

# OUTDOORS



**TOM VENESKY**

OUTDOORS

## Springtime delights all of our senses

No other time of year intrigues the senses like the arrival of spring.

I noticed it last week, and it was a welcome respite from the seemingly endless drone of slate gray skies and muddy ground that defines March.

The signs of spring can be seen, heard and even smelled.

I saw spring on Tuesday morning when I spied two turkey gobblers strutting in a cornfield. Surrounded by hens, the gobblers inflated their chests and fanned their tails as if they were trying to impress the world.

Although the hens were more worried about finding leftover kernels of corn, a strutting gobbler truly is an impressive sight.

The hens will take notice later, when the mating season kicks into full swing. By that time, I'll be seated at the base of tree with my George Sabol Kee Call trying to lure a gobbler within shotgun range.

I saw another sign of spring last week when I found the beginnings of a nest that had fallen out of a tree. The small bowl was masterfully crafted with long strands of hair from a horse's tail, but apparently wasn't secured very well to the branch.

Fortunately it's early yet, and the maker of the nest will have time to build another and lay a clutch of eggs.

The sights that indicate spring's arrival are many, and so are the sounds.

Topping my list every year are the spring peepers that inhabit swamps and pond edges. About an inch in length, the peeper is Pennsylvania's smallest frog. But its diminutive size is misleading when it comes to the peepers' vocal ability.

When the temperatures turn mild, the peepers emerge from hibernation and immediately serenade the nighttime air with a chorus of peeps. I stopped and listened for a while last week and found the constant peeping relaxing and almost melodic.

The peepers aren't singing for our listening pleasure, however. The calling is made by the males in order to attract a female mate. In a few weeks, the females will lay up to 1,000 eggs, each one the size of a pinhead.

The process insures the peepers' survival, which in turn allows us to hear their song again next year.

I also smelled spring last week during an afternoon walk along a shady woodland stream.

The crunch underfoot told me I stepped on something, and the resulting aroma indicated what it was.

Skunk cabbage is one of the first plants to sprout in the spring, sometimes dominating forested stream banks and vernal pools.

Many plants are named after their appearance, and skunk cabbage is no exception. No, it's not black with a white stripe, but when it matures its smooth, thick leaves do resemble cabbage.

And when the plant is crushed, like the one I inadvertently squashed last week, it emits chemicals that produce a skunk-like odor. Some people believe the smell is used to attract insects that feed on decaying matter. The insects land on the plant and provide pollination.

Perhaps the best thing about skunk cabbage – in terms of being a harbinger of spring – is that it doesn't wait for the calendar.

Skunk cabbage will sprout even if there is a late snow on the ground. The rapidly growing plant produces heat and can warm itself as much as 77 degrees (Fahrenheit) above the air temperature.

The process is called thermogenesis, and it basically allows skunk cabbage to create its own habitat by generating heat to thaw out its surroundings.

I guess you can say it's nature's version of global warming on a smaller, less destructive scale.

Tom Venesky writes about hunting, fishing, trapping and the outdoors for The Times Leader. He can be reached at 829-7230 or [tvenesky@timesleader.com](mailto:tvenesky@timesleader.com).



Aerial view of the Francis E. Walter Dam in lower Luzerne County (summer 2006). The release gates are located at the bottom of the release tower shown in the water (left of center).



### Lehigh River Watershed

- Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance estimates a sustainable trout fishery is possible extending 40 miles below the dam to Walnutport.
- The watershed covers 1,345 square miles.
- The river is 103 miles long from its headwaters in Wayne County marshes to the mouth at the Delaware River in Easton.
- Pennsylvania River of the Year in 2007.
- 32-mile section designated Pennsylvania Scenic River from the dam to Jim Thorpe.



Sources: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wildlands Conservancy, Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance  
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## Helping out Lehigh trout

# A quest for COLD WATER

By TOM VENESKY | [tvenesky@timesleader.com](mailto:tvenesky@timesleader.com)

Dean Druckenmiller fell in love with trout fishing in the big rivers out West.

Places such as the Madison River – a wide expanse of clear, cold water in Montana that traverses scenic mountains.

The Lehigh River has many of the same qualities as its counterparts in the West, Druckenmiller said, but it is missing one thing.

"It lacks a consistent supply of cold water," Druckenmiller said. "It has the scenery, character, habitat and forage, but not the cold water all summer long."

And that makes it difficult for trout.

Druckenmiller is president of the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance based in Schuylkill County. The group is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine a way to provide a consistent supply of cold water to the Lehigh River.

Trout are vulnerable when water temperatures rise above 68 degrees, Druckenmiller said. When the river gets warm, trout seek refuge in the cold tributaries flowing down from the mountains. But sometimes, he said, they perish.

There is a remedy to the problem, but Druckenmiller's group faces a large hurdle: The Francis E. Walter Dam.

The dam is operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which determines dates for water releases to supplement recreation on the river. Those releases cause the temperature to rise in the Lehigh River, Druckenmiller said, creating a problem for the trout fishery.

The main purpose of the dam is flood control, followed by recreation. There are 24 water releases planned for this year between May 10 and Oct. 24.

When the releases occur, the discharge is withdrawn from the bottom of the reservoir – where the coldest water



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Jake Markezin, secretary of the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance prepares to release a Rainbow trout caught in the Lehigh River near Palmerton in May 2006.

is located. The early-season releases use up most of the cold water, resulting in summer releases of water that can be 75 degrees.

Druckenmiller said the warm water starts to show up in the river in July.

"I'm sure some trout do die as a result of high water temperatures in the summer," he said.

Jake Markezin, secretary of the Alliance, said the dam was built in 1961 and is antiquated because water can only be withdrawn from the bottom of the reservoir.

The Alliance would like sustained releases of 55-degree water, and Markezin said there is one way to accomplish the goal.

"The dam needs the ability to mix water from different depths. That would be the life-saver for the cold water," he said.

### Study under way

The Corps of Engineers is conducting the first phase of a study looking at the flow and temperature of the releases and the river. The \$150,000 phase should be completed this fall, and then a second phase will examine the impact on water quality and chemistry.

The study is funded by cost-share among the Corps, state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. Greg Wacik, an ecologist for the Corps Philadelphia District, said the study will focus on a 40-mile stretch of the Lehigh River from the dam down to Northampton Borough.

The study will produce a model that the Corps can use to gauge the impacts of different discharge scenarios.

### ONLINE

To view this week's news and notes sections, visit [www.timesleader.com](http://www.timesleader.com). Included is information regarding JAKES Day at Moon Lake, a scoring session for deer and bear, changes to gobbler season and upcoming events planned for Nescopeck State Park.

Regardless of the study's results, options may already be limited by the dam's age.

When the dam was built in 1961, its primary purpose was flood control. Without the ability to discharge water from different elevations, Wacik said, the 55-degree temperature goal may be unattainable.

The dam at Beltzville Lake in Carbon County was built 10 years after F.E. Walter, Wacik said, and has the ability to discharge water from different elevations. As a result, the bottom layer of cold water lasts for the summer and can be utilized when needed.

To incorporate the same ability at F.E. Walter would take work and money, Wacik said.

"We may have to investigate construction alternatives, but there may be cheaper options like retrofitting the tower (which controls releases)," he said. "The flexibility to mix levels would certainly prolong the cold water through the summer, and at Francis Walter we just don't have that capability."

"This is a great resource that can be maximized better, and we want to see what can be done without jeopardizing

flood control."

Markezin shares Wacik's optimism regarding the study and the Corps' willingness to search for a solution.

"You're basically trying to improve the ecosystem with a project of the federal government. In this day and age, that's appealing to the Corps because it's lessening the impact of a dam," he said.

### Downriver impacts and potential

Druckenmiller said the stretch of the river from White Haven to Walnutport can be improved with a consistent cold-water release.

The cold water released from the dam, he said, can be sustained miles downstream by mountain tributaries pouring into the river below Sandy Run, which is about 8 miles downriver from the dam.

"The more miles you can get below 68 degrees, the better the fishery," Druckenmiller said.

It's a goal that would've been considered out of reach in the 1930s when coal silt and acid mine drainage made the Lehigh a dead river.

Today, it has cleaned up and in 2007 was named Pennsylvania's River of the Year by the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Now it's time to keep giving back, Druckenmiller said.

"We have a river here with large rocks, pools, runs and prolific aquatic life," he said. "If we can get coldwater into it all summer long, it will be one of the best trout fisheries in the state."