfront costs associated with these programs. This unique partnership between NJ Audubon and the NJ Department of Agriculture offers one solution to this problem."

"The Farm Bill provides many opportunities for farmers to consider in conserving natural resources on their land," said Tom Drewes, State Conservationist for NRCS. "NRCS is happy to see the New Jersey Department of Agriculture and New Jersey Audubon Society working together to help farmers take advantage of these opportunities through this loan program."

For more information about NJAS's Mini-Loan program please contact John Parke at 908-766-5787 ext 18.

Voters Approve Public Question #3, Stop Gap Preservation Funding Secured **By Joanna Wolaver, Government Relations Director**

For the 13th consecutive time since 1961, voters showed their support for New Jersey's open space, farmland, and historic preservation programs by approving public question #3—the Green Acres, Farmland, Blue Acres, Historic Preservation Bond Act of 2007 – by a margin of 54% to 46% on November 6th. Passage of this measure provides \$200 million in temporary funding to support preservation efforts throughout the state.

This victory sends a clear message to the Governor and State Legislature that funding for preservation is a priority for New Jersey residents even during fiscally challenging times. This question was the only statewide ballot question to receive voter approval this year, as both the property tax and stem cell measure were defeated.

To ensure the passage of this question, NJAS worked with the Keep It Green campaign, a coalition of over 90 non-profit organizations from throughout the state. Along with over 140 endorsing municipalities and businesses and over 100 volunteers, the campaign successfully reached well over one million New Jersey voters. As part of this campaign, the coalition held over 35 press events, distributed over 150,000 flyers, aired radio advertisements, organized volunteer phone banks and distributed 2,000 yard signs. Thank you to all our members that assisted with this effort!

While passage of question #3 was a great victory, this bond measure will only provide enough money to keep the state's preservation efforts going for one more year. Working with the Keep It Green campaign, NJAS will now focus its efforts on securing a long-term stable funding source for the renewal and strengthening of the Garden State Preservation Trust. Please visit the www.NJKeepItGreen.org site for more information on this campaign.

We would like to thank the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Victoria Foundation, and the Schumann Foundation for their generous support.

Key Green Acres Acquisition Chosen for Extensive Habitat Restoration Plan for Threatened and Endangered Grassland Birds
By Troy Ettel, Director Conservation and Stewardship

The New Jersey Audubon Society is partnering with the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife and Hunterdon County Department of Parks and Recreation to implement a grassland management plan for the Merck Tract of the South Branch Wildlife Management Area. The site was identified as one of the most critically important sites for threatened and endangered grassland birds in the region by the Raritan Piedmont Wildlife Habitat Partnership, a consortium of government and non-governmental agencies emphasizing habitat protection in Central New Jersey. Although originally purchased by the NJ Green Acres Program in 2000, inadequate staffing levels and funding for stewardship have prevented the site from serving its intended purposes. Much of the grassland habitat has degraded to a point where it is suboptimal or completely unusable for breeding grassland birds. This plan will restore over 250 acres of warm season and cool season grasses with a goal of providing habitat for Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink and Grasshopper Sparrow. In addition, a small managed wetland and 64 acres of shrubland targeted for American Woodcock and other shrub-nesting species such as Blue-winged Warbler and Prairie Warbler are planned for the site. The restoration plan includes removal of extensive thickets of invasive species, primarily multiflora rose and Russian olive, which have spread throughout the nesting habitat as well as planting and establishment of native grasses. A long-time farmer of the site has helped clear invasive vegetation. He is a key project partner who will also help plant the grasses.

Funding for the project has been provided by Conservation Resources, Inc. through a grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Gibson Family Foundation, Mushett Family Foundation, Merck, Inc., and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Essex County Plans Woodland Restoration at South Mountain Reservation
By Troy Ettel, Director Conservation and Stewardship

In September 2007, Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo publicly announced a plan for the first cull of white-tailed deer on the South Mountain Reservation. The announcement offers hope for restoration of one of the most beautiful urban parks in New Jersey that has been decimated in recent years by an unnaturally large white-tailed deer herd. The Reservation, designed by Frederick Olmsted's family firm, encompasses over 2,000 acres in the Essex county communities of Maplewood, Millburn, and West Orange.

The severity of ecological damage to the park's woodlands resulting from the presence of an extremely high deer density is nearly unparalleled elsewhere in New Jersey. Deforestation of the mostly wooded park is occurring and is readily visible on ridgetops throughout the park, as deer are retarding regeneration of native trees. In addition the Reservation's forests are nearly completely devoid of native shrubs, wildflowers, and other woodland herbs. As the native trees and wildflowers have succumbed to intense browse pressure from white-tailed deer, invasive, nonnative weeds that deer will not eat have risen to take their place. Noxious weeds such as Japanese stiltgrass, Japanese knotweed, garlic mustard, and Japanese barberry have spread throughout the Reservation's forest.

The loss of natural vegetation is of great concern because of its obvious impacts on the native plants and the animals that live in the shrubs and ground-level vegetation in healthy forests. There are also serious human safety issues at stake as well. Loss of vegetation on steep slopes, particularly evident on the Maplewood portion of the park, is creating severe run-off and erosion problems for neighboring residents.

NJ Audubon Society met with officials from each of the three towns that contain the Reservation and Essex County over the past two years and offered public presentations to each of the town councils detailing the impacts of high deer populations on forest health. NJAS urged municipal officials from each of the three towns to pass resolutions allowing the County to pursue a deer hunt. Because of the severity of the damage on the Reservation, NJAS believes that restoration of the South Mountain Reservation will provide a valuable demonstration relevant to much of New Jersey that is suffering from severe emerging impacts from overpopulated white-tailed deer.

Support for NJAS's forest health initiative has been provided by the Johanette Wallerstein Institute.

2007 Conservation Award Recipients Bring Bald Eagles Back to New Jersey
By Eric Stiles, Vice President Conservation and Stewardship

Two couples were awarded the 2007 Richard P. Kane Conservation Award; Elmer and Bunny Clegg and Mary Jane and Red Horner have been critical to the recovery of Bald Eagles in NJ. As recently as 1984, we had only one remaining pair of eagles in the Garden State. Through the hard work of volunteers and the NJDEP Endangered & Nongame Species Program (ENSP), we now have over 60 pairs.

The Cleggs and Horners exemplify the adage that a few determined people can make a tremendous, lasting difference in restoring our natural heritage for generations to come.

Elmer and Bunny Clegg began working with the Bald Eagle Project in 1991, when an eagle pair showed up in Gibbstown where they live. That pair moved many times between 1993 and 1997, and each time Elmer and Bunny tracked them until he found the nest site. Since 1997, the eagle pair has nested at one site, a NJAS sanctuary, on the Delaware River. As the eagle population has grown, Elmer and Bunny have become the official observers of more nests. In 2007, they watched and reported on six nests. Their work is much more than passive observation: they develop good relationships with landowners and neighbors, post signs and maintain site protections, outfit nest trees with predator guards (in the off-season), and keep copious and detailed notes.

Mary Jane and Leroy (Red) Horner have been volunteers with the Bald Eagle Project since 1996 and currently watch seven eagle nests. They work in the area with the densest nesting in the state: the Cohansey River, which is not an easy task. Their work along the Cohansey is particularly challenging since territorial boundaries seem to change year to year as eagles build and maintain several nests. In addition to long hours of challenging eagle study, the Horners have been mentors to new eagle observers.

Both these couples are known to put in long hours, not limited to daylight. They respond to emergencies any time, and they are always willing volunteers when it comes to protecting eagles, and help biologists and conservation officers do the same. ENSP staff rely on their expertise to make Bald Eagle conservation happen in southern New Jersey.

If you are ever out birding on a NJ Audubon trip and see a Bald Eagle, you'll know who to thank.

For more information on making a difference through volunteering, please contact NJAS at 908.204.8998 or ENSP at 609.292.9400.

Shorebird/Horseshoe Crab Campaign

By Eric Stiles, Vice President Conservation and Stewardship

As reported in many of our publications, NJ Audubon has been working to protect and restore the Delaware Bay shorebird stopover areas for over two decades. Before the overharvest of horseshoe crabs, over one million shorebirds graced the Delaware Bay each spring. During the 1990's the crabs were taken in the millions as bait for eel and conch, leaving the shorebirds that rely on horseshoe crab eggs quite hungry. There is no reliable alternative food supply for these shorebirds during May and early June on the Delaware Bay. Several shorebird species, including the Red Knot, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstones, and Sanderlings were particularly hard hit. The current situation is so dire that the Red Knot *rufa* subspecies is facing imminent extinction.

NJ Audubon continues to work with coalition partners to work towards a bay-wide harvest moratorium on horseshoe crabs. Governor Corzine and NJDEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson have been national leaders in the effort. NJ has adopted a two-year moratorium which will lapse in spring 2008, and we are hopeful that another moratorium will be approved. In

addition, NJ has been a leader in research, beach restoration and protection of shorebirds from harassment.

We will continue to advocate for the federal listing of the Red Knot, adoption of a regional moratorium and the protection of shorebirds from harassment in the Delaware Bay.

NJAS Works with Coalition to Reduce Bird Mortality from Outdoor Cats **By Eric Stiles, Vice President Conservation and Stewardship**

Since 1897, NJ Audubon has been identifying threats to the nature of New Jersey and crafting science-based conservation initiatives. Undoubtedly, the main threats to the Garden State's fauna and flora are equal parts development and climate change. Other threats include overabundant deer, invasive species, bird building strikes, and yes outdoor cats. In 2003, we joined the American Bird Conservancy to bring the Cats Indoors! campaign to our state. Cats Indoors! promotes both the benefits to cats and wildlife by keeping America's most abundant companion animal inside our homes. Indoor cats lead far healthier and safer lives, and importantly do not prey on native wildlife.

New Jersey also has a very large population of feral cats. These cats have been the victims of irresponsible human behavior through abandonment. Unfortunately, cats are having a significant impact on birds, mammals and reptile populations through predation and competition.

Nation-wide, many communities are adopting Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) as a method of reducing feral cat populations. Euthanasia is increasingly being viewed by the animal control and animal welfare community as insufficient to the task of reducing the feral cat population. In response, the animal welfare community has been successfully advocating for community-wide TNR programs in which feral cats are trapped, altered, vaccinated and then returned to colonies where they are fed by volunteers. This is typically funded through volunteer work and charitable contributions.

From 2002 to 2005, NJAS had actively opposed the practice of TNR in NJ. Despite this opposition, municipalities continued to adopt TNR ordinances. In 2005, NJAS, American Bird Conservancy, Neighborhood Cats and Burlington Feral Cat Initiative began exploratory dialogue about implementing standards to protect rare wildlife vulnerable to cat predation in towns which have already adopted TNR programs.

Through this dialogue, we announced the formation of the NJ Feral Cat-Wildlife Coalition in December 2005. The coalition's goal was to develop a pilot TNR municipal ordinance and technical manual which includes protection of rare wildlife and wildlife parks and humanely reduces the number of feral cats. Current participants include the Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative, Burlington County Health Department, Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ, Humane Society of the United States, In Defense of Animals, Neighborhood Cats, New Jersey Animal Rights Alliance, New Jersey Audubon Society, NJ Department of Environmental Protection, NJ Department of Health and Senior Services.

The coalition has met monthly to develop a pilot program and has begun implementing it for evaluation in several municipalities in Burlington County which already have municipally sanctioned TNR programs. Through this pilot program, before a colony is registered, the

Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative will perform a proximity analysis to determine if the colony is within ¼ mile of habitat containing rare wildlife which is vulnerable to cat predation and/or a park being managed for wildlife. If the colony is within ¼ mile of rare, cat vulnerable wildlife, then measures are implemented to protect the wildlife. Similarly, if it is within ¼ mile of a wildlife park, then the park manager is contacted.

The coalition will monitor and evaluate the program. This will allow us to reinforce success and make corrections as needed to strengthen the program.

It is important to note that all members of the coalition are seeking to reduce the number of feral cats in New Jersey. TNR is being promoted by the animal welfare community as a tool that addresses the symptom – feral cats already found throughout New Jersey. More importantly, our coalition will begin to work on addressing the cause – irresponsible human behavior. We will be researching additional community-based tools such as public education, mandatory spay-neuter programs, cat license laws, and funding for spay-neuter clinics. We plan on integrating these recommendations into a diverse community-based tool box to holistically address the crisis of feral and outdoor cats and wildlife protection in New Jersey.

We would like to thank the Regina R. Frankenberg Foundation and Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation for funding this important initiative. Special thanks also to Dr. Gordon Stull who is overseeing this pioneering work in Burlington County.

Highlands Conservation Plan – A Regional Road Map for Conservation **By Eric Stiles, Vice President Conservation**

Since NJ Audubon's President co-founded the Highlands Coalition in 1988, our organization has been advocating for the adoption of the regional master plan which is protective of the region's wildlife, forests and water. With expected adoption of the Highlands Regional Master Plan in winter 2008, we have finally realized our dream. For the last two years, NJ Audubon staff has been hard at work on policy research, conservation recommendations and advocacy efforts to ensure that the forests, rare plants and animals, significant ecological communities and vernal pools receive adequate protection.

NJ Audubon remains an active member of the NJ Highlands Coalition (www.njhighlandscoalition.org). Protection of this eco-region is critical to the interests of our membership and our mission to conserve NJ's nature for the present and well into the future. Since at the time of writing, the plan has not been unveiled we cannot evaluate whether or not the plan lives up to its conservation mandate. We will continue to work to ensure that the Highlands are protected through the plan and its implementation. The region is home to rare treasures like Bobcat, Golden-winged Warblers and Tamarack Bogs which are important for our members, residents and visitors to New Jersey and also for state's thriving ecotourism industry.

Natural Resource Protection and Water Quality Management **By Susan Kraham, Director of Policy and Counsel to the President**

Habitat destruction caused by development and global warming is the predominant cause of species decline in New Jersey and much of North America. Land-clearing, development and

infrastructure installation has resulted in degradation of water quality, unsustainable pressure on water supply and wastewater infrastructure and severely contracting recharge areas. New Jersey Audubon Society has consistently articulated its view that determining and avoiding negative environmental impacts must be the guiding principle of an effective and adequately protective regulatory program.

Thus, New Jersey Audubon Society recently submitted comments on water quality management planning rules proposed by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. The proposed rules were a step forward in DEP's planning regime. If adopted, the rules would preclude the expansion of wastewater infrastructure into environmentally sensitive areas. They would strengthen the connection between wastewater management and water supply planning and would make the nitrate standard more stringent. The rule would also increase the acreage necessary for development on septic systems.

Despite these advances, New Jersey Audubon Society took issue with the proposed rule's definition of environmentally sensitive areas and argued that additional resource protection measures should be considered in determining environmental sensitivity. NJAS' comments addressed a range of concerns that were not addressed by the proposal. DEP is likely to respond to these and other comments and act on the rule in the next few months.

DEP recently designated hundreds of miles of new Category One waterways. In addition, it requested comments identifying provisions of the Surface Water Quality Standards in need of revision. NJAS provided extensive comments including the importance of wildlife protection as a factor in designating Category One waters. These waters, referred to as C-1, are our states most ecologically important. NJAS will continue to work closely with DEP's Endangered and Nongame Species Program on this important aspect of wildlife protection.

Our work on these important initiatives is made possible by the Geraldine R. Dodge and Regina B. Frankenburg Foundations and the Environmental Endowment of New Jersey.