



# CURRENTS

SPRING/SUMMER 2024 | VOLUME 67, NO. 1

## 5 Preserves, 1 Trail

### Protecting Habitats & Creating a More Connected Wissahickon

BY **MADDY NEFF**

Wissahickon Trails has been working with public and private partners to connect five nature preserves in Whitpain and Whitemarsh Townships through the creation of a single trail system. A newly established trail easement through private property that connects to Willow Lake Farm means that a trail visitor will be able to walk between Armentrout Preserve, Camp Woods, Briar Hill Preserve (which includes Hughes Family and Cheston Family Preserves), Whitpain Township's Prophecy Creek Park, and Willow Lake Farm. In total, this connects 436 acres of land and 9 miles of trails. The land for the last stretch of trail needed to complete the connection is being provided by Ellen Lea and the funds to support its installation were donated by PECO and a private donation in memory of Phil and Barbara Albright.

The "5 Preserves, 1 Trail Initiative" required the acquisition of land, trail easements, and trail construction and enhancement projects. Since 2018, Wissahickon Trails and our partners have preserved 51 additional acres of open space to



Prairie Warbler  
— PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY



Sunrise at Willow Lake Farm — PHOTO: MARGARET RICHDE



Conservation partners gathered at Willow Lake Farm from left to right: Tom Blomstrom (Director of Parks and Recreation, Whitemarsh Township), Fran McCusker (Chair of the Whitemarsh Township Board of Supervisors), Suzanne Ryan (Regional External Affairs Manager, PECO), Joyce Keller (Whitpain Township Board of Supervisors), John Ferro (Conservation Director, Wissahickon Trails), Gail Farmer (Executive Director, Wissahickon Trails), Kristen Haugen (Board Chair, Wissahickon Trails), Ellen Lea

support this effort, acquired two trail easements, built new trails, and invested in enhancements to improve user experience, such as an equestrian bridge and stepping stones across the Prophecy Creek. The open space and trail investments for this initiative were made possible with \$1.7 million in public funding from Whitpain Township, PECO, Montgomery County, and PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and \$2.5 million in private funding from Wissahickon Trails' donors.

"Wissahickon Trails has a long history of successfully bringing together public and private partners to preserve land and protect the habitats and ecosystems that make our communities better places to live, work, and play," said Gail Farmer, Wissahickon Trails' Executive Director. "This 9-mile trail, connecting 5 nature preserves, has been decades in the making and would not have been possible without the willingness of residential property owners, like Ellen Lea and her family, to allow trail users to walk through their property."

Wissahickon Trails will begin work on the trail connector installation and plans to open the trail connection in summer 2024.

PHOTO: EDWARD SWANARIA, JR.



Walk the Wissahickon participants enjoying the new trail connection

# Green Ribbon Trail Reopened at Route 202

BY MADDY NEFF

Last fall, PennDOT completed the three-year project to widen and reconstruct nearly three miles of U.S. 202 from south of Morris Road to Hancock Road in Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd Townships. This project included replacing a bridge over the Wissahickon Creek, which necessitated the closure of that section of the Green Ribbon Trail (near mile marker 3) for the duration of construction.

The new bridge over the Wissahickon Creek was expanded from two to four lanes—a little daunting for pedestrians wishing to cross the road. However, underneath the bridge, there is 10' wide floodplain bench that connects the Green Ribbon Trail. After construction wrapped up, Wissahickon Trails staff rerouted the Green Ribbon Trail on either side of the bridge to connect with the walkway and made safety improvements. This collaborative effort means that hikers and horseback riders can now safely travel underneath Route 202 when visiting the Green Ribbon Trail. There are two guided hikes from the trailhead to Route 202 planned this year; visit [wissahickontrails.org](http://wissahickontrails.org) for details.

## Designing Wetlands

Just before the trail passes under Route 202, it winds through a reconstructed wetland that PennDOT improved both for stormwater control and wildlife habitat. What had been a wetland channel with little native plant cover is now covered with native shrubs and blooming plants that are favored by pollinators, and that also help to slow, hold, and filter stormwater before it reaches the Wissahickon Creek. Large boulders were added to the wetland to allow trail users to keep their feet dry when walking through, and to help limit habitat disturbance.

# Outdoors for All: Improving Trail Accessibility Update

BY MARGARET ROHDE



PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

TAAC member Nancy Baxter with Freya at Willow Lake Farm

In our last newsletter, we shared that as part of our commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility we would be working with a consultant and listening to the disability community to understand what access barriers exist at our preserves, what information people need to know before visiting a trail, and what we can do to make nature more accessible. We are excited to provide an update!

Over the course of three weeks last fall, consultant Freya McGregor of Access Birding, LLC, visited each of our trails and preserves to assess them and put together a report of recommendations for access improvements, along with informative trail descriptions and suggestions for a rating system, wayfinding, mapping, and website improvements. Staff joined many of the assessments to learn how to see the trail through a different,

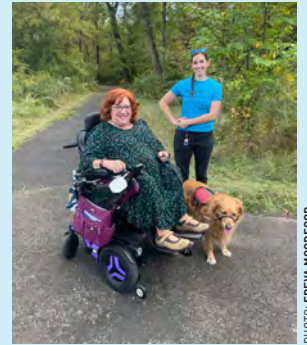


PHOTO: FREYA MCGREGOR

TAAC member Wendy Elliot-Vandivier and Margaret at Piszek Preserve

more inclusive lens, and to gain a thorough understanding of the reasons behind each recommendation.

As part of the project, funded by Montgomery County, staff met with members of our Trail Accessibility Advisory Council (TAAC) – a group of people living with disabilities and caretakers for disabled people – at different preserves so that we could hear and observe



PHOTO: FREYA MCGREGOR

TAAC members Emery and Sam at Crossways Preserve

their direct experience of our trails. These meetings were incredibly valuable in helping us know what access needs we should be considering, and we are so grateful to the TAAC for sharing their insights with us.

Moving forward, we are committed to making sure Freya's recommendations don't just sit on a shelf, but are used to guide our work and improve our trails and preserves this year and into the future – and for as many people as possible.



# 2023 BY THE NUMBERS

**1,199** community members financially supported our mission through annual fund donations, monthly giving, and designated gifts.

**20** trail improvement projects completed by staff and volunteers.

**12** corporate volunteer groups devoted their time and energy to bettering their local environment.

**111** Green Ribbon Circle donors provided nearly \$26,000 through monthly donations to support our core work.

**374** native trees and shrubs were planted at Camp Woods to improve understory and create habitat for wildlife.

**80** nestlings lived in nesting boxes on our preserves until they were ready to strike out on their own.

**4,264** new feet of trail created to connect Briar Hill and the Hughes Family Preserve to Camp Woods and Armentrout Preserve.

**131** corporations, foundations, local businesses, and local organizations supported our work.

**22** residential green stormwater planters and projects were installed through Stream Smart House Calls and are estimated to keep approximately 411,000 gallons of stormwater runoff from entering the Sandy Run every year.

**21** miles of trail and 10 nature preserves assessed by an accessibility consultant who provided recommendations for improving access and inclusion.

**591** total volunteers devoted 4,570 hours of their time across breadth of the organization's efforts.

**47** community science volunteers submitted 428 data reports on the plants, wildlife, and waterways of the Wissahickon watershed.

**105** birds studied at our MAPS bird banding station at Crossways Preserve, including a 7-year-old female red-winged blackbird, originally banded there in 2016.

**2,759** community members deepened their connection to the natural world by engaging with us through our events, nature programs, lectures, and hikes.

**6,400** square feet of the Four Mills Barn renovated for flood resilience, public programming, improved accessibility, and staff work space. And 1 heartfelt "thank you" to the 100+ corporate and individual donors who contributed to the renovation.



## DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

# Tex Mex Connection Restaurant

BY LISA HANSELL

*A man walks into a bar...*

That man was a neighbor and regular customer of the Tex Mex Connection restaurant in North Wales and a supporter of Wissahickon Trails. Jane Keyes, Tex Mex Connection owner, was looking for a worthy organization to be the beneficiary of the Tex Mex 5k Race. That loyal patron suggested Wissahickon Trails. Since this conversation 24 years ago, Tex Mex Connection has generously donated over \$1 million to support our local environment, the trails, and waterways of the Wissahickon Valley.

The family-owned Tex Mex Connection is a stand out in the restaurant industry. More than just delicious food and drinks, they prioritize respect for staff and customers, community support, and environmentalism. In addition to their support of Wissahickon Trails, they donate to dozens of local organizations such as North Wales Police, North Wales Library, and Boys & Girls Club. Their commitment to the environment is remarkable: they are certified as a 3-star green restaurant, have full scale recycling, and are 100% landfill free.

We are grateful for all that Jane Keyes, her family, and Tex Mex Connection do for Wissahickon Trails and the community at large. We hope to see you at the **Tex Mex 5k Race** this summer (June 26, 2024).



## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT DEB SLATER

BY ALEX MCWHORTER



Deb Slater first volunteered with Wissahickon Trails in 2011 on a Serve the Preserve Project. As volunteer opportunities expanded within the organization, she became more engaged through her work with the Conservation Crew and the Creek Watch program. She has since become a stalwart at events and volunteer projects, and we want to thank her specifically for her help with Walk the Wissahickon!

Deb likes the diversity of volunteer initiatives where she can either focus on group projects with a defined goal, or on individual contributions that are more flexible. She believes the knowledge she has gained from volunteering and attending Wissahickon Trails' programs has increased her enjoyment of exploring the outdoors – be it the birds, the bugs, and yes, even the distinctive skunk cabbage.

With trail access more abundant than ever, Deb never misses an opportunity to take a short (or long) walk to unwind in nature. According to her, "I like projects where I can return over the years to monitor their progress. Planting trees is a great visual reminder of successes and challenges."

We are so grateful for Deb and all that she has brought – and continues to bring – to the organization!

## MANAGING YOUR FLOWER GARDEN YEAR-ROUND FOR NATIVE BEES

ARTICLE & PHOTO BY KRISTY MORLEY



When should you cut back old flower stems in your garden? If you want to encourage stem nesting native bees, stubble should be left for at least 2 years.

### LATE WINTER – EARLY SPRING

- ✿ Cut back any remaining dead flower stalks, leaving stem stubble at varying heights of 8"-12".
- ✿ Older cut stems from previous years may contain bee pupa that have overwintered, so leave them standing and watch for emerging bees from spring to fall.

### SUMMER

- ☀ New foliage growth will hide old stems, which native bees will use for nests – look for mud or leaf caps inside the stems to confirm their use.
- ☀ Leaving a few patches of bare dirt will encourage ground-nesting species like the Unequal Cellophane Bee to nest.

### FALL

- 🍂 Add fallen leaves to your garden areas. Bumble bee queens as well as moths and butterflies can use them as winter protection.

### WINTER

- ❄ Leave dead flower stems standing, as they often contain seeds that birds will eat.

**Tip:** Good native flower species include joe-pye weed, elderberry, wild bergamot, and mountain mint, but there are many others. Try trimming a small section to see what you might already have in your garden.

# YOUR COMMUNITY AT WORK



**10K Preserve Run**

Nearly 100 runners and 27 volunteers braved a brisk November morning to take part in our all-new 10k Preserve Run. Long-time volunteer Harm Scherpbier pitched the new route as a way to highlight new and existing trails which interconnect our preserves. Featuring 6 different preserves, the race route showcased a variety of habitats including sprawling meadows, old-growth forest, and dense successional woodlands.

PHOTO: JAMIE STEWART

**Mill Open Houses & Education Program**

Dedicated volunteers are to thank for the ongoing stewardship of the Evans-Mumbower Mill. Throughout the fall, themed open houses and education programs welcomed over 600 people to experience 17th century technology at work.

PHOTO: ERIN MCCOOL

**Fairwold Planting at Camp Woods**

Students and teachers from Fairwold Academy came out in early November to help staff plant 50 native trees and shrubs at Camp Woods. The planting site was along the Mayapple Trail where trees had fallen and opened up the area for new growth.

PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

**Tree Maintenance at Sandy Run**

A TreeVitalize planting along the Sandy Run in Abington was being overtaken by nuisance vines until 7 volunteers swooped in to remove vines and repair tree protections. These saplings are in much better shape and will continue protecting the Sandy Run!

PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

**Volunteer-led Hike**

In October, a hike showcasing the Haines Run was conducted by longtime supporters Charlene & Keith Bance. We are thrilled with the diversity of our volunteers' contributions in 2023!

PHOTO: KEITH BANCE

**Eagle Scout Planting at Camp Woods**

In late October, Eagle Scout Caleb Han and his Troop planted 150 trees and shrubs at Camp Woods. His project helped Wissahickon Trails further our goal of converting a field to forest to create more and better wildlife habitat.

PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

**Winter Salt Watch**

This is our 5th year of Salt Watch in the Wissahickon as partners with Izaak Walton League of America. Volunteers use chloride strips to test sites throughout the Wissahickon before and after snow storms to better understand the impact of road salts on our waterways.

PHOTO: WLA

**Maple Sugaring Festival**

From parking to pancakes, our annual Maple Sugaring Festival was a sweet success thanks to a coordinated effort of 46 volunteers!

PHOTO: JAMIE STEWART

**Capgemini Service Project at Armentrout**

In October, employees from Capgemini came out to Armentrout Preserve to help complete a trail project as part of their Capgemini CARES day.

PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

Our Executive Director, Gail Farmer been selected to serve on the **Sustainability and Climate Change Advisory Committee** for Montgomery County. This committee is geared-up to develop innovative, actionable strategies for a greener, more resilient future. With deep expertise in sustainability and climate action, members are tasked with providing meaningful recommendations to Commissioners Neil Makhija and Jamila Winder to help MontCo protect our environment and ensure a sustainable legacy for generations to come.



# Board Of Directors News

BY **MADDY NEFF**

Wissahickon Trails' Board of Directors is comprised of a group of dedicated volunteers, each bringing a different perspective and expertise that helps the organization grow and position itself for the future.

## Let's Welcome...



PHOTO COURTESY: JOHN HAN

### **JOHN S. HAN**

John is a trial Attorney at High Swartz LLP and has 30 years of public service as a Military Trial Judge for the U.S. Navy, federal prosecutor for the U.S. Department of Justice, Assistant District Attorney, and defense counsel. John serves on the Board of Directors for the Montgomery Bar Association, Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation, and Montgomery County Community College Foundation. By strategically leveraging his leadership and community building skills and experience he plans to assist Wissahickon Trails in successfully carrying out its mission.

## Recognizing Years of Service



PHOTO COURTESY: PETE HOSKINS

### **DUANE D. DEANER**

Duane served on the Board, and still serves on the Mill, Finance, Gala, Education, and Impact Committees. After completing his term on the Board, we're happy to share that he isn't going far—Duane will now join the Emeritus Board. A dedicated volunteer, you can find Duane hard at work at many programs and events, including the Maple Sugaring Festival, Evans-Mumbower Mill Open Houses, Creek Clean Up, education programs, and monitoring salamanders. We thank Duane for his tireless support and can-do spirit and look forward to continuing to work together.



### **ALEXANDER L. (PETE) HOSKINS**

Pete served on the Board, Governance, and DEI Committees. With nearly 40 years of experience as an executive leader and board volunteer in public and private multidisciplinary organizations, he shared his expertise and insight with Wissahickon Trails. Pete spent his time with Wissahickon Trails developing a deeper understanding of the complex human relationships affecting our watershed and we are appreciative of his commitment to this work. We wish him the best on his municipal work in his new home in the Adirondacks.



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS






## Rain in the Forecast

### **MANAGING HAZARDOUS TREES & TRAIL SAFETY**

BY **MADDY NEFF**

In recent years, the frequency and intensity of storms has dramatically increased, making dead and dying trees even more of a risk to trail visitors and preserve neighbors. When possible, we clear downed trees and limbs from the trails ourselves and often leave sections of cut up trees to become habitat. Not every tree can be safely handled by staff and volunteers, and that's when we hire professional tree services. We're grateful for the donors who supported our 2023 Giving Tuesday campaign to help offset the growing cost of managing hazardous trees, as well as fund the replacement of lost trees. And shoutout to Davey Tree for donating one full day of tree work to keep our trails safe.

#### **If you're planning to visit our trails with precipitation in the forecast, consider a few factors:**

-  The Wissahickon Creek is prone to flash flooding conditions and water may continue to rise even after it stops raining.
-  Stepping stone crossings may be underwater.
-  Traffic on muddy trails makes them susceptible to erosion.
-  High winds and saturated soil increase the risk of branches and trees falling.
-  The USGS has a stream monitoring station in the Wissahickon Creek near Fort Washington State Park and you can find real time information online about stream height during storms.

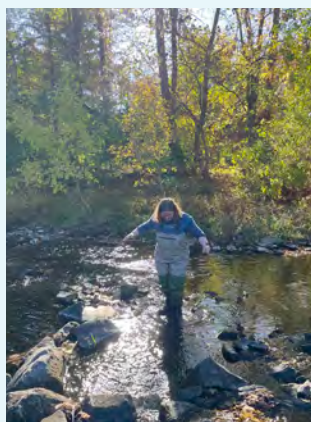


PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT Getting Her Feet Wet

BY **ERIN LANDIS**

Emmy Traband, a Delaware Valley University student majoring in Environmental Science, volunteered with us for the last 5 months through the DelVal Experiential Education program. Emmy contributed to so many projects - water sampling, salamander monitoring, habitat assessments, data analysis, and much more. We are very appreciative for the time she spent with us, and look forward to the great things she'll do next!

# Managing Stormwater at Home

BY ERIN LANDIS

Stormwater has huge impacts on our local streams and on our communities. In green and wooded landscapes, almost all rainfall is absorbed into the ground, but extensive development in suburbia and the cities causes much more stormwater to become runoff during storms. Too much stormwater carries pollution to streams, erodes streambanks, and causes big fluctuations in stream level and temperatures, all of which are harmful to aquatic life. And stormwater does not only impact stream health - it can also cause big problems for people too - stormwater causes flooding and can damage infrastructure like bridges.



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

## TIPS TO MANAGE STORMWATER:

- Install a rain barrel at a downspout to reuse stormwater for gardens! Check if your local municipality has a rain barrel program.
- Indigenous plants that evolved in this region have deep root systems to absorb water and can withstand all weather conditions like droughts. Look for 'native plants' for your yard for everything from small perennials to trees (plus these support birds and butterflies too!)
- "Green" your lawn and spaces to mimic natural or undeveloped spaces.
- Pay attention to local zoning and development, stormwater ordinances, and other topics that might affect your municipality and don't be afraid to speak up!
- Join your municipality's Environmental Advisory Council or Planning & Zoning Board to participate in shaping your community.



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

# Downspout Planters: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO STORMWATER

BY ERIN LANDIS



PHOTO: ERIN LANDIS

In the fall, volunteers helped us build downspout planters, or small contained gardens that attach to downspouts which water the plants. These 15 planters installed at residential homes will attract pollinators while managing stormwater during heavy storms - reducing peak flows to nearby streams (otherwise known as floods!) and keeping pollution out of waterways. Eight residential rain gardens were also installed this year, thanks to funding through the PA Department of Environmental Protection's Growing Greener program. If you'd like to learn more about downspout planters, check out [pwdraincheck.org](http://pwdraincheck.org) or contact us.

While these individual approaches may seem small, movement towards prioritizing environmental benefits into our residential landscapes is critical. These projects can go far towards solving stormwater problems on a property or in a neighborhood, and they can go even further towards modeling stewardship of the environment to neighbors!

## 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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**10K PRESERVE RUN**



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