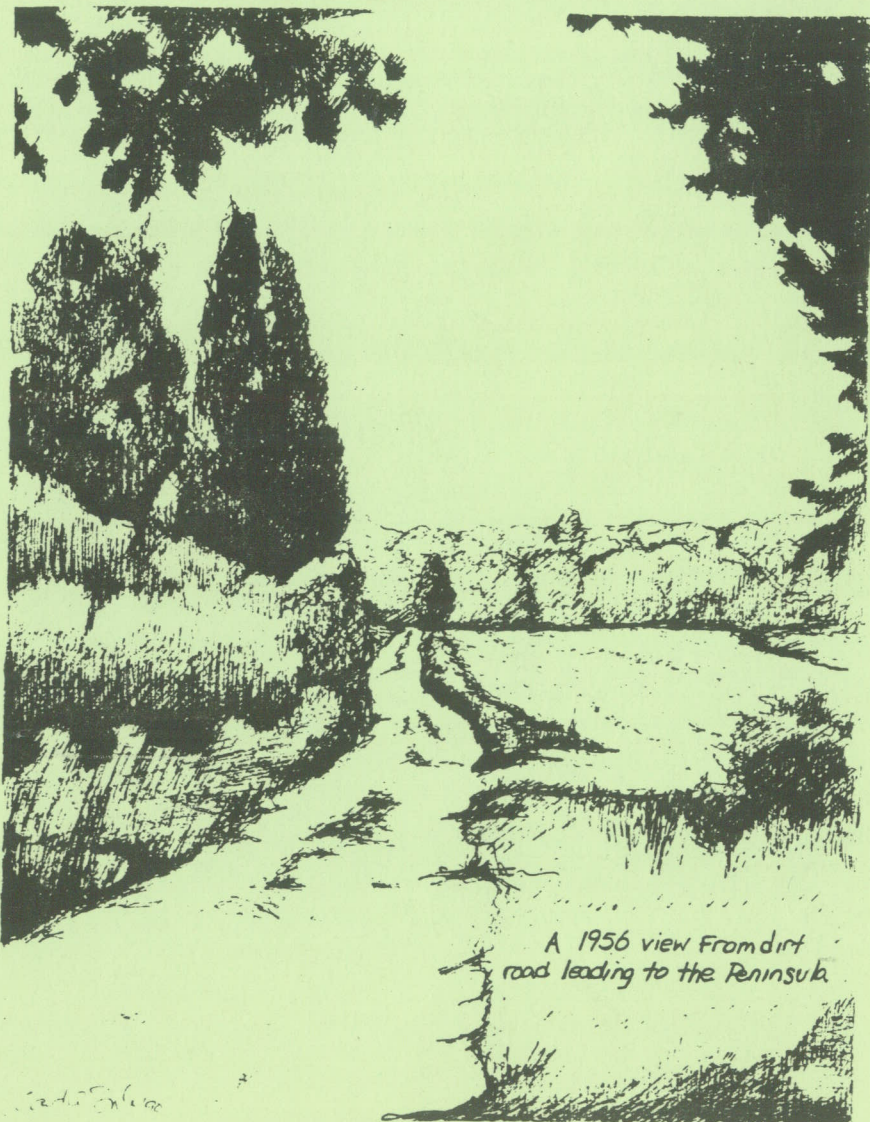


# JERSEY JOURNAL

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OUTDOOR AND NATURAL  
HISTORY OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

1955 - 1971



## PREFACE

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As a child and especially throughout my teenage years and then some, I fortuitously had the foresight to take numerous notes on my outdoor observations. Some of my earliest notes, those in the early 1950's, were generally in the form of short essays written about my experiences in an area I referred to as "my woods" and the nearby Hirsch's Lake in Runnemede, New Jersey. About that time, I also started to compile a list of birds that I observed at these places, as well as along Big Timber Creek. At the age of twelve or thirteen, of course, these writings left much to be desired in terms of prose, grammar, and spelling, yet they certainly expressed my nascent enthusiasm for the outdoors and natural history. By 1955 when I was 16 years old, I started to routinely record my observations and experiences in a diary. I continued this effort rather systematically as a teenager and young adult; I also maintained detailed life lists of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and other animals, as well as various groups of plants. Although my records for New Jersey for all practical purposes ended in 1971 when I moved to Maryland, I continued to keep a diary and have maintained it to this very day. Rather coincidentally, as of the day I typed this sentence, my last diary entry was for an October 10-11, 1992 nostalgic backpacking trip to New Jersey, along the Dunnfield Creek.

The New Jersey part of my diary, which I have decided to call the Jersey Journal, is an account of my outdoor and natural history experiences between 1955 and 1971. Although the majority of the journal entries are for New Jersey, some are for other states since my interests also took me elsewhere at the time. In addition, many of my early records, including various life lists, are not included in this journal other than for some infrequent excerpts or citations.

In preparing the journal in "printed" form, my objective is to assure that the seventeen years of anecdotal information about New Jersey's outdoors and natural history is not lost as the years pass, which unfortunately is frequently the case with handwritten materials. As should be obvious by my rather faithful maintenance of a diary over the years, I am a firm believer in keeping good outdoor and natural history records and documenting observations. Moreover, I feel that such information is invaluable and should therefore be published, as appropriate, in professional journals; in the long run, it should be archived in some manner. In my case, having documented the substantial environmental changes that occurred along Big Timber Creek and Big Lebanon Run alone are excellent examples. Fifty years from now who will remember what was there? For that matter, who does now?

Much of the information in this journal is also documented in my book, *Through the Eyes of a Young Naturalist*. In fact, when I decided to write the book, my first step was to review my entire diary, taking notes as I read. These notes served as the basis for much of my book. In this regard, I am amazed that, in typing up the *Jersey Journal*, I encountered only three errors in interpretation of my original records -- Otter Branch of Big Timber Creek is really Otter Brook, Stone Branch of Big Lebanon Run is really Stone Bridge Branch, and my first trip to Sunfish Pond at the Delaware Water Gap was really documented, albeit subtly, in my diary (i.e., I had indicated in my book my amazement over not documenting my first visit to Sunfish Pond, considering its pristine nature). Thus, there is a remarkable consistency between my book and the activities and areas mentioned in my diary (i.e., this journal).

As I indicated in my book, the period between 1962 and 1964 was a time of change for me -- a time of changing interests. My hunting, trapping, and even fishing interests were slowly dwindling. At the same time, my interest in natural history was once again on the rise, with experiences reminiscent of early wildlife adventures at Hirsch's Lake, along Big Timber Creek, and at Locust Grove. A good example of this is a field trip I took with Pat Penza on March 4, 1962 near Blackwood, where I recorded a number of birds and plants. This was certainly a precursor of what was to come later that year and particularly in 1963, when many of my outdoor activities centered around natural history. A few examples for 1963 might be appropriate here: on January 14, I went to my first Audubon Wildlife Society meeting, which I deem a milestone in my outdoor education; on a May 30 trip to the Delaware Water Gap with my cousins, I fished for half the day and spent the second half botanizing; on a July 14 trip to Batsto with Pat Penza, he fished while I studied plants; and on July 23, I took a trip to Locust Grove with my cousins solely for the purpose of finding reptiles and amphibians. One chapter of my book is devoted entirely to these changing interests.

When I first started pursuing natural history, as might be expected, I made good use of various field guides. This, of course, had its good points and its bad points. Needless to say, field guides are invaluable to the beginning student of natural history; few people, at least in more recent times, have ever started working directly with technical identification manuals. For example, I spent much of my botanical adolescence using *A Field Guide to Trees and Shrubs* by George A. Petrides and *Wildflower Guide* by Edgar T. Wherry and literally wore out the tree and shrub guide. It still sits on my book shelf torn and frayed and packed with numerous, dried and crumbling leaves. For years, even many professionals have standardly used field guides at times, along with the more systematic and inclusive regional treatments. Dr. Wherry himself was a good example. He was indubitably the best professional botanist that I ever

encountered, yet he knew the benefits of field guides and his wildflower guide undoubtedly stimulated the interest of many a burgeoning botanist, including me. However, as I experienced early in my career, the use of field guides can result in misidentification problems, considering that most field guides are not all inclusive of species for their regional areas of coverage. The reader should keep that in mind with regard to my early botanical listings in this journal, since in typing the journal it was obvious to me that I made a number of misidentifications during the years I relied solely on field guides. Wherever I detected these errors, I have indicated so in the text as commentary. A related problem with field guides is that, in using them, one simply cannot identify all of the species found due to the inevitable limitations on the number of species that can be included in the guides. In my case, a good example of this took place on June 8, 1963 when I found three hawkweeds that I couldn't identify using only Dr. Wherry's wildflower guide. As of 1963, I hadn't yet started using technical manuals, such as Gray's Manual of Botany and The New Britton and Brown Illustrated Flora of the Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada, and therefore was unsuccessful with the hawkweeds.

As indicate above, one benefit of keeping outdoor or natural history diaries or journals is that they tend to document the changes that occur over time. In reference to my Jersey Journal, the best case that I can think of is certainly the sad demise of Big Lebanon Run, to which a chapter is devoted in my book. Other examples, include Little Lebanon Run, Big Timber Creek, Parker's Creek, and the drastic changes that have occurred historically in the Hackensack Meadows. Such change, in fact, is one of the themes of my book. At this point, I might add that I have been back to a number of these places since leaving New Jersey and have been quite depressed by the continuing degradation -- so depressed in the case of Big Lebanon Run that I would just as soon not elaborate upon it other than to say that names like Mayfair Meadows, Mayfair Woods, Mayfair Glen, Aston Woods, Country Woods, Mulberry Station, Ashford Glen, and not only Terrestria, but also White Birch Mews at Terrestria do absolutely nothing for me. I wonder if the folks who live in these "environmentally named" developments are aware of what it really was like down Lebanon not so long ago. As far as I'm concerned, the state of affairs there represents the biggest environmental disappointment of my life. There's also the many Runnemedede streams that my friends and I traveled and trapped as teenagers. Well, most are now either culverted or otherwise degraded. Even the unique New Jersey Pine Barrens is slowly experiencing the effects of peripheral encroachment. And I wonder what Walt Whitman thinks as he looks down from the heavens on the area he chose to spend his summer days recuperating from a serious illness along Big Timber Creek.

As the reader will see by some of my journal entries, environmental degradation was not the only unsavory activity that I experienced as a teenager. Some were of my own making and I regret them to this day. One had to do with the mistreatment of non-game birds by some of my friends and me during New Jersey's annual railbird season; the other involved the killing of feral house cats. This excerpt from my book summarizes my feeling about our mistreatment of non-game birds:

"Admittedly, I was far from an angel as a child, and as a teenager I made my share of foolish mistakes, some of which I would just as soon not bring up. But in fairness to the reader and to demonstrate a point, I will. Once, for example, back in the fall of 1958, a large bird of prey, an osprey, swept low over the fresh meadow at Locust Grove. As it approached the upland slope overlooking the meadow, my 12-gauge shotgun barked loudly and the osprey crashed to the ground. As teenagers back then, my friends and I frequently hunted that meadow and the freshwater tidal marshes near the confluence of Big Timber and Almonesson Creeks during New Jersey's annual rail bird season, which normally ran between the first of September and the eighth or ninth of November.

For reasons which I do not fully understand now, we occasionally frequented the marshes just to sharpen our aims on the literally thousands of blackbirds that annually massed there prior to moving further south for the winter. Unfortunately, songbirds, shorebirds, and raptors like the osprey I shot sometimes became prime targets too. I certainly do not condone this activity nor am I proud of it; conversely, I am quite ashamed of my embarrassing involvement. Why we let ourselves get into this situation is inexplicable to me. Because a number of us were involved, however, I like to think that it had to do with certain wanting attitudes on our part, attitudes relating to responsibility and the difference between right and wrong, both of which generally come only with maturity. Maybe there is some truth in this point for as the field naturalist, Paul Errington, once wrote in Of Men and Marshes:

'Unfortunately, youngsters, for reasons of immaturity and inexperience, may have some of the worst faults as hunters and trappers, but, insofar as these same youngsters are among the people for whom a wholesome interest in hunting and trapping (together with other outdoor pursuits) can be of greatest importance, it is up to us to be patient with them. Youngsters can learn the right things fast under guidance.'

"Fortunately, my records show that after a couple of seasons of that nonsense, I restrained my hunting to legal game. I guess I just finally grew up. I suspect,

nevertheless, that this type of "target practice" may be all too prevalent with youngsters just starting out in the sport, especially if they do not get the proper guidance which is so important for assuring not only appropriate attitudes but also hunting safety. In discussing this problem, even Errington himself admitted that as an immature, he did things with firearms -- as well as with money, axes, canoes, automobiles, horses, fists, and a too-ready tongue -- of which, as an adult he was not the least proud. And one of the few ospreys that he ever saw around a familiar Iowan marsh was a shot bird lying on the shore. I often wonder if the person who shot that Iowan osprey feels as guilty as I still do today."

As indicated above, this wanton killing of non-game birds lasted only a couple of years; my involvement at least ended after the 1961 railbird season, except for one hunting trip in 1962. I should also clarify that as far as legal game was concerned, it was never wasted. It was either eaten or given away.

I didn't address the mistreatment of feral house cats in my book. I really don't recall why at this point. Perhaps it just didn't fit in; perhaps I just felt too awkward, if not embarrassed, to explain it. Although I now wish that I wouldn't have gotten involved, my friends and I basically thought we were doing the right thing in disposing of the cats because of their predatory impact upon wildlife. In those days at least, it was legal for residents possessing a valid hunting-trapping license to dispose of feral house cats found hunting in the wild. I even confirmed that by letter with the State as a precaution. The apparent rationale was that the cats had an adverse predatory impact upon wildlife. As some of my journal entries reflect, I experienced this predation directly as a youngster while observing attacks by cats on young rabbits and in one instance on a baby cardinal (and many subsequent examples I might add). Although there is some merit to this argument, in retrospect, I now realize that we were wrong in doing this for a number of reasons. And while there was no regret on our part then, substantial guilt subsequently surfaced in me (and no doubt in my friends as well) when I realized that some of these cats were probably people's pets. Obviously, I wouldn't encourage this type of activity in hunters and trappers or anyone for that matter now. Again, at the time at least, it was within the law and we just thought we were doing the right thing. Interestingly, we didn't have this attitude about native predators and if we did, of course, that perspective would have been absolutely wrong ecologically. And rather surprisingly, it even took the venerable conservationist Aldo Leopold some time to accept this idea. Early in his career while with the U.S. Forest Service he encouraged southwesterners to kill predatory animals, stating in his A Sand County Almanac that "In those days we had

never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy...When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks." Obviously, at the time there was a management philosophy within the Forest Service to control predators to the satisfaction of the ranchers and stockmen. Predator control was not uncommon elsewhere as well, New Jersey being no exception for at least as late as the 1956-1957 hunting season the goshawk, Cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, and the great horned owl were listed as unprotected birds.

My intent in discussing the non-game bird and house cat situations is not an attempt to justify these depredations in any way whatsoever. I simply want to be honest about what transpired, yet place our actions within the context in which they occurred. Out of fairness to my friends and me, however, I should point out that, at the time at least, some of these birds (e.g., the crow and surprisingly, as indicated above, even some raptors) were unprotected. In fact, crows, hawks, and woodchucks were classified as vermin by the State. And even birds like the snipe, gallinules, and rails were considered legal game. In addition, many of our outdoor activities back then were meritorious, such as our many stream improvement projects at Big Lebanon Run, the brush piles we created for wildlife, the bluebird and wood duck boxes we erected, and our frequent policing of litter left by thoughtless fishermen. With respect to the latter, I am quite amazed to this day that many of the very people who seem to benefit the most from the great outdoors, are some of the biggest neglectors of it when it comes to littering.

One last thing needs to be addressed. In preparing the Jersey Journal for "printing," it quickly became apparent to me that some editing was necessary and that some contemporaneous commentary would improve the document. For the most part, however, I limited the amount of editing in order to maintain the flavor of the original (handwritten) diary. As I indicated above, my prose, grammar, and spelling were quite poor as a youngster, and certain corrections appeared appropriate (e.g., the use of "saw" versus "seen" and "which" versus "witch"). Even in later years, despite my perseverance in keeping records, I sometimes rather hastily recorded the information, at times even misspelling locations and people's names. Thus, to avoid confusion, the correct spelling of names and places is also given. Likewise, if I thought there could be confusion over interpretation, I spelled out any abbreviations, including those for scientific names. On the other hand, I generally retained the names of the places and species, including common names and scientific were applicable, in order to reflect the prevalent nomenclature of that era. A few specifics should also be mentioned: by "rat," I meant the muskrat unless otherwise

indicated; by "blackies," I meant blackbirds unless otherwise indicated; by "sunnies," I meant the pumpkinseed sunfish unless otherwise indicated. Likewise, any reference to "squirrels" referred to the eastern gray squirrel. I retained the scientific names, even for the more common species, no matter how many times they were listed, assuming they were given in the original text.

I felt that the commentary, which is given in brackets, would not only be very useful to explain the significance of the data presented or the phenomena discussed, but also necessary in some instances to avoid confusion over what I meant when some passages were brief or cryptic. Brackets were also applied to some of the corrections and to add the scientific names of plants and animals where necessary. Specifically, if the scientific names of plants, reptiles, amphibians, and insects and other invertebrates weren't present in the original text, I always entered them in brackets following the common names. I did this also for fish upon their first encounter in the journal and repeatedly when less well-known species were involved. I seldom added the scientific names for mammals and birds, having done so only when it was deemed prudent to avoid confusion over the correct identities. Again, in all of these instances I attempted to use the nomenclature that was prevalent at the time the data were recorded or at least that which occurred in the field guides or technical books I was using then.

One last note. I can assure the reader that typing and editing this journal and adding the commentary was no easy task -- many a weekend and weekday evening went into the effort. However, I was determined to see it through, given that I am a firm believer in documenting and archiving outdoor and natural history experiences. I might also add that doing it, while arduous, was exciting and very nostalgic, considering that I relived so many experiences over and over again as I banged away at my computer keyboard day after day and night after night and also edited the various drafts. Hopefully, my efforts have resulted in a document found useful and interesting to others as well. Certainly it should be interesting at least to those friends who experienced much of its content with me.

Now that this journal is complete, my immediate goal is to compile a similar journal, my Maryland Journal, based upon twenty plus years of outdoor and natural history activities I have experienced and documented since leaving New Jersey. This initiative too may result in an additional book someday, at least that is my intent.

William S. Sipple  
November 15, 1992



