



# THE DOCENT NEWS

Of The Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Docent Program



# DECEMBER 2006

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For the Volunteers and Supporters of the Oklahoma Chapter of The Nature Conservancy

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## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

—Don Wolf

Time is rapidly approaching for the most exciting Christmas Bird Count in Oklahoma. It looks as though the best day for the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Christmas Bird Count will be Saturday, 30 December. For those of you that have not yet participated before, here is a good opportunity to see Golden Eagles, Greater Prairie-Chickens, Leconte's Sparrows, various longspurs, American and Sprague's Pipits, various falcons, Short-eared Owls, and many other upland birds. Assuming there will be at least some water in ponds, there should even be some waterfowl around. For those of you that will be trying to add a few more species to your "year list", then this might be a great opportunity. Maybe this will be the year that we break 100 species.

Most parties will be departing from the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve headquarters at 7 or 8 AM (those covering the east side of the TGP and Western Wall WMA will meet elsewhere in the morning). We will wrap things up around 5:30 PM with a chili supper at the

Stucco House. If anyone wants to head out earlier (around 5 AM) to look for owls, please let me know. As usual, there will be a \$5 registration fee for all participants.

Please let me know by email at DWOLFE@OU.EDU if you plan to participate and feel free to pass this on to anyone else that you think might be interested.



## NICKEL WINTER BIRD COUNT

—Mia Revels

I hope that many of you will be able to attend the fifth annual Nickel Preserve Winter Bird Count on February 3rd from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. If you haven't visited the preserve, then it is a great opportunity to bird in one of the most beautiful areas in the state:

<http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/oklahoma/preserves/nickel.html>

Newcomers are very welcome and can contact me for directions by email at REV-ELS@NSUOK.EDU, or by telephone at 918-456-5511 x3824. We will be meeting at the Eagle Bluff resort parking lot on Hwy 10 just a few miles northeast of Tahlequah. I will pass out checklists and we will organize into groups with assigned areas. Folks can lunch on their own, and we will meet back at the Visitors Center/Preserve Headquarters at 4:00. At that time we will compile a species list for the day, with numbers to be tabulated later. I look forward to seeing you all there!

## ON NATURE CONSERVATION II

—Achilles Schnetzer

*The French Dominican, A. G. Sertillanges (1863—1948) asks some rhetorical questions in his book THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE: "Can one study a piece of clockwork without thinking of the adjoining piece? Can one study a bodily organ without considering*



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the body? Neither is it possible to advance in physics or in chemistry without mathematics, in astronomy without mechanics and geology, in ethics without psychology, in psychology without the natural sciences, in anything without history. Everything is linked together, light falls from one subject on another, and an intelligent treatise on any of the sciences alludes more or less to all the others.”<sup>[pp103]</sup> Further he says: “Just as no particular branch of knowledge is self-sufficing so all branches together are not self-sufficing without the queen of knowledge, philosophy...”<sup>[pp107]</sup> At this point he provides a footnote in which he says: “It is remarkable that at the present time [1921], the scientist is called on by his very science to elucidate problems that hitherto were of the exclusive domain of philosophy; causality, determinism, probability, continuity and discontinuity, space, time, etc. Logically, the scientist should borrow his notions from the philosopher; but most often the philosopher, satisfied with his age-old categories, declines the task of enlightening the scientist; and the scientist has to philosophize for himself, which he does without experience and often wrongly.” Well, we are not doing anything as grand as that, but this is the second in a series of essays by Achilles Schnetzer on Humanity’s relationship with Nature. In this essay, he makes a distinction between ANTHROPOMORPHISM and ANTHROPOCRACY: anthropomorphism is when we look at Nature through the filter of Human culture whereas anthropocracy is the religious dogma that sets the Kingdom of Man in dominion over Creation. Achilles is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Freiburg in Switzerland.—Editor.

Quarrels with morals, Switzerland, December 2006: Walking home after a long, long night of playing music with my friends, I have always found it most intriguing to listen to the birds as they commenced their early morning concert. Smilingly and in awe, on all these early Saturday mornings, I declared that birds are truly the best jazz players that there could possibly be. A thousand times I may have heard the birds singing outside my window and a thousand times I may have just heard what a biologist would hear. But during those very special moments on those very early Saturday mornings, my soul somehow opened up to embrace something in those singing birds that goes far beyond any description by any biologist. Philosophically speaking, I would be in a transcendental mode of perceiving and thus contemplating the cosmic images and transtemporal dimensions of nature; images, the beauty of which, and dimensions, the magnitude of which, no human mind in its rational mode will ever be able to comprehend. Or put bluntly: The beauty of nature exemplified in the singing of birds would just overwhelm me and simply drive me nuts. First period lesson to be learned: It is immoral not to love nature!

But there is a dilemma: How can something that is capable of giving overwhelming joy be at the same time violent and destructive to an extent that the dictum Bel-

lum omnium contra omnes (War of everyone against everyone) applies to it? Just consider that in the course of its history, nature has killed and erased the great majority of all species that have ever evolved. So, asking where the project of nature conservation has to start, the logical answer must be that in the first place, it is not humans but nature itself from which nature needs to be shielded.... However, this answer is cynical: Holding nature responsible and accusing it of morally wrong doings is certainly completely off the point. All that nature does is to involuntarily and indifferently follow blind mechanisms. Nature is as it is. It is most certainly not a moral agent (or is it?) Therefore, it can’t be held responsible, neither for the sufferings of animals and plants nor for the extinction of them.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that human beings are the sole inhabitants of the moral universe (at least as we know it). So, since there are no other moral agents around, it is our obligation to take care of this our planet. This way of thinking which of course comes very naturally leads to an anthropocentric perspective: It puts us human beings on top of everything else and makes us the masters of nature in every respect.

The question then arises how far our responsibility to take care of nature is supposed to go. Is it exclusively based on an obligation to make sure that future generations of human beings have a place to live? If there is more to our moral responsibility towards nature than just inter-generational obligations, and if we agree that our Western lifestyle is quite detrimental to nature, shouldn’t we at least make sure that the poor countries do not develop to our standard so that they won’t be able to harm nature like we do? Well, I take it to be quite obvious that both of these conceptions of what it means to be responsible for nature, are quite unsatisfactory—albeit for different reasons. So, just what are the moral criteria for a responsible attitude towards nature? Where do these criteria come from and how are they justified?

My aim in this article is to give a systematic overview of the options. I will start with what I call the natural attitude, namely anthropocentric ethics, or anthropocentrism for short.



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Anthropocentrism claims that human beings owe respect only to other human beings. Nature as such is thus not an object towards which we need to take an ethical stance. This is because only human beings possess a moral value. Therefore, nature has to be conserved exclusively for the sake of human beings and not for its own sake. The most famous anthropocentrist is the 18th Century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. And just for the record: Wherever anthropocentrism tips towards anthropocracy, I am vehemently opposed to it.

The basic justifications for anthropocentrism, i.e. taking the human life as the sole criterion for nature conservation come from three main arguments:

1. Basic needs argument: Nature is the foundation of our well-being. It supplies us with the resources we need for our survival. Therefore: Nature must be conserved whenever our survival is at risk.
2. Aesthetical argument: Nature can provoke feelings of great joy in us. Such feelings are necessary for our well-being. Therefore: nature needs to be conserved for our emotional balance which is an important aspect of our well-being.
3. National heritage argument: Nature is a part of our national heritage, i.e. a part of our cultural identity. Our cultural identity is indispensable for the stability and the well-being of a society. Therefore: nature as we know it needs to be conserved for the sake of our society.

The ethical counterpart to anthropocentrism is called physiocentrism. This position holds that nature or at least large parts of nature, e.g. animals and ecosystems possess moral values. Thus, physiocentrism expands the moral universe. It is then our moral obligation to base our behavior towards all of these moral agents on an ethical foundation since nature or at least parts of nature possess moral values of their own and must therefore be granted moral rights. On this assumption, nature conservation needs to be implemented not just for our own sake but indeed for the sake of nature itself. Physiocentrism comes in two versions. Depending whether or not you attribute to nature or to certain parts of nature the same

or lesser moral value as you attribute to human beings, physiocentrism is either egalitarian or hierarchical respectively. A well-known contemporary defender of physiocentrism is Peter Singer. And again just for the record: I firmly believe we ought to defend one form or another of physiocentrism.

The five basic justifications for physiocentrism come from the following arguments:

1. Teleological argument: Everything in nature serves a purpose. The property of having a given purpose is a moral property in the wide sense. Therefore: Everything in nature deserves to be treated from an ethical stance.
2. Holistic argument: Everything that exists—be it sentient or not—has a right to exist. The right to exist is independent of any manmade agreements or contracts. Rather, it is a fundamental right inherent in every existing thing. Therefore: Everything in nature deserves to be treated from an ethical stance.
3. Pathocentric argument: Sentience is the hallmark of moral agents. Animals and maybe even ecosystems are sentient beings. Therefore: All sentient beings, and maybe even ecosystems, deserve to be treated from an ethical stance.
4. Theological argument: Everything that God created is wanted by God. In other words, everything that exists transcends the merely functional value that it might provide for human beings. Therefore: nature as a whole deserves to be treated from an ethical stance.
5. NATURAM SEQUI argument: Nature possesses a certain hierarchy of values which exist independent of our moral judgement. Therefore: We must abandon pure anthropocentrism and act according to this hierarchy of values which may or may not put us on top of all other moral agents in nature.

It is important to point out how the conclusions in anthropocentric and physiocentric arguments differ from one another. The anthropocentric conclusions demand a certain behavior out of self-interest. It is not specified if this behavior follows ethical prin-



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ciples. Actually, it would appear that behavior of this sort is exclusively based on pragmatics and basically amounts to a prescription for avoiding the indirect suicide of mankind by destroying our planet. The physiocentric conclusions on the other hand clearly demand a certain moral behavior, that is they are aiming at dictating behavior which is based on ethical principles. The reason for this being that nature and not just human beings belong to the moral universe, i.e. nature too does have certain moral rights.

Consider this list of arguments I have just given as a sort of menu from which you can choose to put together your favorite nature conservation dish. I must admit that the anthropocentric arguments in their soft, non-anthropocentric versions cannot be denied and therefore must be swallowed. But are they really sufficient for a good meal? To my taste, they clearly lack depth and spicyness. They might not even be the basic ingredients. In my next article, I will try to be convincing about my nature conservation dish.

## THE MAGNIFICENT COUGAR

—Van Vives

I have to admit that I believed that if I wanted to see a cougar I would have to travel to Colorado or some other mountainous areas. After all, another name for the cougar is mountain lion. This summer a couple of men from Colorado visited the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve and claim to have seen a cougar on the south part of the preserve. They were knowledgeable about nature and animals and described the cat with the long curved tail. Mary Waters, a volunteer living in Pawhuska, claims to have seen cougar tracks in the park in Pawhuska. I began inquiring from farmers and ranchers if any of them had seen a cougar on their acreage and I was surprised with the answers I got. Marilyn Keefer, another of our docents who owns a ranch near Bartlesville, said that it was not at all unusual to spot a cougar along the creek bed. Another person living on a ranch southeast of Bartlesville said that he started to go out of his house early one morning, but there was a cougar at the foot of his back steps. So, yes they do seem to be in the neighborhood. So I decided to learn about this Magnificent and perhaps dangerous animal.

If one looks at a map giving the areas in the United States where cougars are found, one sees an area covering the western states extending eastward to Colorado and Texas, but not Oklahoma. There is a small area in southern Florida which also has a small population of this animal.

It is known by other names, some of which are quite regional. There are over 40 different names in English for Puma. Puma is the most correct name since the scientific name is PUMA CONCOLOR, with numerous subspecies. The conservation status of the Puma is "Near Threatened." Overhunting and decrease in its habitat are the principal reasons for the drop in population. In the decade 1996-2006 over 30,000 pumas were killed for sport. Recent attempts at conservation may help this animal survive.

How dangerous are the cougars? Their primary food is deer, but they also hunt insects, mice, rabbits, cats, dogs, sheep, and elk. If one knows that there is one in the area, it is wise to protect domestic pets, especially at night. Attacks on humans are very rare and those are usually due to the actions of the human.

The Puma is tan in color with lighter colors underneath. They have a long curved tail which probably helps them maneuver when jumping. Adults weigh from 160 to 200 pounds. They can run 44 miles per hour and jump horizontally 20 ft. from a standing position and 16 ft. vertically. Adult males can be 8 ft. long, nose to tail. It cannot roar, like a lion, but makes noises similar to small cats.

The Puma has the widest range of any New World land animal. It has been recently sighted in Northern Connecticut and New England. In areas where the population is higher than in Oklahoma, the Puma has gotten comfortable in being near humans. As habitat decreases due to development, urban spread, etc., the plight of the animals in finding opportunity for hunting worsens. So the next alternative for the Puma is encroachment on human properties and scavenging of human garbage and domestic animals. This development makes the humans want to set up a defense, which ultimately means the killing of the Puma.

This magnificent animal deserves to be



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protected in an intelligent way.

## GREENHOUSE MASSES

—G. Jeffrey MacDonald

One New England church makes global warming a crusade, but finds sacrifice isn't always easy. Click on the link for the full story:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1120/p20s01-sten.html?s=hns>

## THE RAPTOR

—Andrew Donovan-Shead

2 December 2006: This morning while she was reading the paper at the kitchen table, my wife saw a bird land in our pecan tree; it was unusual enough movement to attract the attention of our cat who was helping her to read the paper. Marcia fetched me to look at a small hawk. From another room, where the tree is closer to the window, we watched a hawk with a pale gray ventral area and a breast speckled like a brown thrasher. As we watched, we noticed that the hawk had captured a small bird that looked like a sparrow. The hawk moved around on the branch and plucked feathers from its victim; as it moved, the hawk revealed longish tail-feathers marked by horizontal bars.

I got our AUDUBON FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS and looked through the pages for hawk-like birds; the picture with the closest match to our visitor was of the Merlin. In the description for FALCO COLUMBARIUS the Merlin, or "pigeon hawk", its range is described as "Alaska, Mackenzie, and Labrador south to Nova Scotia, Michigan, and Oregon. Winters from British Columbia and, rarely, Newfoundland to northern South America.... This northern species, formerly called 'pigeon hawk' is best known as a migrant along our larger rivers and coastal marshes. It is most abundant during the migrations of the shorebirds, sparrows, warblers and other

small birds on which it feeds."

Though I am uncertain as to the hawk's identity, I will assume that it is indeed a Merlin. We live in Tulsa within a couple of miles of the river. It is winter, so the birds are moving south. A city like Tulsa is a good hunting ground for small birds. All of this leads me to think we saw a Merlin. Anyone who is more knowledgeable of birds is welcome to submit a few paragraphs for or against the Merlin in Tulsa.

## PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

—Mark Clayton

Private land conservation booms in US. Owners protected 37 million acres from development last year, a 54-percent jump from 2000. Click this link to see the full article:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1214/p03s03-ussc.html?s=hns>

## NEWSLETTER BACK ISSUES

Back issues of the Docent Newsletter, to October 2006, can be found in the two green zip-binders, stored in the Perspex rack by the file cabinet in the office of the Visitor's Center.

## NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION

Deadline for submission of articles for inclusion in the newsletter is the 10th of each month. Publication date is on the 15th. All docents, Nature Conservancy staff, university scientists, and philosophers are welcome to submit articles and pictures about the various preserves in Oklahoma, but of course the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in particular.

## PICTURE CREDITS

- ▶ Page-1: Horse by Van Vives. Van says that with some imagination you can see an Indian head with the face on the horse's hindquarters looking backwards.





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