

## BIRD BANDING AT WISSAHICKON TRAILS

PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY

BY **KRISTY MORLEY & MARGARET ROHDE**

The summer of 2023 marked the completion of the 9th season of the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) banding station at Crossways Preserve.



PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY

### Banding equipment

The MAPS project was created by the Institute for Bird Populations in response to documented bird population declines. The project seeks to understand the drivers of population change over time, as well as bird distribution, their response to climate change, and what management practices might benefit certain species the most.

Since its establishment in 2015, the station at Crossways has contributed to this large-scale, continent-wide research project, while also helping Wissahickon Trails collect information about the birds that depend on our natural areas, and if and how our management strategies influence them.

### HOW DO YOU CATCH A BIRD?

Bird banding involves the safe capture of wild birds using fine, nylon nets called "mist nets." Once caught, the bird's species, sex, age, wing length, amount of stored fat, and weight are recorded. A lightweight, aluminum band with a unique, 9-digit number is placed on one of the bird's legs, giving it an identity that allows researchers to study the same individual over time, when it is recaptured. To date, we have a total of 1,186 capture records across 42 different species.

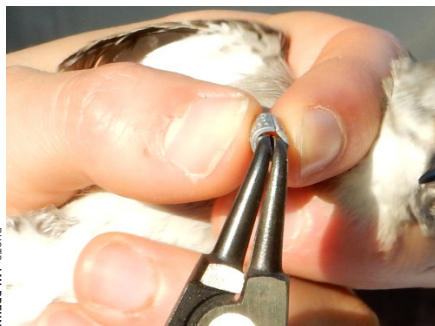


PHOTO: IAN BREHN

### Opening the band

### A TALE OF TWO CATBIRDS

Gray Catbirds are the most common birds banded at Crossways, and the abundance of data we have provides unique insight into the species. For example, we have documented that during summers with extreme weather – cool and wet, like in 2018, or hot, like in 2020 – fewer young catbirds are born. Information like this means we can begin to see how species are affected



PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

Gray catbird

by different factors, which can help us understand the reasons behind population growth or decline.

Of the hundreds of catbirds we've caught, 26 were recaptured over multiple years. Among them are a male (known as #411) and female (known as #933) who have each been recaptured over 7 years. Interestingly, #933 was initially caught in 2015 and we didn't see her again until 2020 and 2021, while #411, first captured in 2016, reappeared every year until 2022.

These two birds demonstrate how difficult it can be to track individuals. #933 has only been caught four times, and each time in a different net. She could have been present in all years, and simply avoided capture. In contrast, #411 used a smaller area of the preserve and was caught in the same exact net 7 out of 12 times.

Catbirds as old as 18 years have been banded at other stations, so although we didn't see either of these birds in 2023, there's still a chance they will be back to visit.



PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

Canada warbler



# SUPREME COURT DECISION CHANGES THE LANDSCAPE OF NATIONAL WATER PROTECTIONS

BY ERIN LANDIS



A sign warns people of the dangers of a polluted waterway in Upper Gwynedd (circa 1960s or 70s)

In May, a federal Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Sackett v the Environmental Protection Agency* reduced federal protections of waterways. The root of this case is interpretation of the 1972 Clean Water Act, a federal law that is the backbone of water protections in the US. The Clean Water Act prohibits the discharge of pollutants into “waters of the United States”, but the central question of defining “waters of the US” has been wrestled with for decades.

Prior to the Sackett ruling, the Clean Water Act was interpreted to protect wetlands and

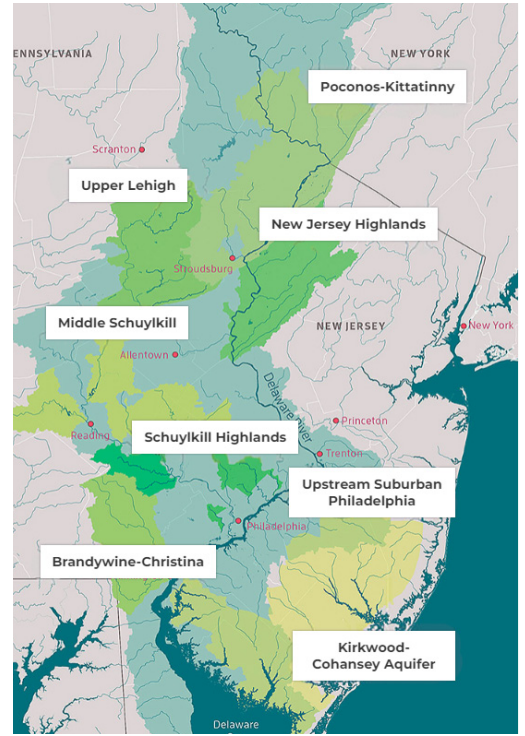
ephemeral streams that have seasonal surface waters – these features make up the ‘headwaters’ of a river system. The headwaters are where a river is born – in small streams, wetlands, and even stormwater drains – and these small streams and wetlands provide flood control, habitat to plants and animals, and ensure high water quality. Major rivers are fed by everything upstream and the protection of ‘headwaters’ is integral to overall river health.

Under the Sackett decision, the court’s interpretation of “waters of the US” is limited to waterways with an obvious surface connection to permanent water bodies, which will leave many

wetlands and ephemeral streams vulnerable to pollution and degradation. This ruling ignores the complexity of water systems, which are also connected underground, and puts the responsibilities on states to ensure clean water for their residents.

Surprisingly few states have constitutional language establishing the right to a clean environment, but happily, Pennsylvania’s

constitution includes the right to “pure water.” Pennsylvania’s Clean Streams Law protects a broad interpretation of waterways, including wetlands and small ephemeral streams. Pennsylvania’s protections of waterways have been, and continue to be, more stringent than federal protections. So in practicality, this ruling does not markedly change protections of the Wissahickon Creek or its tributaries. However, the Wissahickon Creek is a tributary of the Delaware River, which is fed by waterways from three other states and may be impacted by this ruling.



Map of the Delaware River Watershed shows connected waterways

## Outdoors for All: IMPROVING PHYSICAL TRAIL ACCESSIBILITY

BY MARGARET ROHDE

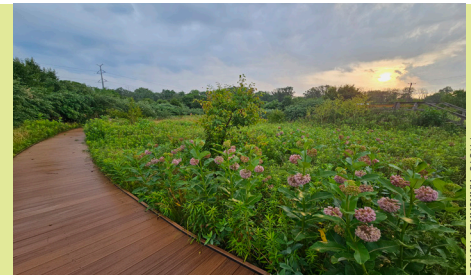
As part of a project funded through Montgomery County, we’ve been gathering information around the physical barriers individuals face when getting out into nature and learning what they need to know ahead of time to decide if a trail will be safe and enjoyable. We’re also exploring where there are opportunities to change the physical characteristics encountered on our trails, and how we can create more welcoming spaces for people living with disabilities.

This work involves listening to the disabled community and those who experience access challenges because

of the way the world is designed. Our Trail Accessibility Advisory Council, a group of people with disabilities, as well as those who care for disabled people, have been sharing their lived experiences with us and helping guide the way.

We are excited to be working with Freya McGregor, an accessibility consultant, disabled birder, and owner of Access Birding, LLC, who will be assessing our trails and preserves this fall, creating reports for each, and making recommendations for improvements.

We believe that people benefit when nature thrives. We also believe that people thrive when they’re able to spend



time outdoors, and so we are committed to doing what we can to make nature available not just to some of us, but to as many of us as possible. Because whether we are Deaf, Blind, use a mobility device, have PTSD, anxiety, a chronic illness, a bad knee, or any of the other things that can be true for a person, we should all be able to benefit from time outside.

This effort to improve accessibility is part of our larger DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility) goals to make Wissahickon Trails more accessible and inclusive.





# FOUR MILLS BARN RENOVATION IS COMPLETE – WE HOPE TO SEE YOU SOON!

ARTICLE BY **MICHAELLE FLEISHER** & PHOTOS BY **JAMIE STEWART**

The Four Mills Barn renovation project is finally complete and the building is again open to staff, supporters, and visitors! We were able to get dramatic results with modest changes, and the beauty of the building truly shines through. The first floor is flood resilient, public program space is enhanced on both floors, and accessibility facilities are improved.



**Our focus** was to showcase the beauty of the original structure while modernizing it. The ceilings are 16' high and we added natural light. The photos decorating the building were taken by staff and supporters and feature our preserves and local wildlife.

**Our renovated first floor** has transformed from a maze of small rooms to an open program space and exposing the windows has transformed it from dark to inviting. The concrete floors will provide an easy clean up after a flood.



**The conference room's** end wall is now a gateway to our new balcony and a bird's eye view of the preserve. The original barn doors are window shades.



**The pathways** have been replaced with wheelchair accessible surfaces and the courtyard is re-designed to host our events more comfortably.



**Removable wainscoting** panels can be washed and disinfected after a flood. They are easy to remove and the insulation is FEMA rated foam and can also be pulled out, washed, and replaced.



**The new balcony** gives access to the courtyard from the conference room, extending our programming space.



**The reading nook** has become a gathering space for casual meetings and work. The end barn doors have been enhanced by creating windows and adding new insulation.



**Our reception area** is much the same at the front desk but there is a welcome addition of 5 public toilets, a water fountain, and bottle filler. The staff has a locker room and shower which will be great after working outdoors.



**Office seating** has moved from many desks sharing poorly lit rooms to open cubicles on the second floor.



# REMEMBERING JOHN SHOBER & ROLLAND (ROL) HENDERSON

BY GAIL FARMER, STEVE BLUBAUGH, AND MARK SMITH

We celebrate the lives and legacies of John Shober and Rol Henderson, both of whom died this year.



**John Shober** was a supporter, Board Member, Board Chair, and Emeritus Board Member with Wissahickon Trails for more than 30 years. His contributions to the organization we see today were many, but he was especially proud of his efforts to preserve the Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve, a former asbestos waste dump in Ambler that is now a beautiful community asset.

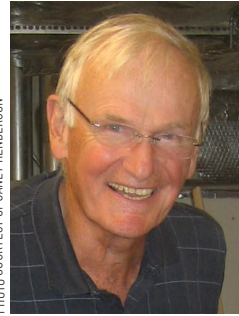


PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET HENDERSON

**Rol Henderson** was a gifted wood worker and possessed impressive design skills, which he used to support the Evans-Mumbower Mill. In 2011, Rol designed and built a sifting table and a grain conveyor that demonstrated a functioning Archimedes' Screw. Both of these interactive models are still used and enjoyed at education programs and open houses. Rol and his wife Janet volunteered at the mill for more than a

decade and supported Wissahickon Trails for over 30 years.

We remember these two men fondly and recognize their long-lasting contributions to the Wissahickon Trails' community.

## BEYOND BEES & BUTTERFLIES: A Spotlight on Underappreciated Pollinators

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY KRISTY MORLEY

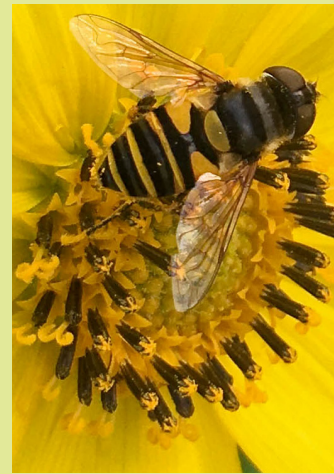
Name a pollinator. Any pollinator. Did butterflies come to mind, or maybe bees? What about flies or beetles? Probably not, but what we tend to think of as pests, are surprisingly important pollinators.

**Flies** visit flowers to drink nectar and eat pollen, and in the process collect pollen on their heads and bodies that is transferred to other flowers as they forage. Flies have a few advantages over bees where pollination is concerned. Flies will feed in temperatures that are cooler than bees will tolerate, and they don't mind flying in the rain. Flies also tend to have ranges that are much larger than bees, allowing a broader spread of pollen in the environment. The larval stages of flies are also beneficial in a garden, feeding on aphids and other pests.

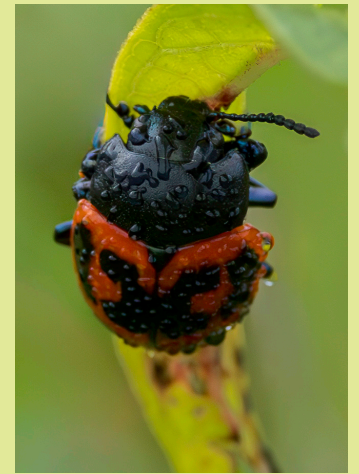
Researchers have found that flies may give bees a run for their money when it comes to pollinating crops like avocados, mangos, leeks, and carrots!

**Beetles** make up a quarter of all animal species, with almost 400,000 species worldwide! Fossil records show that beetles were abundant when dinosaurs walked the earth. Around 100 million years ago, flowering plants appeared, and since bees and butterflies took another 20 to 30 million years to arrive, beetles were likely the first pollinators of these ancient plants.

Today, this history can be seen in the forests of the Wissahickon Valley. Tulip trees, members of the magnolia family, are a common tree in our area and are descendants of those ancient plants. Tulip trees (and other magnolias) are pollinated almost exclusively by a variety of beetles. Beetles are also pollinators of spicebush, crab apples, and goldenrod.



Transverse Flower Fly



Swamp Milkweed Beetle



Yellow-legged Flower Fly



Goldenrod Soldier Beetle

So put away that flyswatter! Next time you are on the trails or in a preserve, take some time to appreciate the flies and beetles you see. In your yard, plant native plants, eliminate the use of chemicals, and offer habitat, such as leaf litter or decaying logs, to provide for the needs of these underappreciated pollinators.



# YOUR COMMUNITY AT WORK



PHOTO: ALEX MCHORTER

## Downspout Planter Build

Volunteers built twelve downspout planters. Each planter will connect to a residential downspout and can hold over 50 gallons of stormwater while supporting a flower garden.



PHOTO: ALEX MCHORTER

## Ally Bank Creek Clean Up

Employees of Ally Bank left their desks in favor of the Pine Run and removed trash from the creek, banks, and roadway. These volunteers felt a special sense of pride as this stretch of water runs directly in front of their office.



PHOTO: ALEX MCHORTER

## Camp Woods Trail Connection

Conservation Crew members helped establish a new trail connection between existing routes within Camp Woods. This section is part of a system that connects five of our preserves without ever leaving the trail.



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

## Borough Park Tree Care

Ambler residents and SFCS Architect volunteers gave some previously-planted trees in Ambler Borough Park attention and care. The trees were mulched and watered, weeds were pulled, and tree protections were repaired.



PHOTO: ALEX MCHORTER

## Cappgemini Creek Clean Up

Our partners at Cappgemini completed a creek clean up in the southern end of Ft. Washington State Park. Employees and their families came together to clean a heavily-trafficked stretch of the Green Ribbon Trail and Wissahickon Creek.



PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY

## Monarch Monitoring Blitz

13 volunteers participated in the International Monarch Monitoring Blitz. 597 milkweed stems were surveyed on three Wissahickon Trail's properties (Crossways, Armentrout, and Dodsworth Run), and we found 31 eggs, 13 caterpillars, and 6 adult monarch butterflies.



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

## First Green

120 students visited the Philadelphia Cricket Club and learned about stormwater and examined live stream critters impacted by water pollution at First Green, an environmental outreach program that uses golf courses as living classrooms.



PHOTO: MICHAEL BLAKE

## Tex Mex Volunteers

Our annual Tex Mex 5k could not have been possible without the support of over 125 volunteers! From registration to the finish line, volunteers were there to provide runners safe streets, motivation, and margaritas.



PHOTO: ALEX MCHORTER

## Green Ribbon Trail Project

Volunteers re-routed a section of the Green Ribbon Trail south of Swedesford Road, allowing for increased visibility and access near Runner's Crossing.



# LOVE MUDDY TRAILS? NEITHER DO WE

BY MADDY NEFF

We're in the business of keeping feet dry and reducing trail erosion. The Green Ribbon Trail sections closest to the Wissahickon Creek are often flooded because of stormwater and other factors; the section from the trailhead to mile marker 3 especially has a reputation for being muddy, which can lead to trail erosion. Here are some of the improvements we have made in the past year to manage wet sections of trail for the benefit of both habitat and trail visitors:

**Volunteers joined staff** to deconstruct a flood damaged boardwalk. Removing the displaced boardwalk will open the trail for easier passage as well as create space for new boardwalk construction to take place.

**Volunteers piled crushed rock** on worn down, muddy banks on either side of the Merck stepping stone crossing. The crushed rock improves bank stability, slows erosion, and will help walkers safely cross the creek.

**Plantings** at the headwater's restoration site continue to grow. Vegetation roots hold soil in place, stabilizing banks and floodplains, and reducing erosion. Plantings also play a big role in absorbing stormwater and maintaining healthy plant communities is a critical stormwater control tool!

**A local contractor** is inspecting the muddy section through Timoney Preserve, with a fix coming later this year.

**An Eagle Scout completed** his service project by removing a damaged boardwalk and replacing a bridge over a small stream that runs to the Wissahickon.



PHOTO: TOM VOTER

## Welcome to the Team: CAZ TOBIN



PHOTO: MICHAELLE FLEISHER

Caz has joined our team as the Administrative and Operations Assistant. Since graduating with a degree in Recreation and Parks Management from Frostburg State University, they have gained a variety of experience ranging from customer service to program planning. They look forward to helping advance the mission of Wissahickon Trails in any way they can.

Caz is an avid collector of VHS tapes and vinyl. They enjoy cooking for their partner, watching whatever sport is in season, and going on hikes with their dog, Ducky.

## Donor Spotlight: RICK SHORIN

BY ANNA MARCHINI

Shortly after Rick and his wife moved to the area in 1993, he purchased some plants at a local native plant sale. This plant sale, hosted by Wissahickon Trails, was the start of three decades of involvement. Rick and his family joined us for programs, hikes, and camps. As he learned about our land and water conservation work, Rick knew he wanted to do more.

For over 8 years he has been an incredible asset to the Finance

Committee, offering his expertise as a certified public accountant. *"It takes a lot of work to run this organization and I truly appreciate how efficient it is even as more acres are acquired, more trails are maintained, and more people are reached."*

*"I prefer to give locally. My contribution may not make a difference for a much larger organization, but for Wissahickon Trails, it has a direct impact."* One of his favorite ways to give is with appreciated stock. This is an easy transfer and both the donor and Wissahickon Trails enjoy benefits.

Rick's passions extend beyond Wissahickon Trails. He is a cyclist, covering over 4,000 miles per year, he volunteers weekly for Mattie N. Dixon Community Cupboard, and is the Vice Chair of the Whitpain Township Planning Commission. And those plants he purchased 30 years ago? Still growing strong in his own green space!



PHOTO: COURTESY OF RICK SHORIN



# ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS: Where Curriculum Meets the Outdoors

BY GAIL FARMER

Wissahickon Trails has partnered with Erin McCool of Cool Heron to align our environmental education program with new state-wide education standards. The PA Dept of Education has updated their science curriculum standards to align with the Next Generation Science Standards, which takes an inquiry-based approach to science learning. In other words, students learn about science by using the scientific process to explore and understand questions. This is a very exciting development and reflects evidence-based best practices in science education. Furthermore, the new standards include a domain for “Environmental Literacy and Sustainability” across all grade levels. This domain incorporates essential principles of environmental education organized under the following three core ideas: 1) Agricultural and Environmental Systems and Resources; 2) Environmental Literacy Skills; and 3) Sustainability and Stewardship.

For more than a decade, Wissahickon Trails has been partnering with schools and districts in the watershed to enrich their science curriculum with experiential environmental education. Our recently retired educator, Suzanne Smith-Oscilowski, has taught thousands of area students about wetlands, watersheds, habitats, and more. We are excited to build on Mrs. Oscilowski’s work with the help of Ms. McCool, aligning our program with these new curriculum standards so that we may continue to support our local



PHOTO: SUZANNE SMITH-OSCILOWSKI

schools in environmental learning. Ms. McCool has led environmental education programs for more than two decades, most recently as the Director of Education and Strategic Partnerships at Riverbend Environmental Center. She serves on the PA Environmental Literacy Steering Committee and was involved in helping develop the curriculum standards for Environmental Literacy & Sustainability.



PHOTO: JENN BILBER

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: KEN WOLFE

BY ALEX MCWHORTER



PHOTO: ALEX MCWHORTER

A volunteer since 2019, Ken Wolfe has supported Wissahickon Trails in so many ways. A mainstay at our fundraisers, Ken has helped with quite literally every event we host –

coming early and staying late to ensure that everyone involved has the support they need. He has also become an invaluable volunteer at the Evans-Mumbower Mill where every ask of him has been greeted with curiosity. But the real contribution to the organization has been his infectious work

ethic and unshakably positive attitude. If you have ever worked alongside Ken, he makes you feel like you are part of a team. No matter the task, he creates a sense that you’re completing a job worth doing. It is volunteers like this that make our organization successful, and we are very grateful to Ken for sharing his valuable time and energy. Ken said, *“The combination of volunteering on useful, fun projects and the wonderful people I have worked with at Wissahickon Trails keep me coming back for more! I am grateful for the opportunity to be of service.”* Thank you for all you do, Ken!

## OUR MISSION

We inspire and engage diverse communities of people to protect, steward, and enjoy the land and waterways of the Wissahickon Valley.

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