Alum Creek FACT Sheets

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Bald Eagles Nesting on Alum Creek

by Carol Elder

In what is a first for Central Ohio, a pair of bald eagles has built a nest in a suburban area of the Alum Creek watershed. It is in a rapidly developing area of northern Westerville, close to Polaris Parkway, right on Alum Creek and is the closest nest to Columbus. The pair may be young eagles building their first nest, which could explain their choice of an urban location, because eagles usually are much more wary of people and choose a secluded nesting site. But the nest is within an easy "commute" to two good food sources, Alum Creek reservoir and Hoover reservoir.

Because of habitat loss, hunting and pesticides thinning their eggshells, bald eagle populations dropped drastically and it was listed as an endangered species. DDT was banned in 1972 and by 1979 there were only 4 pairs of bald eagles in Ohio. In that year, the Ohio Division of Wildlife began a restoration project which has been wildly successful. By 2004, there were more than 100 nesting pairs. An annual bald eagle mid-winter census that began in 1979 counted 6 birds that year. The January 2006 census counted 554, with several living at nearby Hoover Reservoir.

An adult eagle is more than 3 feet tall with a 6-7 foot wingspan. Courtship behavior and nest building can occur anytime between October and early December. As winter begins, the bonding activities wind down but then resume again in late January. Beginning in early February, the male bald eagle will put on an aerial display of ritualized movements showing his mate his readiness.

Bald Eagle, photographed at Chatfield State Park. *Photo courtesy of Colorado State Parks.*

Established pairs generally return to an existing nest and add six or more inches of material including branches, grasses, corn stalks and cattails. The nest is maintained throughout the breeding season.

New pairs will start from scratch. An average eagle nest is built high in a tall tree and ranges

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Mission

FACT is committed to finding ways to preserve and protect Alum Creek as a natural area while providing citizen access for environmentally responsible recreation, educational opportunities and citizen enjoyment at many levels.

Watershed Protection Partners

$1000 or more: City of Westerville and the City of Bexley.
$250 – $999: Mrs. William K. Westwater.

Supporting Members ($100 - $249): Acorn Farms Inc.; Anderson Concrete; Coca Cola North America; Paige & Michael Crane; Elizabeth B. Crane; Del-Co Water Company; Dipietro Tyre; Jeff & Leslie Fowler; Gretchen Hummel; Jeremy King & Susan Studer; Bill & Lisa Lonergan; Mira Cit Development Corp.; Morrow Gravel Co.; National Groundwater Association; Plaza Properties; Maggie Somple; Lisa Westwater; Rick Wilson & Melinda Harris.

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from three to five feet wide, and three to six feet deep. Still, a young pair can build their nest in as little as three weeks. If successful, the eagles will return to the nest in following years.

Beginning in early February, the male bald eagle will put on an aerial display of ritualized movements showing his mate his readiness. If receptive, the female will join him in flight. This activity is then followed by more ritual movements in flight. This activity is then followed by more ritual movements and gestures before actual mating occurs. The female lays one to three eggs, approximately 36 hours apart, in mid-February to late March. Both she and her mate spend time on the nest incubating. This process usually lasts 35 days, with the young hatching in late March through early May. The eaglets will stay in the nest 10 to 12 weeks and both parents share the feeding responsibilities.

The eaglet(s) begin limb hopping as they strengthen their wings. The fledging process continues for four to eight weeks; all the while the eaglets slowly broaden their range from the nest, but continue to depend on their parents for food. Eagles are great at scooping fish from the water with their talons, but will also eat mammals or even scavenge for carrion, especially in the winter.

When workers at a nearby business noticed the nesting activity in Westerville, they called ODNR. They kept the location a secret until they could erect signs warning people to stay away from the area. Human activity can scare eagles off a nest, exposing eggs to cold temperatures or preventing them from feeding young hatchlings.

The City of Westerville is setting up an eagle viewing area at the Westerville Sports Complex at the southwest corner of County Line Road and Cleveland Avenue, a respectable distance from the nest. Disturbing an eagle and causing it to neglect its eggs or young, or even picking up an eagle feather, is a crime with possible jail time so birdwatchers must be very careful.

The work of FACT and local partners like the City of Westerville in preserving and protecting riparian habitat and water quality in the Alum Creek watershed may have been one factor in the eagles' choice of nesting sights. Without this natural swath of land, or "greenway," along Alum Creek, it's doubtful that eagles would be nesting among us.

Preserving greenways also provides us with recreational opportunities, prevents flooding and protects our drinking water (which is drawn from Alum Creek for Westerville residents).

It is imperative that we preserve and restore the remaining natural areas along the creek and wetlands in the watershed to ensure a healthy environment for wildlife and for ourselves. With your help, we can continue this important work.

Watershed Watch

Drilling Fluids Found in Unnamed Tributary and Alum Creek

On January 12, 2006, OEPA issued a Notice of Violation (NOV), following a storm water complaint initiated by a FACT member. The NOV was issued to Columbia Gas after an investigation revealed that bentonite drilling fluid had discharged into the unnamed tributary immediately south of Alum Creek dam and had escaped into Alum Creek.

Columbia Gas is building a 25 mile natural gas distribution pipeline, some of which will be beneath Alum Creek. According to OEPA representative Harry Kallipolitis, bentonite poses a suffocation danger mainly to some small mollusks in the creek. A Columbia Gas representative indicated that the bentonite observed in the tributary did not appear to have been a result of ground seepage from the drilling operations, but instead, was caused by an unreported transportation spill by a Columbia Gas contractor.

As reported in the January 5, 2006 edition of *This Week Olentangy*, OEPA had previously issued

Bentonite, *continued from page 3*

Bentonite (left) found in Alum Creek. *Photo by Leah Piteo.*

a Notice of Violation against Columbia Gas for bentonite leaks observed in the Olentangy River in Liberty Township, Delaware County. The leaks resulted from bentonite escaping through ground fractures during the drilling operations. Columbia Gas has reportedly acknowledged losing some 38,000 gallons of the drilling fluid during drilling operations.

The NOV issued for the Alum Creek spill included orders for Columbia Gas to immediately contain the drilling fluids which appeared to have escaped through storm water runoff. The order also required Columbia Gas to remove the drilling fluids from the stream, suggesting hand removal with shovels and wheel barrels, and an after-the-fact 401 water quality submission to include clean-up, restoration and mitigation associated with the illicit discharge into Alum Creek.

Developer Withdraws Application to Fill 13 Acres of Floodplain

State Street Development withdrew its application to fill 13 acres of floodplain located on the west bank of Alum Creek on Bale Kenyon Road. The developer applied to fill 13 acres of a 30-acre parcel zoned residential farming (FR-1) in order to build 51 condominiums.

Last December, many turned out to testify against the application before the Orange Township Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA). Testimony by Delaware County Regional Planning Commission (DCRPC) staff indicated that the designated 100-year floodplain may rise as a result of development in the floodplain, jeopardizing current homes sited outside the 100-year floodplain. DCRPC further stated that the development, as proposed, would create a bottleneck in the stream under flood conditions, increasing upstream flood elevations and downstream velocities.

Additional environmental concerns were raised, including preservation of water quality for downstream drinking water supplies and preservation of the Orange Township Comprehensive Zoning Plan that emphasizes the floodplains as a critical part of the ecosystem that provides natural flood and erosion control. FACT, the City of Westerville and OEPA all provided opposition testimony to the plan.

The hearing was continued until January 10, 2006, at which time the developer withdrew the application. The developer expressed intent to return at a later date before the BZA to propose four or five home sites on the 30-acre parcel, rather than the 51 condos. The lot sizes will conform to the current zoning (150 feet frontage, 1.997 acre minimum lot size) and will require some fill in the 100-year floodplain.

The developer pledged to work with DCRPC to arrive at a solution. It remains to be seen whether DCRPC will recommend a conditional use permit to fill in the floodplain or if the BZA would approve the same. BZA has approved limited fill of the Alum Creek 100-year floodplain in the past, most notably in the River's Edge Subdivision located south of Alum Creek Dam on Bale Kenyon.

Wetlands & Floodplain Filled Without Permit at Morse and Sunbury Roads

A tract of land between Sunbury Road and Alum Creek just north of Morse Road slopes steeply down from the road to floodplain. This land served as a riparian buffer of Alum Creek, and was wooded, with a large, delineated wetland. Recently,

the new owner of property, Cavin Carmell, filled-in floodplain and wetlands without permits from the City of Columbus or Ohio EPA, respectively. Mr. Carmell continued filling after a stop-work order was issued by the City of Columbus.

Unfortunately, it is likely that the Army Corps of Engineers, which works with the Ohio EPA on wetland fill permitting, will grant Mr. Carmell an after-the-fact permit for the destruction of the wetland. Mr. Carmell has also applied for rezoning of the site for commercial development, though so far, the application has not been well-received by city departments. Should this ecologically sensitive site be developed, requirements should include at a minimum, appropriate set-backs from the creek and appropriate mitigation for wetlands destruction. Expect future updates on this project!

Wetlands Mitigation Moves Forward in Westerville and Orange Township

With the goal of conserving wetlands in the Alum Creek watershed, FACT has initiated three wetland restoration and conservation projects. While wetlands in the watershed continue to be filled to make room for new development, state law requires that entities seeking permits to fill wetlands compensate, or mitigate, for the loss by creating or restoring wetlands elsewhere.

Unfortunately, mitigation usually occurs at "wetland banks" in rural areas outside of the watershed, where it provides no benefit to Alum Creek or local residents. FACT has worked to change this circumstance by researching sites in the watershed that can accommodate mitigation.

Thanks to the work of many dedicated volunteers and the willingness of both permit applicants and local governments, three local mitigation projects are now in progress. We are counting on volunteer participation to complete these projects. If you'd like to get involved, please join FACT on Earth Day – April 22nd.

Boyer Park Nature Preserve, Westerville. FACT volunteers have braved the cold twice this winter to help clear non-native honeysuckle shrubs from this site in preparation for early spring construction of vernal (or small, seasonal) wetlands. After the wetlands are constructed, join FACT on April 22nd (Earth Day) to plant wetlands vegetation.

College Knolls, Westerville. To accommodate mitigation for a wetland fill permit by the Performance Site Management Company, new wetlands will be created in a natural area within the College Knolls subdivision. The City of Westerville worked to restore wetlands here in the 1990s, and has identified additional wetlands work that will help offset flooding in some backyards. Volunteers will be working on this site on Earth Day to start clearing non-native shrubs to make room for wetlands creation.

Village at Bale Kenyon, Orange Township. Plans are now underway to restore wetlands on a plot of farmed land between Bale Kenyon Road and Alum Creek, north of Worthington Road. The property has been dedicated as greenspace in conjunction with the new "Villages at Bale Kenyon" subdivision being constructed by Village Communities. This farm field was likely historically wetlands, and will be restored to accommodate mitigation requirements for a Plaza Properties project near the Columbus Airport, as well as future Village Communities project. At FACT's request, Plaza Properties had initially sought to develop wetlands for mitigation at Somerset Park in Columbus, but may opt for this site instead.

FACT volunteers worked in January to clear a path to the wetlands creation area at Boyer Park Nature Preserve. Pictured from front center, clockwise, are Roberta Cook, Jerry Holloway, Larry Cox, Paul Konicek and Erin Miller.

River Voices by David Hohmann

David Hohmann has served on the FACT Board of Directors for four years, and is the man behind many of FACT's cleanups efforts. He joins us as this edition's River Voices author.

My family has appreciated Alum Creek for generations. Passing this on is a joy of being a FACT member and parent. Our son Jordan, who is not quite three-years-old, announces "Alum Creek!" when he sees it. I remember my dad's tales of a boyhood spent boating, ice skating, fishing and exploring Alum Creek. In my teenage years the creek was nearly a lost cause, avoided by most people as a polluted urban sewer. Stories of its big flood reminded me of its dormant power.

David and Becky Hohmann with son, Jordan, at the September 2005 FACT Bike Ride event on the Alum Creek Multi-Use Trail through Nelson Park.

My personal choices and actions for the environment have been easier to navigate when I relate them to local results. Academically, I have studied technical and scientific intricacies of pollution at global, regional, and sometimes local scales. While helping the Earth as a whole may seem daunting, "Acting Locally," through FACT projects in the community context of our watershed, is easy to relate to.

For almost 35 years, the goals of the nation's Clean Water Act have drifted just ahead of us. Should fishable, swimmable, drinkable water be so tough to reach? I hope we're making progress now.

Each day the creek brings new water flowing past in a sort of renewal. The riparian corridor and streambed habitat are dynamic and evolving. I trust that Alum Creek may heal, with some careful help. FACT seeks ways to do this and informs the community so that appropriate decisions can be made to live in a better balance with our river.

See Alum Creek once from a canoe and you realize the surprising and persistent oasis of natural life, right here in the city, that it represents. Yes, it's been damaged – but nature's resilience to recover is being called forth by the dam removal and greenway projects.

Like the rivers downstream – the Scioto, Ohio and Mississippi – Alum Creek can link us together with our past and future, as well as to the planet. A sustainable, more balanced future for Ohio begins locally right here in our watershed backyard. Through FACT we can pass this priceless gift along to future generations. I'm thankful and proud to be part of this great organization.

Factoid

Sycamores and Alum Creek

by David Hohmann

At this time of year, the native Sycamore trees along Alum Creek are highly visible. They thrive in riparian areas and provide valuable shade to keep fish happy in the waters during summer. Fallen leaves and papery bark pieces serve as food for the "cruncher" organisms at the base of the aquatic food chain. Sycamore branches and root hollows along the bank are home to birds, ranging from herons to wood ducks, warblers, kingfishers, and critters like muskrat, otter, raccoon or mink. At night, the white bark of the sycamore trees along the creek may stand out like the streetlights on a city street. One legend says the underground railroad travelers along the creek had used the sycamore trees like signposts.

The American Sycamore, *Platanus occidentalis*, grows throughout Ohio in wetlands, riverbanks and floodplains. It is the largest diameter tree in the eastern U.S., and commonly ranges from 3 to 8 feet in diameter at the trunk. Ohio's largest sycamore in Ashland County is 15 feet in diameter (48.5 feet in circumference).

Randy Sanders of the Ohio DNR has studied the value of the Sycamore and he thinks it is the keystone tree for the entire riparian ecology. He thinks it is so important that it should be Ohio's state tree instead of the Buckeye. What's the easiest way to maintain a riparian corridor? – Keep or plant sycamores. He also notes that Sycamore trees are one of the best trees to support a 2,000 pound bald eagle nest!

The distinctive bark of the Sycamore tree.

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FACT Events Calendar

Contact the Friends of Alum Creek & Tributaries at (614) 409-0511 for more information on all events.

March 9: FACT meeting CANCELLED.

April 6: Estate Planning and Charitable Giving Seminar. Sponsored by Ohio Environmental Council, Simply Living and Friends of Alum Creek and Tributaries. At Northside Branch Library, 1423 N. High Street, Columbus. Learn more about probate, estate taxes, trusts, IRAs, Donor Advised Funds, Charitable Lead Trusts, Charitable Remainder Trusts and more from James K. Leonard, an estate planning attorney and OSBA Board Certified Specialist in Estate Planning, Trust & Probate Law. Admission is free. Refreshments will be served. RSVP by April 3 to Susan Studer King at (614) 487-7506.

April 8: Alum Creek Cleanup at Academy Park. 9-11 a.m. Join FACT and Capital University volunteers for the first cleanup of the year at our Keep Columbus Beautiful Adopted Area: Academy Park and Alum Creek! Wear old clothes and shoes. Directions: Academy Park is located between Main Street and Broad Street on Nelson Road. From downtown, follow I-70 east and take the Main Street/Bexley exit. Follow the exit ramp north on Alum Creek Drive. Turn left on to Main Street. Turn right at the next light onto Nelson Road. Academy Park is on the right (east) side of street, next to a recreation center.

April 13: Wastewater in Your Watershed. 6:30 p.m., Ohio Dominican University Neighborhood Center, 1229 Sunbury Road. Join FACT for a presentation by Cyane Gresham of the Ohio Sierra Club. Learn how sewers and stormwater are impacting Alum Creek and tributaries, what big construction projects are planned for the future and what you can do on your own property. There will be an opportunity to ask questions. Park in the lot north of the center.

April 22: Earth Day Volunteer Outing! FACT will offer several ways for you to celebrate Earth Day. Volunteers are needed for a number of projects, including wetlands restoration work at Boyer Park Nature Preserve and the College Knolls project in Westerville. Details will be available soon – call FACT or visit FACT online at www.friendsofalumcreek.org after April 1.

May 20: Wetlands Walk at Three Creeks Park. 10 a.m., Three Creeks Park – Sycamore Fields Recreation Area, Spangler Road. Spring is a great time to catch wetlands in all of their glory. Explore wooded wetlands next to Alum Creek. Please wear hip waders, knee boots or old shoes that you don't mind getting wet and muddy. Directions: From I-70, exit Alum Creek Drive east of downtown Columbus. At the end of the ramp, turn left (south) on Alum Creek Drive. Proceed approximately 2.5 miles (passing Route 104), and turn left onto Watkins Road. Follow the road around a sharp right bend. Turn left into entrance to Sycamore Fields. Meet at the first parking area.

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