WISSAHICKON TRAILS CONNECTING LAND, WATER & PEOPLE

CURRENTS

FALL/WINTER 2026 | VOLUME 69, NO. 2

PHOTO: ALEX MCWHORTER



Many Hands at Work at Penllyn Natural Area

BY **ALEX MCWHORTER AND MARGARET ROHDE**

Penllyn Natural Area is a 23-acre preserve adjacent to Penllyn Woods Park. The Wissahickon Creek flows through the property, and the 10.5-mile Green Ribbon Trail winds its way on one side for about a quarter of a mile, passing through a forest of oaks, hickories, black cherries, and beech trees. The preserve is home to birds, bugs, fish, turtles, snakes, and even two lively geocaches.

It was also the first piece of land Wissahickon Trails ever preserved, and like any natural area, Penllyn faces its own set of challenges: trail erosion, a need for improved access and wayfinding, and – perhaps most notably – the takeover of non-native vegetation.

This March, a focused effort was made to reclaim a section of Penllyn from nonnative vegetation. Thickets of privet, garlic mustard, multiflora rose, autumn olive, and burning bush (just to name a few) all found a happy home in the lush grounds of the preserve, crowding out native species that are beneficial to the local ecosystem.

Reclaiming the area meant more stewardship was needed than a one-off project with a few helping hands. The initiative needed a strategic approach with careful, responsible management, and year-round consistency. As different species go to seed at different times throughout the year, removing certain invasives at the right time was crucial to stopping their spread. That, plus the sheer speed at which these plants grow also meant that crews would need to return regularly throughout the growing season.

PHOTO: ALEX MCWHORTER



Monthly workdays gave staff and volunteers the consistency needed to make meaningful progress. Together, they have cleared a large area of invasive vegetation and prepared it for planting with native species this fall.

The ongoing project has also given members of the community an opportunity to return month after month and see the results of their work take shape. To date, 41 volunteers have devoted 125 hours of their time to the project. Of those volunteers, 13 of them joined multiple workdays, and many have brought family, friends, and coworkers with them. We're thrilled to see this type of buy-in from the community and believe that so much of what we accomplish is possible because of the people who value and care for natural lands and trails. We're grateful to everyone who has given their time, energy, and enthusiasm to help care for Penllyn Natural Area. As with most things in life, many hands can achieve what only a few could not.



PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY



PHOTO: IAN BREHM

From Monitoring to Management: How Data Informs Action

BY **MARGARET ROHDE**

If you've been a supporter of Wissahickon Trails for any number of years, you've likely heard us talk about the importance of monitoring, whether we're observing stream health, salamanders, or birds. Monitoring matters because to make the best decisions and prioritize our work, we need information, and usually that information must be gathered over several years.

For the past decade, we have consistently collected data on birds across our preserves. Not only are birds accessible and easy to study, but they also tell us so much (and quickly) about the health of the habitats around them. We track their populations through surveys, bird banding (where birds are caught and given a unique identifier, allowing us to study individuals over time), and through our nest box monitoring program.



PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY

The breeding season is the height of data collection because the birds that stick around to breed give us the most information. Their presence, nesting success, and the survival of their young are directly tied to the resources available during this critical part of their life cycle, including food, appropriate cover, and places to nest.

A trend we've seen from our data is that two species in particular – willow flycatchers and field sparrows – have declined in the last decade. Both are designated Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Pennsylvania, meaning they are important to monitor and support. What has changed over time in the areas of our preserves where they were once more abundant? Mostly, non-indigenous, invasive plants like autumn olive and Bradford pear have altered the landscape faster than we could manage. As they spread, they alter the habitat and make it less suitable for these birds.

Having this insight means we can direct our habitat management efforts where it's most likely to help. Our goal is to work on target areas this fall, next spring, and into the future to make them favorable again to willow flycatchers and field sparrows. As with most of our work, we'll be leaning on volunteers to help us meet our goals.

CREATING THE BRAILLE TRAIL AT DODSWORTH RUN PRESERVE

BY **BRYN HAMILTON**

Nature should be a place where everyone can explore, learn, and feel welcome. That belief inspired me to create the Braille Trail at Dodsworth Run Preserve for my Girl Scout Silver Award.

The idea of creating the Braille Trail came after seeing a similar project completed by another Girl Scout elsewhere in the country. It made me realize that I had never seen a Braille Trail in the Philadelphia area. I believe that every person has the right to access nature's beauty. I wanted to provide that access for the blind community.



PHOTO: GABRIELLE FATULA

The first step was meeting with Ms. Margaret Rohde, Associate Conservation Director at Wissahickon Trails. She helped outline where I could install the trail. I then planned out how many interpretive signs were needed, where they would go, and what visitors would be able to learn along the way.

Next, I calculated the costs for materials and raised money through community donations, fundraising, and Girl Scout cookie sales. Once I had all my plans in place and the materials were ready, I gathered a crew to bring it all to life.

I hope the Braille Trail will be a learning tool and provide equal access to nature that the blind community is so often not given. I also hope it encourages sighted visitors to remember that the little things that they take for granted could be very big to someone else. Most of all, I hope this project inspires others to make more strides for equal opportunities outdoors.

PHOTO: KRISTY MORLEY



Monarch Monitoring:
One Milkweed Leaf at a Time

BY **KRISTY MORLEY**

For 10 years, the International Monarch Monitoring Blitz has helped scientists study monarch butterflies' summer breeding habitat, track population trends, identify conservation priorities, and guide habitat restoration. Wissahickon Trails has participated since 2023, joining volunteers across the United States, Canada, and Mexico for 10 days of monitoring each summer.

This work is possible because of our volunteer community scientists. Over four years, 71 volunteers have contributed 152 hours of monitoring across six preserves and portions of the Green Ribbon Trail. Together, they have surveyed 28,529 square meters and carefully checked the leaves of 3,538 milkweed plants, finding 260 monarch eggs and 69 caterpillars and observing 19 adult butterflies. Occasionally, volunteers are even lucky enough to see a female laying her eggs.

Four years of data is not yet enough to identify local population trends, but we have seen variation from year to year. Monarch populations are influenced by conditions throughout their migratory range, including weather, drought, milkweed availability, and the loss of protected wintering habitat. By continuing to monitor, we can build a clearer picture of how monarchs are using local habitats and how we can best support them.



PHOTO: JOAN CARPENTER

How Community Protects Clean Water: A CASE STUDY

BY **ERIN LANDIS**

Protecting stream health takes the support of community members, and public and private partners. In the Abington area where the Sandy Run begins to flow, restoring stream health has been an effort that nearly everyone in the community has contributed to!

The Sandy Run begins in a residential area, where it receives a flush of stormwater when it rains. Water running off roofs, roads, parking lots, and other hard surfaces can carry pollutants into the stream. It can also erode streambanks.

What happens here affects waterways well beyond the surrounding neighborhood. Sandy Run feeds Wissahickon Creek, which flows into the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia before reaching the Delaware River. Improving the health of Sandy Run has involved many people and projects:

- Wissahickon Trails led the planting of 100 trees along Sandy Run through a grant from Montgomery County. As they grow, they will hold soil in place and absorb stormwater and pollutants that would otherwise flow into the Sandy Run. Since these young trees were planted a few years ago, aggressive vines have threatened to smother them. Each year, community volunteers return to remove the vines, giving the young trees the space and sunlight they need to become established.
- Abington Township installed stormwater projects in nearby Roychester Park. These solutions mimic nature by absorbing water during storms and reducing pollution and downstream flooding.
- Wissahickon Trails worked with nearby Overlook Elementary School, to install stormwater projects to capture water from the school's parking lots.
- Residents of the neighborhoods surrounding Sandy Run participated in conversations around water quality and stormwater. Many residents installed small nature-based projects on their own properties to do their part to absorb stormwater from home roofs and driveways.



PHOTO: EMARGARET ROHDE

Many of these projects were made possible by grants from the state and from private foundations. Professionals with specialty experience supported the planning and installation of nature-based stormwater projects. The local Abington Environmental Advisory Council and Shade Tree Commission, made up of volunteers stewarding their community's natural resources, also helped inform and support this work.

Water quality is a complex topic that cannot be tackled by any one person or organization alone. Every action, big and small, happens most effectively in collaboration.

Turning Expertise INTO IMPACT

BY **GABRIELLE FATULA**

Volunteering with Wissahickon Trails does not always mean pulling invasive plants, monitoring wildlife, or working along the trail. Some volunteers support our work by sharing their expertise, community connections, and honest feedback through our program advisory committees.

A program advisory committee is a group of volunteers who offer guidance and recommendations to staff in a particular area of our work. Our Engagement, Water Resources, Conservation, and Mill committees bring together people with a range of professional backgrounds, skills, and lived experiences.

Members offer fresh perspectives, ask thoughtful questions, help us work through challenges, and connect staff with knowledge and opportunities we might not find on our own.

Most committees meet quarterly, with virtual and hybrid options available. For people whose schedules or circumstances make it difficult to participate regularly in fieldwork, sharing your expertise can be another meaningful way to volunteer.

Committee work may happen behind the scenes, but the ideas and connections that come from it often help shape what happens next. If you think your experience could benefit one of our committees, we would love to hear from you!



PHOTO: JAMIE STEWART



PHOTO: MARGARET ROHDE

YOUR FEEDBACK AT WORK ON THE TRAILS

BY **TOM VOTER**

On the conservation team, we hike our trails so often that hardly anything phases us. With nearly 25 miles of trails and a team of four, we're often so busy with upkeep that the quirks of our trails can start to feel like second nature. That familiarity helps us care for the trails, but in a way, we're not always the right people to ask what improvements to prioritize.

That's why many of our trail projects stem from the conversations and feedback we get from the trail users. Those interactions create a snowball effect of conversations and decisions that inform us where to focus our trail improvement efforts. The feedback we've received through stop-and-chats with the community has informed countless improvement projects.

We received feedback that certain obstacles create barriers in some sections of our trails, so we've cut out roots and removed rocks to smooth the surface. When a trail user told us that the descent to a set of stepping stones could be more challenging than the crossing itself, we added steps and additional stones at several crossings. Hikers also told us they needed more information before arriving to understand what they might encounter. In response, we designed and installed new signs at Green Ribbon Trail trailheads with details about trail length, obstacles, shade, and more.

These are only a few notable examples inspired by the people who hike our trails. We are determined to make our trails user-friendly to as many people as possible, while preserving the natural character that makes them special. So, if you're hiking our trail and notice something that can improve your experience, let us know! Your feedback makes a difference.

Miles of Commitment and a Lasting Legacy

BY **ANNA MARCHINI**

Kareem Afzal is no stranger to trails. An avid runner for decades, he recently completed a grueling 100-mile race in Colorado. But much of his training happens closer to home on Wissahickon Trails' Green Ribbon Trail.



PHOTO: GABRIELLE FATULA

Running along the Green Ribbon Trail has given Kareem an appreciation not only for the beauty so close to home, but also for the work required to care for it. A few years ago, when a particularly wet section of the trail needed improvements to keep it passable, Kareem and his family stepped forward to help fund the construction of an elevated boardwalk.

More recently, the family found another way to support improvements along the trail. Their generosity created an opportunity to combine Wissahickon Trails' focus on improving accessibility while honoring someone deeply important to them.



PHOTO: GABRIELLE FATULA

In memory of Kareem's mother, Birgitta, they funded additional trail improvements and a new bench along the Green Ribbon Trail.

"Birgitta came to the US from Sweden, having grown up surrounded by unspoiled natural beauty. Throughout her life she believed in conservation and saving natural lands for generations to come. The bench was a way to honor her."

The bench provides a place for visitors to rest, making it easier for people of different abilities to enjoy more of the trail. It's a simple addition, but one that reflects our larger goal of making the places we protect more welcoming and easier to experience.

We're grateful to Kareem and his family for seeing themselves not just as trail users, but as partners in caring for the Green Ribbon Trail, and helping make it better for everyone whose path brings them to this special corner of the world.

GOOD FOR THE COMMUNITY, GOOD FOR YOU.

BY **ERIN MCCOOL**

Volunteering gives something valuable to your community, and it offers plenty in return. It can get us outside, keep us active, introduce us to new people, and give us a greater sense of purpose.

At Wissahickon Trails, a morning spent caring for a preserve, monitoring a stream, or helping with a community program is also time spent moving, connecting with others, and experiencing nature. All of these can contribute to our well-being. When we care for the places our community depends on, we may find that they care for us, too.



PHOTO: ALEX MCWHORTER

Ready to join us? Fill out our volunteer form today!

YOUR COMMUNITY AT WORK



PHOTO: LISA HANSELL



PHOTO: LISA HANSELL



PHOTO: LISA HANSELL



PHOTO: ALEX MCWHORTER

Groups of employees from KeyBank, Aon, Hatch, and SofterWare have all recently joined Wissahickon Trails staff for corporate stewardship day at Four Mills Nature Reserve. The groups focused on removing unwanted vegetation along the trail, improving trail safety, and reinforcing our newly-installed pollinator garden.



PHOTO: AMBER DUDICK

Coworkers from Kenvue spent "shutdown day" helping clean up Sandy Run, which runs adjacent to their campus. The annual clean-up of this tributary always results in a significant amount of trash collected as the Sandy Run flows underneath two major roadways.

OUR MISSION

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

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Bob Brockway, *Chair*
Kristen Haugen, *Vice Chair*
Keith Eby, *Treasurer*
Suzanne Bush, *Secretary*
Nancy Bednarik
Michaelle Fleisher
Darrell Gunter
John S. Han
Patrick Hitchens
Ann Laughlin
Joseph L. Maglaty
Eugene (E.G.) Rall, Jr.
Harm Scherpbier
Teri Scott
Richard Shorin
Kristian Smith
Wendy Weirman

EMERITUS BOARD

Richard Collier, Jr., *Chair*
Mary S. Claghorn
Duane D. Deaner
Ellen T. Duncan
Cary B. Fleisher
Saly A. Glassman
Sara Hertz
Dolores E. Hillas
Timothy P. Hughes
Nancy B. Kreider
Mark P. Letner
George M. Riter
Hugh A. A. Sargent
Mark Schafer
Jamie Stewart
John Tierney
Neil Trueblood
Cheryl L. Young

FOLLOW US

#WissahickonTrails

WISSAHICKON TRAILS
CONNECTING LAND, WATER & PEOPLE

12 MORRIS ROAD
AMBLER, PA 19002-5499

NON-PROFIT U.S. POSTAGE
PAID

Printed on recycled paper

EDITORIAL STAFF

Executive Editor:
Gail Farmer

Communications Manager & Designer:
Gabrielle Fatula

Many Thanks to Our 2026 Event Sponsors

TEX MEX 5K RACE FOR OPEN SPACE

TEX MEX CONNECTION
MERCK
UNIVEST
NORTH WALES RUNNING COMPANY
NWWA North Wales Water Authority
BDS
NOLAN Painting
Horsham
Catalfano Brothers
Yuengling
ALTITLE.com
HAVERFORD QUALITY INVESTING
Edward Jones
ARTISAN'S ALLEY
Scanlin McDonald Funeral Home Ltd
LandConcepts
Ashley Foods
DERSTINE'S
HARLEYSVILLE PARTY RENTAL
J. Ambrogi
Port-A-Bowl

CREEK CLEAN UP

ATHLETIC BREWING CO
AQUA
Kulicke & Soffa
CADDICK UTILITIES
NWWA North Wales Water Authority
RUSSELL ROOFING & EXTERIORS
BGONE
The Philadelphia Cricket Club

Thank you to these companies for supporting our environmental education programs through the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) Program

Friends of Education K-12
Ciocca Automotive
CHUBB
donorperfect
HAVERFORD QUALITY INVESTING
The Haverford Trust Company
RUSH ORDER TEES Custom T-Shirts Delivered Fast
NINJA TRANSFERS
MID PENN BANK