



Somerset County Conservancy A Charitable Trust

www.somersetcountyconservancy.org

Newsletter

Spring 2024

President's Message Spring 2024

Jeff Payne



Many exciting activities are happening with your Somerset County Conservancy. We have had many events since our last newsletter including our annual banquet featuring a talk on controlled burns by Sgt. Travis Anderson of the PA Game Commission. Outings included a winter walk/tree id, waterfowl id, mushroom culturing, fern identification and frog walks. We have birding walks, spider identification, spring wildflowers and a skulls/bones/and other nature finds show and tell planned. Please watch for emails and our website announcing these events.

The Education Committee has a busy spring planned with at least eight classroom visits for our stream macroinvertebrate and water quality workshops. We are finally back to pre-Covid numbers of students with more activities being contemplated for the future. Giving kids, some of whom have little outdoor experience, the opportunity to learn about streams and nature is one of our core commitments.

The Board of Directors is busy working on an overall management plan for KRNA and planning for future improvements. We are also purchasing some new equipment to make maintenance of our 646 acres a bit easier. We look forward to having interns this summer to help with the upkeep.

Our membership drive is going well but we would like to see even more people joining and being a part of sustaining and growing this organization. We do not receive any government operating funds. We want to do our best to keep the property and events open to all. It is a bit discouraging when talking to hikers and hunters at KRNA to find that many are not members or donating. As members, I would encourage all of us to invite others to join – they will get the newsletters, invitations to the picnic and annual dinner and the satisfaction of knowing they are an important part of this fantastic organization!

Our KRNA endowment is slowly growing. We are able to take approximately \$400 a month towards the maintenance costs of Kimberly Run Natural Area from this fund. As we grow this fund we will hopefully be able to accomplish and maintain even more projects at our Natural Area. We welcome gifts directed towards this long term plan. Please consider an outright donation or include the Somerset County Conservancy in your estate plans.

Kimberly Run Natural Area Update

By Jeff Payne

Improvements and upkeep continue on our KRNA. Winter brings ice and wind and the inevitable tree blowdowns. When this happens in the woods, it provides new habitat on the ground and opens a gap in the canopy allowing light to reach the forest floor and stimulate new plant and tree growth. When the tree happens to fall across a trail or road, however, it needs to be removed and this means either calling in our hard-working volunteers or hiring a professional tree service for the more difficult tangles. If you are hiking and come across a new blowdown, you can let us know at mail@somersetconservancy.org (or on the FB page). Please be patient while we get it taken care of and please avoid hiking on the high wind days.



New projects are occurring on the Menser addition. An extension of the woods trail has been laid out for construction this summer. Trees and shrubs have been planted along field edges and the new wetlands. Several acres of invasive Bush Honeysuckle and Autumn Olive shrub have been removed and wildflowers are being planted by Scouting troops and volunteers. Bluebird boxes have been cleaned, new boxes installed and a new Duck Box in the wetlands had a hen Wood Duck sticking her head out a couple weeks later! We are also exploring, with the help of

the Fish & Wildlife Foundation and Penn West Universities, the possibility of constructing a larger wetland across Menser Road next year. Last year's wetland project has already attracted Wood Frogs, Spring Peepers, American Toads and Solitary Sandpipers. Please explore the trails and consider volunteering for one of our work parties.

Help Our Facebook Page Grow!



We work hard to keep our Facebook page current, but your assistance is appreciated! Please feel free to post your photos and/or stories on our timeline.

Let's do all we can to spread the word about the Somerset County Conservancy and its accomplishments!

Water Quality & Macroinvertebrates

By Pam Diesel



Do you know if your stream is healthy? Looking at the macroinvertebrates and chemical parameters of your stream can tell you the water quality of your stream. Water quality is a measure of water's suitability to be used for a specific purpose such as fishing.

Macroinvertebrates can be placed in three groups. Group 1 are pollution sensitive organisms found in good quality water. These organisms are mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies, gilled snails, dobsonflies, and riffle beetles.



Group 2 organisms are somewhat pollution tolerant and are found in good or fair quality water. Example organisms are dragonfly nymphs, damselfly nymphs, crayfish, crane fly larvae, beetle larvae and sowbugs.

Group 3 organisms are pollution tolerant but can live in any quality water. Aquatic worms, leeches, blackfly larvae and midge fly larva.

Other indicators of water quality are the amounts of dissolved oxygen, alkalinity, acidity, pH, nitrates, phosphates, and temperature. An example of a chemical test is alkalinity. Alkalinity is the quantitative capacity of the water to neutralize acidity in the stream. Higher levels of alkalinity are needed to buffer the acidic rainfall in the north east.

We have found in our past analysis of Kimberly Run that it is a healthy stream with good chemical factors and many level 1 organisms like mayflies.

Mushroom Foray

By Scott Bastian

Mr. Dan O'Brien and Dr. Jeff Territo, both of the Central Pennsylvania Mushroom Club, visited the grounds of Kimberly Run Natural Area to host and lead a mushroom foray on Saturday, October 7. The weather was a little

cool and moist, but the gathered group of 27 participants all agreed that they had a great outing: we gathered and identified more than 40 species of fungus. After an easy walk in the woods, Dan and Jeff had us bring our specimens to the cottage where they were spread out on the tables for inspection and final identifications. There is no doubt that the Conservancy will want to repeat this sort of activity again sometime soon. Many thanks to our new friends from CPMC!



Waterfowl Identification Outing

By Jeff Payne



The Conservancy hosted a waterfowl identification outing on March 9, 2024 at Somerset Lake. Migration is always highly dependent on weather and this is especially true for waterfowl. This season we did not get freeze up until mid-January and actually had very good local movements of southbound birds up until January 16, then ice melted by the third week of February and ducks and geese started back north. March 9 was a cold and rainy day and 11 folks braved the weather for the event.

Even though the hoped for fallout of large flocks of birds did not occur we saw 12 species of waterfowl and one gull species. All participants appreciated the roofed pavilion and fishing platform constructed at Somerset Lake by the Conservancy's Somerset Lake Action Committee which helped keep us a little dry.

The following birds were sighted: Canada Goose; Mallard; American Wigeon; Gadwall; Wood Duck; Green-winged Teal; Redhead; Ring-necked Duck; Lesser Scaup; Common Merganser; Red-breasted Merganser; and Hooded Merganser.

On Bluebird Trails with "Bunk" Harding

By Dan Jenkins

Ira "Bunk" Harding is an outdoors and wildlife enthusiast from Berlin. Forty years ago Bunk was watching bluebirds and learned that there was a lack of suitable nesting cavities. He decided to help and starting with a few successful nest boxes he gradually built his bluebird trail to a high of 62 monitored boxes. Bunk learned that the PA Game Commission had box kits available and he enthusiastically has been leading programs with Scout troops, 4-H clubs, Youth Field days and school programs to teach box construction and proper placement and care for bluebird boxes. Bunk's efforts have led to over 1000 boxes being constructed over the years. At 81 years of age Bunk is thankful to still have the health and energy to continue his box building and nest monitoring but is hopeful that he can mentor others to start taking over. If you have an interest in learning more contact us at mail@somersetconservancy.org.

The Kimberly Run Natural Area has its own bluebird trails overseen by Board member Fred Will and assisted by Girl Scout Troops. There were 29 of 31 new boxes on the Menser side occupied last year with Tree Swallows, Bluebirds and Chickadees (the only boxes not used were the only 2 painted red). In the big field on the 219 side of KRNA there were also high occupancy but several boxes had nest failures due to very cold conditions in early May 2023.

Frog Walk

By Aaron Capouellez

On Saturday, March 30, 2024, Kimberly Run Natural Area held its first Frog Walk. Despite the thunder at the start of the guided night hike, attendees were enthusiastic and eager to learn.

The weather did not dampen the group's energy, and they continued their hike, taking in the sights and sounds of the woods as they went. Aaron Capouellez, President of PA Woods and Forests, provided insightful commentary on the ideal habitat of native backyard species like the American Toad, explaining their breeding habits and the importance of maintaining their habitats.



The group actively participated in exploring two ponds in the nature reserve, finding many spotted salamanders breeding and many red spotted newts in the water and having fun. Capouellez later answered group questions, and attendees enthusiastically shared their stories and encounters about the critters living in their backyards. On the way back, attendees were fortunate enough to hear spring peepers and northern green frogs.

The Frog Walk turned out to be a successful night hike. The non-profit PA Woods and Forests is grateful to the Somerset County Conservancy for their involvement in our conservation project Frog Week over the past few years.

Mushroom Culture Workshop

By Scott Bastian



On Saturday, February 10th, Mr. Kevin Hoover provided an introduction to mushroom culture, i.e., farming your own edible mushrooms. Kevin is an active member of the Central Pennsylvania Mushroom Club and enjoys teaching people how to grow some of the tastiest edibles. First, he talked about the art of growing mushrooms and then he showed the bunch of us how to do it. Graciously, Kevin even brought the necessary substrate materials: soy and cottonseed hulls mixed with wood pellets in special plastic bags. At home, we added boiling water to the substrate (to

kill any fungal species already present) and then added the provided Oyster Mushroom spawn (*Pleurotus ostreatus*). After about five weeks, the first harvest or "flush" grew out of our substrate bags: time to eat! Oysters are delicious - I was pleased to get a second flush of mushrooms a few weeks later and just recently a third flush to put in the skillet. They were also a superb addition to omelets. As an added bonus that day, Dan O'Brien accompanied Kevin back to Kimberly Run for the presentation and brought his homemade Autumn Olive jelly to share on crackers. I'm getting hungry writing this.

An Ordinary Miraculous Walk at Kimberly Run

By Scott Bastian

Ordinary or miraculous?

Jill & I hiked west away from the new parking lot at Kimberly Run's Menser addition. The sun was getting low but still bright in the sky on this early fall day. Just imagine, the light we saw left the sun about eight minutes ago, rocketing through space at light speed to strike my retina and be perceived as light. Eight minutes. But, from the light's point of view, no time passed at all – time stands still at light speed. For a little fun, try to make those two truths compatible in your mind.

A stout Northern Red oak grows along the Blue Trail close to Piersol Rock. It's leaves are just beginning to show the transition to fall color. How many leaves are there on that tree? Go big or go home: how many leaves are there on *all the trees of the world*? Whatever that number is, it is less than the number of electrons in my fingernail. Physicist Neils Bohr –developer of the Bohr Model of the atom– noted "Everything that we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real."

Acorn mast is beginning to accumulate underneath that oak. The acorns fell from their spot on the tree to the ground below in order for the tree to reproduce itself. But why did they fall? Why not float away up into the stratosphere? "Gravity!" But what *is* that, exactly? We can scientifically measure it and describe its behavior, but at the end of the day, we don't really know what gravity "is" or "why" it is.

Jill leads the way out of the woods on the Blue Trail and a huge cumulus cloud dominates the skies over the turnpike, majestically catching the setting sun's rays, just floating weightlessly along. No, **not** weightless. That cloud itself weighs something on the order of a million pounds. If air had no weight, the water vapor cloud would not float.

As we stroll along the marsh boardwalk, a Green Frog jumps into the safety of its watery haven. That frog began as a gill-breathing, herbivorous tadpole and transformed into a lung-breathing carnivore. Biologically speaking, that's pretty crazy.

Returning along the White Trail, we spot a Giant Puffball mushroom the size of a soccer ball. Seven trillion spores inside of that thing. Try to imagine that. Sadly, you cannot. Visualize 10 apples: no problem. Now do 100 apples: again, not hard. How about 1000? Still doable. Can you do 10,000? (Struggling.) Now 100,000? I'm out. A million is extremely difficult to picture. So seven million *groups* of a million is waaaaay beyond reach.

Always the eagle-eyed, Jill spots a distant Monarch butterfly drifting over the new wetland site near the parking area. Soon, it will undertake a spectacular migration south to woodlands in Mexico for the winter. Not long ago, it was a handsome caterpillar that looked *nothing* like it does now. It attached to a leaf and literally liquefied itself inside a pupa, only to reorganize into a showy butterfly. How, pray tell, did the first Monarch caterpillars figure out how to do that?

We could *see* that insect, but the unseen tally of insects contained within the square mile boundary of Kimberly Run would approximate the human population on Earth.

As we climbed back into our parked car, a full moon begins to show itself over the eastern horizon. Have you observed that we only ever see one face of the moon? The same side of a spherical moon is always facing us. Is that because the moon does not rotate? Nope - the moon actually rotates at *precisely* the right speed in concert with its orbit for only one side to present itself to Earth. Incredible coincidence? No - that's physics in action. Some other moons have shown the same astonishing phenomenon.

Ordinary or miraculous? We tend to want the burning bush as evidence of the miraculous. But if all other bushes were burning, a green-leaved bush would be overwhelming, indeed. We are surrounded every day and all day by the miraculous. It may seem ordinary, but don't take it for granted.



KRNA Storm Damage

By Jim Moses

Kimberly Run Natural Area has been hit hard this spring with rain and wind damage. Large rainstorms have created high water flows potentially under cutting stream banks and causing erosion and clogging drainage pipes. Heavy winds have blown many trees down across our trails. Many of the tree trunks are snapping in half twenty feet



above the ground. Our maintenance team has been able to clear most of these trees but there are a few that we need to call professionals to handle them safely. Top Notch Tree Service (814-233-0943) is coming to our aid, by the time this newsletter is published they will be done. A big Thank You to everyone involved with the cleanup.



Equipment Upgrade

By Jim Moses

The Conservancy Board of Directors has decided to upgrade our mowing equipment. With the new trails added when we acquired the Menser Addition property our old garden tractor was struggling to keep up with the mowing. The new mower has a sixty-inch cutting width so it should take less time to maintain the new trails. It also has a small bucket attached that we hope to use on the wooded trails to drain wet spots and add fill to uneven terrain.

Somerset County Conservancy

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HELP US SPREAD THE WORD!
Pass this newsletter on to a friend and ask them to join.

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\$ 30 Family Member

\$ 75 Sustaining Member

\$100 Patron, Club, Organization Member

\$750 Lifetime Member

\$1,000 Corporate Member

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