

Bird Notes by Rick Pyeritz

“This is not an issue of survival. Mere survival is not enough. How we survive is the critical issue....Our goal is not just an environment of clean air, and water, and scenic beauty....while forgetting about the Appalachians and the ghettos where our children live in America’s worst environment...Our goal is an environment of decency, quality, and mutual respect for all other human creatures and all other living creatures..... an environment without ugliness, without ghettos, without discrimination, without hunger, poverty or war. Our goal is a decent environment in the deepest and broadest sense.

---Gaylord A. Nelson (1916 – 2005)

The first few years of the 1960’s marked the beginning of the counterculture movement in the United States. Most of the incredible energy of this time was devoted to opposition of American involvement in the Vietnam War. There was little interest in an environmental political agenda. Certainly, Rachel Carson’s book, Silent Spring, provided dry tinder for the coming conflagration, but it was too easy to ignore the loss of some raptors due to thinning egg shells, or the lethal effect of pesticides on birds. What was needed was an event(s) which could not be ignored. Something which would focus the public’s and politicians’ attention on the awful, unregulated state of the environment. Two such events occurred in 1969. On January 28, 1969, five million barrels of crude oil were released at an offshore rig in the Santa Barbara Channel three miles off the coast of California. Soon, images of oil-soaked otters and dying birds were broadcast daily into people’s homes. Environmental issues became part of the protests. Sierra Club membership doubled. In June of 1969, the hydrocarbon soaked water of the Cuyahoga River, which runs through Cleveland, Ohio, caught fire. The pictures of this disaster, along with the Santa Barbara spill, combined with the political activism of the time to solidify public and political concern about the health of the environment.

All of this activity was the catalyst for a creative idea in the mind of an important person in a position of power. Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic senator from Wisconsin, thought the time was right to further focus national attention on the health of the environment. His idea was to develop a “national teach-in on the environment”. Senator Nelson recruited a well-known environmental advocate, Denis Hayes from Harvard, to be national coordinator. On April 22, 1970 the first Earth Day attracted over 20 million Americans to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment. People who were concerned about different problems with the environment realized they shared many common values, including some politicians. The decade from 1968 to 1977 was one of bipartisan cooperation in the House of Representatives and Senate. As a result of this spirit, numerous important environmental laws and regulations were passed and signed by the President. There has been some amendments added to these bills, but they essentially remain in force. They are listed below:

National Environmental Policy Act 1969
Clean Air Act 1963 amended 1970
National Wild and Scenic River Act 1968
National Hiking Trail Act 1968
Environmental Education Act 1970
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created 1970
Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) created 1971
Federal Pesticide Act 1972
Surface Mining Control & Reclamation Act
Water Quality Improvement Act 1972
Endangered Species Act 1973
Toxic Substances Control Act 1976

After the success of Earth Day 1970, Denis Hayes organized a global effort for Earth Day 1990. The work done by over 200 million people from 141 countries helped give attention to the problem of global warming, which culminated in the United Nations Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In 1995, President Clinton awarded Gaylord Nelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his work as the Earth Day founder. Clean energy and global warming were the focus of Earth Day 2000 involving 184 countries. The 50th anniversary of Earth Day in 2020 is expected to be celebrated by over 1 billion people. There is much to be concerned about, however. Once again the health and care of the environment is not on the political agenda. The people in power in the United States even deny the existence of global warming.

The woods around my house used to be home to at least 3 breeding pairs of Wood Thrush---now only one. A Kentucky Warbler family no longer lives in the thickets. The loud “Creeep” of the Great Crested Flycatcher has not been heard for the past 5 seasons. What disasters need to happen to focus our attention again on the reasons for such silence..?

The next article will talk about the history of the Endangered Species Act and what it has done for birds.

Questions or comments? Contact me at eapyeritz@gmail.com.