



Photo Courtesy of Joe Endy

Middle Creek in Motion

Keeping you updated through our seasons

FALL 2020

"It's the first day of autumn! A time of hot chocolatey mornings, and toasty marshmallow evenings, and, best of all, leaping into leaves!"

- Winnie the Pooh

Fall is a season of change and preparation for wildlife. Some, like songbirds, are following the food and weather south for the winter, leaving backyard feeders to overwintering residents. Others, like white-tailed deer, are foraging on calorie-dense acorns to pack on pounds that will sustain them during a winter outside. Still others, like black bear, are gorging themselves in preparation for hibernation. At Middle Creek, staff are busy preparing for the start of Fall hunting seasons and closing visitor attractions like the tour road for the season. Volunteers, like Anne Sherman, are cleaning out the 200+ eastern bluebird nesting boxes on the property so that they are ready for a new batch of nestlings in the Spring. In this newsletter, you'll meet Anne, explore the history of Middle Creek as the Game Commission celebrates its 125th anniversary, get an update on habitat happenings, and learn about a rare recent visitor!

Celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the Pennsylvania Game Commission: The History of Middle Creek's Waterfowl Hunting Heritage

For many visitors, it is hard to imagine Middle Creek's landscape without its iconic 360-acre lake and thousands of acres of wetland and grassland habitats. However, many long-time users can recall when this feature of the Furnace Hill's valley was instead peppered with homesteads - some dating back to pre-civil war - donned with the typical agricultural structure that many neighboring properties still have. Why does Middle Creek look like it does today? The simple answer: the Canada Goose.

In 1935, the state's first waterfowl refuge, the Pymatuning Reservoir (located in Crawford County on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border), was created to help protect and propagate waterfowl that had been decimated by non-regulated hunting. Game Commission staff transplanted Mississippi Flyway Canada geese to create a new resident population and within 30 years, the population was robust enough to be opened for a highly regulated waterfowl hunting opportunity that could not be found anywhere else in Pennsylvania.

The Canada goose focused hunts at Pymatuning were highly successful and popular but Pymatuning was a distant outpost for a large portion of Pennsylvania's hunters living in the state's southeastern counties. At the same time, the Project 70 Land Acquisition and Borrowing Act was enacted in June of 1964. Project 70 permitted the state to issue bonds for the purchase of lands for public parks, reservoirs, and other conservation, recreation, and historical preservation purposes. The act also permitted acquisition of lands by eminent domain. In 1965, With support from local hunters, conservationists, and recreationists, the Game Commission started creating the "Pymatuning of the East" which we know today as Middle Creek. The agency received \$5 million in financial backing from Project 70 and received funding from Project 500 and the recently initiated federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Middle Creek plan called for 63 families to be displaced and Governor William Scranton granted the agency eminent domain powers to acquire these properties. Many landowners willingly sold their properties while others refused. Through condemnation proceedings, and finally eminent domain, land acquisition was completed in 1972.

Converting the old homesteads and agricultural land into waterfowl habitat took planning and spanned several years. However, the land and its sub-surface were well suited to accommodate the transformation. Properties were razed and fields contoured. Dikes were built to

create or fortify wetlands. Farm ponds were customized, and other small dams and potholes were built. To establish a Canada goose population at Middle Creek as soon as possible, two holding pens were constructed and "stocked" with 15 pairs of Canada geese from Pymatuning. By 1971, Middle Creek's nucleus of lands had been secured and construction on the main lake and dam moved forward. Water flowed over its spillway on January 30, 1972.



Aerial of construction of the dam at Middle Creek.

Upon its completion, Middle Creek still faced uncertainty. There were no guarantees it would develop a resident Canada goose population, or that it would be a significant migration site for waterfowl to use. It was a "Field of Dreams" approach to waterfowl conservation: "If you build it, they will come." Of course, Middle Creek would provide recreation, such as fishing, birdwatching, photography, canoeing, hunting, and hiking, as well as serve local educators and provide conservation programming for Pennsylvanians at Middle Creek's newly built Visitors Center. But there were no assurances that Middle Creek would ever be the thriving "Pymatuning East" it was envisioned to become. Still, Middle Creek had a lot going for it. With its reshaped lands, exclusion of traffic and people from much of the area, nesting structures and an emphasis to further improve habitat, Middle Creek started to attract a diversity of wildlife, not just waterfowl. Goose numbers continued to increase at Middle Creek while populations statewide also continued to increase. The Game Commission also trapped and transferred residents to areas deficient of geese, many of which found their new home at Middle Creek.

Regulated Canada goose hunts were held at Middle Creek beginning in 1974 when numbers were stable enough to sustain limited hunter harvest. At this time, Middle Creek and Pymatuning were vital to help build populations high enough throughout the state to sustain

harvest. The Atlantic Flyway Canada goose population continued to grow steadily through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, a trend that would eventually require intervention. In 1995, an annual resident Canada goose hunting season was established statewide in Pennsylvania.

Middle Creek's improving habitat and growing population of resident Canada geese helped lure Atlantic Flyway transients to its waters. With each passing year, more and more Canada geese and ducks began to utilize Middle Creek, especially during spring and fall migrations. Migrant tundra swans made an appearance for the first time in 1976, while snow geese began appearing at about the same time. Both tundra swans and snow geese slowly adjusted their route north to include Middle Creek. Snow goose numbers continue to increase annually. To date, the largest number of snow goose recorded peaked at 200,000. Tundra swans also increased annually and now peak between 3,000 to 5,000 birds annually. Other waterfowl species including over 20 species of ducks can be found at Middle Creek throughout the spring and fall migrations. Waterfowl are not the only species that have benefitted from the creation of Middle Creek. Over 280 species of birds have been seen at Middle Creek over the years!

Of course, Middle Creek was developed with an eye toward helping Canada geese establish residency in Pennsylvania. With help from Pymatuning in the west and trap-and-transfer in the state's heartland in the 1970s, the Canada goose's comeback in Pennsylvania exceeded expectations and therefore so did Middle Creek. Whether you are admiring a tundra swan with your binoculars in the winter, taking photos of a bobolink in the spring, or standing atop of the Millstone Trail appreciating the vista and view of the lake, remember, it all started because of the Canada goose!



First group of hunters to check in for Middle Creek's first controlled hunt on Oct. 12, 1974

A New Face in a Familiar Place

The Middle Creek tour road is popular with diverse recreational users, including wildlife watchers that log their sightings in citizen science mobile apps. This group often spends hours watching for birds and other wildlife, keeping an eye for subtle movements in the brush, and documenting their species observations at Middle Creek. This is helpful for managers who cannot be everywhere at once!

In July, an alert birder listening to the warm and cool season grass fields just before 'Stop 3' on the tour road heard an unfamiliar song among the familiar trees and grasses blowing in the wind. It was a series of three or four sharp chirps followed by a trill. Eventually, the small brown bird producing the song flitted in the grass and the birder realized he was seeing something special and rare: a sedge wren!



Photo courtesy of Audubon.

The sedge wren is a small non-descript brown bird. It has a finely streaked crown with “peachy” colored flanks and a streaked back, banded wings, and usually holds its tail upright like most other wren species. The sedge wren is one of 16 endangered bird species in Pennsylvania and is considered an “accidental” species at Middle Creek. That means it has been recorded just three or fewer times since records began!

Spotting a sedge wren at Middle Creek on its own is a big deal but continued observation revealed the bird was carrying nesting material and a second sedge wren was also confirmed. Based on behavioral observations, Middle Creek staff believe the birds were attempting to nest. While mid-August might seem late for birds to be nesting, this behavior is consistent with sedge wren’s breeding strategies.

The sighting was so rare that the birder reported it to the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Rare Bird Alert System and also immediately logged the finding in [eBird](#), an online database of bird observations providing scientists, researchers and amateur naturalists with real-time data about bird distribution and abundance. Word flies fast in the birding community and shortly after the original sighting, many birders flocked to the tour road observe the bird in its habitat.

Middle Creek staff is grateful to the visitors reporting their unique findings because it often informs habitat management decisions. In this instance, the grass field in which the sedge wrens were nesting is typically cut between August 15th and September 15th to keep it in early successional habitat. Mid-August falls well after traditional bird breeding season ends. Fortunately, because of the observations of citizen scientists, this endangered species was able to nest at Middle Creek without disturbance. While we hope that the sedge wrens return next year, only time will tell. In the meantime, keep an eye out while visiting Middle Creek. Even if it is the same corner you have passed hundreds of times, you never know what surprising wildlife might be waiting to be discovered!

Middle Creek Tour Road Closed for the Season.

Each year the Middle Creek tour road closes on or around October 1st to provide hunting access for the upcoming season and help maintain an off-limits propagation area to ensure suitable wildlife habitat. The tour road will re-open on March 1st, 2021.

Watching the Fledglings Fly

Eastern bluebird parents call to their nestlings to encourage first flight. The moment the young spread their wings and leave the nest they become fledglings, still dependent on their parents for food but exploring the world outside their cavity homes for the first time. During Spring and Summer, restless bluebird nestlings, still as much fluff as feathers, can be observed chirping and poking their heads from nearly 260 bluebird boxes at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area. It is also Anne Sherman's favorite time of year to monitor bluebirds.

Anne has deep roots in the area. Born in nearby Akron, she spent her own fledgling years hiking, fishing, accompanying her dad to the local sportsmen's club and, in the winter, ice-skating at Middle Creek before it transformed into the globally recognized Important Bird and Biodiversity Area it is today. Her family albums include pictures of the Middle Creek dam under construction, the lake filling in, and the opening of the Visitors Center. Today, Anne is making her own mark on Middle Creek's history as the lead volunteer coordinator of the Bluebird Project and as a part-time employee who has educated hundreds of area students on wildlife and its conservation.

Like many members of Middle Creek's dedicated volunteer community, Anne experienced an epiphany that she wanted to give back to the place she deeply cherished. Her sign was a literal sign, specifically one seeking volunteers to the Middle Creek Bluebird Project ("Project"). The Bluebird Project, established in 1998 by former biology teacher and Middle Creek volunteer manager Dick Brown, was one of many statewide initiatives to reverse the near decimation of eastern bluebird populations in the 1960s due to land use changes, the application of certain pesticides, and competition from invasive species.

At Middle Creek, the Project's conservation efforts have yielded impressive results and Anne has been there from the early years, monitoring, coordinating, training new volunteers (most regular monitors started as substitutes), and submitting the season's data to Cornell School of Ornithology and the PA Bluebird Society. Today, nearly 260 cavity nesting boxes ideal for eastern bluebirds and tree swallows dot 15 routes --- and are monitored by approximately 30 volunteers.

This success is a true team effort! Volunteers meet at the Spring Kick-off Meeting to share excitement for the upcoming monitoring season, which runs March to August 1st. Volunteers meet again at an end-of-season picnic to share experiences and plan for the following year. During the off-season, Hal Hopper, a retired shop teacher, organizes box modifications and new installations. Children of all ages (with parents) and retirees can volunteer and join the 8 original volunteer monitors: Ken Barshinger, Bill Seifert, Jon and Julia Walker, Ellen and John Rupp and Fred and Maureen Light. These early volunteers welcomed Anne into monitoring and shared their knowledge, just as they continue to do with the new volunteers!

Guided by the original Project monitors, Anne tackled her first assignment in 2000 with Willow Point Trail boxes. During her two decades of service, Anne has monitored just about every bluebird box at Middle Creek and observed hundreds of nesting families. Anne's contributions to Middle Creek extend beyond the Project. Equipped with degrees in education and early childhood development from Clarion University and a Montessori degree, Anne works part-time at Middle Creek. She has led hundreds of students on guided hikes of the Conservation, Willow Point, and Spicebush trails; taught about Pennsylvania's 480 bird and animal species, and; helped create "milkweed blizzards" in the fields next to the Visitors Center to bring pollinator lessons to life.

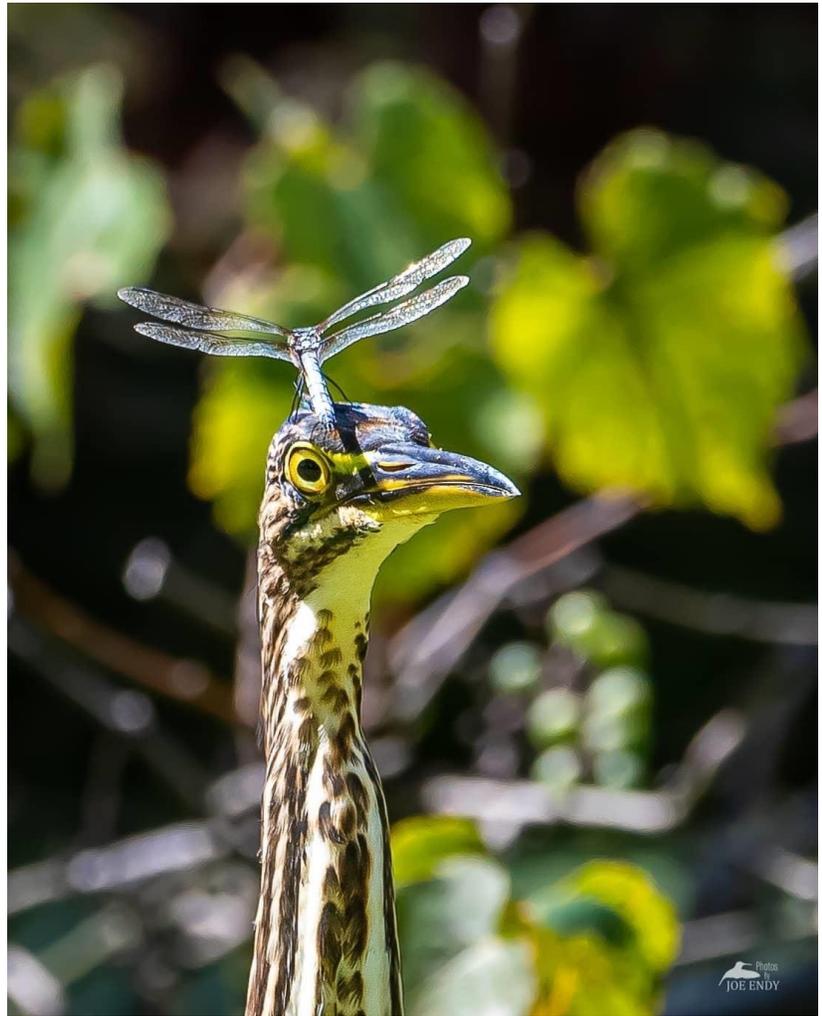
As a current and former educator and grandmother to 4 granddaughters, Anne is delighted to see a place deeply rooted in her family's history become a hub for place-based environmental education in the region. Leading a hike through brilliant Fall foliage on the Spicebush Trail or new Spring meadows, she will often hear one student say to another, "Wow, I've never been on a hike. I love it!" She does not jot down these notes in her monitor book the way she might when nestling bluebirds leave their nest, but she is thrilled all the same to be there when something new happens in their world for the first time.



Middle Creek Community Photo Feature

Middle Creek is blessed with a diverse group of users and wildlife enthusiasts, including a thriving photography community. Each newsletter, we feature choice photos from local photographers that capture the season and sense of place that make Middle Creek a unique destination in the region. Interested in connecting with fellow wildlife photographers? Visit the Middle Creek Photographers Facebook page and ask to join!

Green Heron at Middle Creek Photos courtesy of Joe Endy



Photos by
JOE ENDY

Meant to Bee: Middle Creek Contributes to Pollinator Partnership Initiative

Pollinator habitat is vital for native wildlife to thrive. That's why Middle Creek habitat managers are partnering with Project Wingspan, an initiative to support imperiled native pollinators and the habitat they depend on. Specifically, Middle Creek managers are helping increase monarch butterfly and rusty patched bumble bee habitat by supporting, securing, and enhancing over 15,000 acres of pollinator habitat. Project Wingspan is overseen by the Pollinator Partnership whose mission is to promote the health of pollinators, critical to food and ecosystems, through conservation, education, and research.

Monarch butterflies have declined by 90% over the past two decades and Project Wingspan hopes to help reverse that trend by working with public lands such as Middle Creek and private land stewards. The 9-state target region includes Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Ecologists from the Pollinator Partnership requested the help of the Pennsylvania Game Commission to assist with the collection of local native wildflower seeds within designated collection zones. All seed collections are geospatially tagged, cleaned, and inspected, and then provided to support habitat creation and enhancement projects within their state and zone of origin. Long-term habitat will be secured through obtaining written agreements from program participants to manage native habitat areas utilizing Best Management Practices for a minimum of 5 years. Interested in volunteering or applying as a private land steward?

Check out Project Wingspan's website at www.pollinator.org/wingspan.



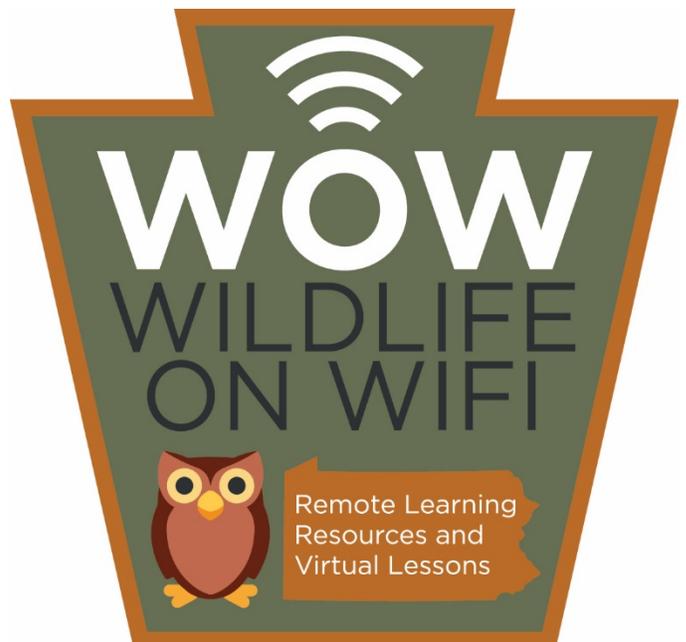
Milkweed pod.

Middle Creek Staff Win National Award for *Wildlife on WiFi* Education Program

The Game Commission's new *Wildlife on WiFi (WoW)* program was named winner of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' 2020 Stephen Kellert Award. The program team includes two Middle Creek staff members: manager and wildlife education specialist Lauren Ferreri and environmental education specialist Joe Monfort. The Stephen Kellert Award recognizes a distinguished individual or group effort for outstanding service in advancing connections between humans and the natural world to all peoples in a diverse and inclusive manner.

Launched during the state's original stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, *WoW* connects Pennsylvanians to their state's wildlife from anywhere. *WoW* provides innovative remote learning opportunities, virtual lessons and online educational resources about wildlife and its conservation. Since its April 2020 launch, *WoW* has registered approximately 40,000 user engagements, including downloads of *WoW* lessons and activities, views of videos and story time readings, live virtual lessons and "From the Field" webinars that connect registrants directly to Game Commission experts.

To check out the 50+ remote learning and DIY activities and lessons, visit www.pgc.gov/education/virtualllearning or to schedule a virtual lesson, email wildlifeonwifi@pa.gov.



COVID-19 Update: Staying Safe on State Game Lands and at Middle Creek

The Middle Creek Visitors Center remains closed in response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). This closure applies to the Visitors Center only. All other Middle Creek public access areas and trails are open for public use and recreation. While enjoying Middle Creek during this time, please observe all appropriate precautions. Game Commission managers continue to monitor the situation and will communicate any changes on the Game Commission website (link below), on Middle Creek property signs, and in this newsletter.

For more information, please visit the [Pennsylvania Game Commission's coronavirus-cancellations bulletin](#).



While engaging in recreational activities is permitted during COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, please practice these additional guidelines when enjoying the outdoors.



Do not recreate in large groups.



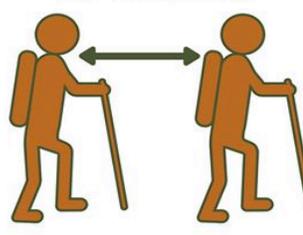
If a parking lot is full, please go to another lot or trail. Do not make your own parking.



Carry your trash in and out.



Avoid touching your eyes, nose & mouth. Cough or sneeze into a tissue or elbow.



Maintain a 6 foot distance when passing others.



Be aware of hunting seasons. Wear orange.

Contact Us

Have a question or comment about Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area? We would love to hear from you!
Please contact us at middlecreek@pa.gov