

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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The Flute Player in the Woods

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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



*The Wood Thrush is one of the most beautiful wild inhabitants of the Chautauqua Watershed. Its voice, an ethereal flute-like song, was one of Roger Tory Peterson's favorites.*

It was many years ago. We were young, with rich and vivid imaginations. My brother told me about a dream of his. In this dream he had crept out through his bedroom window to go in search of the magical mysterious flute player in the woods – an elfin figure clad in soft brown cloth perched upon a moss-cushioned stump, slender fingers clasped around a fantastically carved wooden flute. I don't know that he ever found the flute player that night, but I have since then.

For many years I often heard this elusive musician's sweet melody emanating from leaf shadowed places. Eventually I learned its identity. The flute player is, in fact, a bird called the Wood Thrush. What sounds like a flute is its own voice. It sings a song that no human ever could. Our vocal organ is the larynx, located at the top of our trachea. The larynx

contains hard membranes called vocal chords. When we sing we force air from our lungs over these chords, which causes them to vibrate and produce sound. We control the pitch with a complex of muscles and cartilage within the larynx that change the tension of the chords – kind of like blowing over a stretched rubber band. A bird's vocal organ is called a syrinx. It is located on the lower portion of the trachea where it separates into the two bronchi. The syrinx contains highly elastic membranes that, in most birds, including the Wood Thrush, are controlled by two separate sets of muscles located on each side of syrinx. This allows a bird to produce many varied sounds and even emit two different sounds simultaneously. In other words most birds can sing harmonies with themselves! This is exactly what the Wood Thrush does when he sings his ethereal flute-like song.

The Wood Thrush is relatively common in the forests of the Chautauqua Watershed but most people have heard but never seen it. The Wood Thrush is not a flashy bird like a male Cardinal or Baltimore Oriole. Both the male and female Wood Thrush wears a soft brown "coat" over a white "shirt" dotted with dark spots. This coloration helps it blend into woodland shadows. Nor is the Wood Thrush a bird that you will see at your winter

feeder. Preferring a diet of insects, Wood Thrushes travel as far as Central America to satisfy their taste for bugs when our landscape turns white and there are few insects about.

The Wood Thrush and many other migratory songbird populations are declining. Roads and various kinds of development are increasingly fragmenting the birds' North American breeding grounds, such as the forests of the Chautauqua Watershed. In a fragmented forest, breeding birds, their eggs and babies become vulnerable to predators that inhabit forest edges. They also become exposed to Brown-headed Cowbirds. Cowbirds are brood parasites, birds that do not construct their own nests or care for their own young; instead, they lay their eggs in other species of birds' nests, leaving the unwitting parents to care for and feed cowbird babies in preference to their own. A fragmented forest makes it easier for cowbirds to find and parasitize Wood Thrush nests, significantly reducing the breeding success of Wood Thrushes.

Meanwhile destruction of forests in Central America reduces the Wood Thrush's preferred wintering habitat forcing the birds to choose less suitable habitats where their survival might be compromised due to lack of food and protection from predators.

Although the Wood Thrush is still far from extinction we would do well to pay attention to the causes of their decline and do all we can to ensure their survival in the Chautauqua Watershed. It would be a sad day for us all if the flute player in the woods disappeared and its beautiful music became only a dream.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!