

# Lycoming Audubon Society

Lycoming Audubon Society  
P. O. Box 4053  
Williamsport, PA 17701

Re: Concerns with the Tiadaghton State Forest ATV Pilot Connector  
(Lycoming/Clinton counties)

Honorable Chair Gene Yaw and members of the Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Lycoming Audubon Society is a chartered local chapter of the National Audubon Society with over 300 members in Lycoming and Clinton Counties. Our mission is "To conserve and restore natural ecosystems focusing on birds and other wildlife and habitats for the benefit of humanity and earth's biological diversity." To that end our organization partners with many other organizations on education, conservation, habitat protection and restoration projects in Clinton and Lycoming Counties.

We and many of our chapter members join countless other Pennsylvanians and visitors from around the world in bird watching, hiking, fishing, biking, quietly driving and generally otherwise enjoying the natural beauty, prolific wildlife and solitude of the PA Wilds, including the Tiadaghton State Forest. From this perspective then, and on behalf of the Lycoming Audubon membership, we oppose the expansion of ATV use on Bureau of Forestry public roads, gated roads, snowmobile and other existing trails or on newly created trails or "connectors". This expansion impairs the "wild character" of these lands, undermines the Commonwealth's biological diversity, and as a result it is counter to the multi-use mission of DCNR. Based on our members' experience and on our knowledge of wildlife and the habitats that support it, our opinion is that ATV use on these public lands interferes with the experience of almost all other users of the forests and parks.

The expansive network of forests and streams that make up Pennsylvania's northern tier forests are a national treasure, recognized as the "Pennsylvania Wilds" because of the wild and scenic character sustained by the landscape. These forests provide a healthy landscape of interior forest habitats, streams, and rivers that are enjoyed by many thousand annually. Hunting, fishing, bird-watching, and many other outdoor recreation enthusiasts are drawn to this area because of its wild character and the diversity of wildlife that reside there. Over 100 species of forest-interior birds make their home in this area, many of which are in decline elsewhere.



Expanding ATV use across miles of Bureau of Forestry roads and trails jeopardizes the integrity of these north central forests, and violates the mission of the Bureau and the Department on lands that are still recovering from exploitative abuses of the 19th and 20th centuries. This threatens to change the character of these forests through direct environmental degradation and noise pollution that reaches far into the hills and valleys where these machines are in use. The negative impacts of ATV use are well known. Direct impacts to the environment include degradation through soil erosion, resulting in increased sedimentation of local water systems. The relentless noise produced by the machines extends the environmental damage beyond the actual roads and trails, breaking the quiet and tranquility of these woodlands. The degradation of water quality, soil erosion, and the spread of invasive species introduced by expanded ATV use are legitimate concerns of Lycoming Audubon but are largely addressed by others.

Impacts of noise on wild bird populations are well-documented. Recent studies at Penn State document declines in reproductive success in birds exposed to noise (Ornithological Applications. 2021; 123:1-11.). These studies were conducted in Pennsylvania to evaluate gas well development. Other studies demonstrate that birds change their behavior in response to human disturbance. But the noise caused by ATV use is particularly insidious, since it is not restricted to point sources, but extends along the length of routes opened for their use. As a result, the impact of noise on wildlife extends for square miles of forested habitat along these routes. Further, the proposed expansion of ATV use extends throughout the whole breeding season for the majority of neotropical migratory birds, creating persistent disturbance during this critical phase in their life history.

Cornell University's landmark study found that nearly 3 billion birds have been lost from North America in the past 5 decades (Cornell Lab of Ornithology and others; Science, September, 2019). That number represents just under 1/3 of the continent's total population of birds lost in about 50 years. North central Pennsylvania's forested public lands are a critical remaining refuge and breeding area for many of these avian species. Expanded ATV use in these critical habitats would surely cause further negative impacts to sensitive species' populations. For instance, in the forests surrounding just 4 miles of the Slate Run Road of the proposed ATV route expansion, the PA Conservation Opportunity Area tool identified the potential of 23 Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including species of national concern such as Allegheny Woodrat, Cerulean Warbler, and Timber Rattlesnake. Tragically, the proposed ATV connector on this road would negatively impact these species precisely within the very core of their remaining populations' strongholds.

Extensive research conducted on forest fragmentation indicates the importance of contiguous, "interior" character of forests for many wildlife species. Notably, the

small roads typical of north-central Bureau forests are not generally considered fragmenting features, as are typical PennDOT roads. The low impacts of most BOF roads provide for the ecological integrity of the surrounding forest systems. However, the expansion of ATV use in these remote areas has the potential to change the ecological character of these roads. As a result, impacts to sensitive species by ATV expansion will occur just where these species have the greatest chance of success – the extensive forests of central Pennsylvania, potentially contributing to declines of scores of species. This risks turning this previously productive wildlife refuge into an ecological trap, impacted by noise pollution. Surely the impacts of ATV use, old and new, should be carefully studied for impacts on the forest habitat, the wildlife that live there and the other users who recreate in these areas before additional ATV use is considered.

The direct impacts on other wildlife species, notably small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians are likely to be severe. Roadways are a well-documented cause of mortality for these terrestrial species. The increased vehicular traffic on these remote BOF roads will inevitably increase mortality in many species with sensitive populations. Again, these State Forests provide a refuge for these species. ATV expansion will jeopardize these core populations as well.

The expansion of one special interest (ATV users) will degrade the environment, wildlife, and aesthetic resources held in trust by DCNR and valued by all other users. We note that the proposed ATV season does not extend into the traditional big-game hunting seasons, because of the resulting conflict with hunters. How can the experience of hikers, bird-watchers, fishers, campers, and all other outdoor enthusiasts be disregarded to this extent during the summer months? ATV use is largely incompatible with the enjoyment of all of these other users. These natural landscapes are not only known for their dark skies but also the peace and tranquility of the breeze in the tree-tops and ripple of wild brooks. ATV expansion undermines DCNR's vision of "inspiring citizens to value their natural resources." The impacts on trails and the noise caused by ATV use tangibly degrades the outdoor experience of these users for miles around that activity, and will negatively impact the economic contribution of these low-impact users. Hikers, campers, and birders just won't tolerate this intrusion. This will degrade the \$1+ billion annual economic contributions to the Pennsylvania Wilds area. ATV expansion degrades the "wild character" of the state's forests, favoring one small sub-group above all others.

For all of these reasons, we at the Lycoming Audubon Society respectfully suggest to your Committee, and request of the DCNR, that any and all expansion of the ATV road and trail system in Pennsylvania's State Forests and Parks be halted. The Commonwealth and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have a constitutional obligation to manage and protect the public lands in the state for the

benefit of all of its citizens and to sustain the biological diversity of those public lands. On its face, then, the expansion of ATV use on those public lands fails each of these constitutional requirements.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this issue of such great importance to our members and friends.

Sincerely,

 12/7/21

Dan Brauning  
Lycoming Audubon Society Member  
State Ornithologist  
PA Game Commission, Retired

 12/7/2021

Ted Loy  
President  
Lycoming Audubon Society