

Fairmount Park and Benjamin Rush State Park Recognized as an Important Bird Area (IBA)



By Keith Russell

Bird photos by Doug Wechsler and VIREO



Redheads and female Mallard at FDR Park. Photo taken March 5, 2006.

In May 2005 the Fairmount Park system, together with Benjamin Rush State Park (a small state park located in Northeast Philadelphia),* was named as the 83rd Important Bird Area (IBA) in Pennsylvania. In receiving this honor, both parks joined a select group of sites currently considered to be among the most significant and valuable areas for birds within the state.

The Important Bird Area program was started in Europe by BirdLife International during the 1980s as a way of identifying and protecting those areas considered to be most important to the survival of wild bird populations throughout the world. The IBA program was introduced to the United States in 1994 and is currently being administered in the United States by the National Audubon Society.

Fairmount Park and Benjamin Rush State Park were recognized as an Important Bird Area because the combined area 1) has a large diversity and concentration of birds, 2) contains excellent bird habitat, and 3) has been used for long-term avian research and monitoring projects. The most important criteria leading to the recognition of the two parks as an IBA, however, was the fact that the parks attract a large number and variety of birds. Over 200 species of birds can be found within the combined area annually, including Wood Thrushes, Cedar Waxwings, Pileated Woodpeckers, and over 90 other species of breeding birds. In addition, 21 Pennsylvania Species of Special Concern (SSC) and one federally threatened species have also been recorded within the combined area.



Scenic Kelly Drive along the Schuylkill River provides habitat for nesting and migratory birds. Photo courtesy of Fairmount Park Conservancy.

Philadelphia: a Major Migration Pathway

Because Philadelphia is located along a major migration pathway, the Fairmount Park/Benjamin Rush State Park IBA plays a crucial role in protecting not only Philadelphia's resident bird populations but also large numbers of birds that simply pass

through Philadelphia during their migrations. Each year, hundreds of thousands of migrating birds pass through Philadelphia during the spring and autumn, and many of these long distance travelers utilize Fairmount Park and Benjamin Rush State Park as crucial resting and feeding areas during their journeys. Among these are large numbers of Blackpoll Warblers, a small 5 ½ inch songbird that, while weighing only a few ounces, flies up to 8000 km (almost 5000 miles) twice a year between its breeding grounds in Alaska and its wintering grounds in Brazil. Blackpoll Warblers migrate through Philadelphia in larger numbers than in most other parts of the state. In addition to Blackpoll Warblers, over 150 other species of land and water birds, from Bald Eagles to Canvasbacks (a species of diving duck) to Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, use the Fairmount Park/Benjamin Rush State Park IBA as a resting and feeding area during their migrations.



The Blackpoll Warbler is one of the most common migratory warblers that occurs in the FP/BRSP IBA during spring.

How does IBA recognition benefit a site?

Although the IBA program was established to help protect those areas that are considered to be most important to birds, it has no regulatory authority. Instead, the program works by providing local communities and landowners with information, resources and programs to help them manage IBA sites in ways that will benefit birds and other wildlife.



Green-winged Teal occur in Fairmount Park during their spring and fall migrations. Photo taken at FDR Park on March 5, 2006.

To that end, Pennsylvania's IBA program recently partnered with Fairmount Park on a clean-up at FDR Park on Earth Day 2006 and will be installing nest boxes in FDR Park and Benjamin Rush State Park for Barn Owls (an at risk species in Pennsylvania). The IBA program will also be sponsoring public bird walks and will be monitoring bird populations in both parks. Sites recognized as Important Bird Areas can also benefit by receiving priority when requesting funds from the state for projects that will protect birds.

How does a site become an IBA?

Although any site can be considered for IBA recognition, only those that meet one or more of the state's ten IBA criteria can be officially recognized as an Important Bird Area. IBAs can vary considerably in size, and many are composed of a combination of parks or other lands which lie in close proximity to each another. The organization that determines which sites receive IBA recognition in Pennsylvania is the Ornithological Technical Committee (OTC) of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. IBA nominations are usually presented to the OTC by Audubon Pennsylvania.

Who coordinates the IBA program in Pennsylvania?

The IBA program is coordinated in Pennsylvania by Audubon Pennsylvania, which also conducts a number of other programs designed to monitor and protect wild bird populations throughout the state. For more information about Pennsylvania’s IBA program, please visit Audubon Pennsylvania’s IBA web page at <http://pa.audubon.org/iba/> or write to Audubon Pennsylvania at 100 Wildwood Way, Harrisburg, PA 17110. For information about IBA programs in other states, please visit the National Audubon Society’s IBA web page at www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html.



Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Ducks are among 14 species of ducks that spend the winter in Fairmount Park. Photo taken at FDR Park on March 5, 2006

*The Fairmount Park/Benjamin Rush State Park IBA also includes portions of the lower Wissahickon and Pennypack creek watersheds in Montgomery County.

PA Species of Special Concern (SSC) that occur within the Fairmount Park/Benjamin Rush State Park (FP/BRSP) IBA		
Species	Breeding Status in PA	Status in FP/BRSP
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Extirpated	Transient
American Bittern	Endangered	Transient
Blackpoll Warbler	Endangered	Transient
Great Egret	Endangered	Summer resident
Peregrine Falcon	Endangered	Permanent resident
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Endangered	Summer resident
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	Endangered	Transient
Bald Eagle	Threatened	Winter resident
Osprey	Threatened	Transient
Sedge Wren	Threatened	Transient
Barn Owl	At Risk	Permanent resident
Northern Harrier	At Risk	Transient
American Coot	Rare	Winter resident
Green-winged Teal	Rare	Transient
Marsh Wren	Rare	Transient
Northern Goshawk	Rare	Winter resident
Pied-billed Grebe	Rare	Winter resident
Prothonotary Warbler	Rare	Transient
Summer Tanager	Rare	Transient
Swainson’s Thrush	Rare	Transient
Wilson’s Snipe	Rare	Transient
Federally listed species that occur in FP/BRSP		
Bald Eaale	Threatened	Winter resident

This article can be found on www.fairmountpark.org

To obtain a bird list for Wissahickon and Pennypack Park in Fairmount Park go to www.fairmountpark.org/wissahickonEC.asp or www.fairmountpark.org/pennypackEC.asp