



Middle Creek in Motion

Winter 2024

Introducing Middle Creek's New Visitors Center Manager

It's official! Middle Creek has a new Manager for the Visitors Center. Laura Richmond will take the helm as the 5th manager since Middle Creek's opening to the public 51 years ago. Laura took on her new role this last November.

Laura brings with her a background in operations management and event planning that started with her time in college at Widener University where she got her Bachelors of Science in Hospitality Management. She has previously worked at venues such as both the Hershey and Lancaster Country Clubs. Most recently, she was the Event and Training Manager at the local company APR Supply Co. where she focused on planning events for both internal employees and customers.



Recreational birding is a hobby Laura recently took up that has really blossomed in the years since the pandemic. She grew up in a hunting family where her father pursued a diversity of game species. Laura is married with a daughter (and a dog, cat, and three chickens!).

Laura has always liked to plan and network, leading her to pursue a career in the hospitality industry. She was excited to come across the Visitors Center Manager's job so she could combine her enjoyment of event planning with working in a realm she is more passionate about. Coming to Middle Creek's events in the recent past made Laura realize there were such jobs that existed and she could see herself pursuing

that involve wildlife and the outdoors.

Laura is most excited to see how some events work behind the scenes, like the ever-popular snow goose migration, and Wildlife Art Show. She also looks forward to seeing how those events can be enhanced. Of course, she is looking forward to working with wildlife, particularly banding birds like waterfowl and songbirds during our MAPS banding. She is also excited to work with a group of people with different experiences that are very passionate about those roles, and additionally how to integrate with that and empower others.



Photo by Michele Laucks

Important Reminders!

The snow geese are coming! The snow geese are coming!

As we progress into the winter, snow geese and tundra swans will begin to trickle in, usually building up to a peak in February or even March during a colder year.

We also release our annual Event Guide in January, so be sure to keep an eye on our Facebook Page, website, or pick up a copy in-person at the Visitors Center once we reopen on January 21st.

Middle Creek has been a busy place this fall and winter, even while we were closed to the public for the season. And there are a lot of happenings on the horizon, too, so be sure to read every single page! We are looking forward to changes in 2025.



Always Thank a Volunteer!

Why do you visit Middle Creek? Is it the stunning native gardens at the Visitors Center, or is hiking the well-manicured trails more your thing? Regardless, everyone can find something to enjoy at the Management Area. Did you know a volunteer is likely responsible for maintaining your favorite area at Middle Creek? Middle Creek is held together through dedication and hard work, especially that of dozens of volunteers who



Trashed picked up by staff and volunteers at the Boat Launch.

maintain the grounds, gardens, trails, bluebird boxes, and more.

This year, garden volunteers continued to beautify the plots around the Visitors Center. They ensured our plants stayed hydrated during the hot, dry summer, put out fresh mulch, cut back and thinned overgrown vegetation, and more. A new bog garden was also just installed that will get some native plants come next spring.

In 2024, our trail volunteers worked hard, building boardwalks and clearing blowdowns. Volunteers and several Scout groups worked consistently to keep trails ready for hiking and enjoyable despite the weather conditions. On top of constantly keeping vegetation trimmed back and fallen trees removed, a big project completed this year was the addition and replacement of boardwalks along the Spicebush Trail and others to make hiking easier in damp areas of the trails.

A wonderful crew of volunteers also monitor the 257 boxes on the Middle Creek property. This year, the bluebird crew watched about 830 birds successfully fledge from our nest boxes. These birds included 514 tree swallows, 274 eastern bluebirds, and 41 house wrens. Talk about a successful year!

One of our recent volunteer projects was the Middle Creek Boat Launch trash clean-up. Over the year, trash tends to pile up on the shoreline of the main lake at Middle Creek. Everything from aluminum cans, fishing line, glass, cloth, and plastic were found and removed during the clean-up, resulting in three large bags full of trash! We want to say a special thank you to those volunteers who participated in the clean-up! We also want to encourage others to clean up trash they find and, as always, leave nature as we find it. Please pack out anything you bring to our Management Area.

As our year comes to an end, from everyone here at Middle Creek, thank you to our volunteers. This place wouldn't function without your effort and passion for the Management Area. We are grateful to have such a wonderful crew and are always looking to expand our volunteer family. If you are interested in volunteering at Middle Creek, please subscribe to our Volunteer Email, where you will be notified of volunteer opportunities each month! Sign up here: bit.ly/middlecreekvolunteers



Some of our dedicated garden volunteers and staff who manage our gardens on a weekly basis throughout the growing season.



It's tough to get all of our volunteers at the same place at the same time, but we try!

Nesting and Roosting Structures Remix

Middle Creek is home to many species of birds and mammals that breed and nest within the Management Area. The Game Commission installs nesting and roosting structures throughout the property to assist successful breeding. During the fall and winter, our staff has been working hard to replace, remove, and relocate nesting structures for the upcoming nesting season.

The American kestrel box behind the Visitors Center was previously higher up the hill, closer to the wood edge. This box was unsuccessful for many years, which got us thinking that maybe we needed to mix things up a bit. So, our staff moved the structure to a field closer to the Visitors Center. This field is burned annually and has diverse plant life that may be more suitable for American kestrels. Moving this nesting box closer to the Visitors Center should also provide an excellent educational opportunity to discuss the American kestrel, their habitat needs, and how you can help this tiny but mighty falcon.

Another big change you may notice outside the Visitors Center is the removal of the giant “tree house” just north of the Visitors Center from the front of the Visitors Center. To the surprise of many visitors, it is not a tree house; it is a bat condo! This structure was originally placed on the property to attract bats and get them to roost inside the structure. After many years of waiting, one barn owl nest attempt, and no bat activity, we have decided to remove the structure and replace it with more commonly used roosting structures.

Harvest Roundup To-Date

The beginning of winter brings us to roughly the mid-point of the Middle Creek special hunting seasons. Archery deer hunts were completed in November and our flintlock/archery hunt took place on December 18th. A month from now, on January 18th, 2025, the waterfowl hunting season will come to an end.

The archery hunt, which took place over three separate weeks beginning on the 5th of October resulted in the harvest of ten deer. The hunting was somewhat hampered by unusually warm weather especially during the second week when only one antlerless deer was taken. Hunters managed to bag four antlerless deer during the 1st week of hunting, but the top week was week number three when the lone antlered deer, a five point, was harvested along with four antlerless deer. Hunters reported a total of 851 hours hunting and 97.5 hours scouting during the three weeks.

On Saturday, November 9th, 2024, the Middle Creek waterfowl hunting season got underway. The youth hunt kicked off the season by harvesting seven Canada geese and nine ducks. November 23rd, 26th, and 28th got our main season off and running but it has been a tough season. Low water has prevented us from running the duck blinds to start the season. To this point an additional eight geese and three ducks were harvested. Thankfully, some much needed rain fell so we will be able to get some duck blinds up and running for the rest of our season which resumes on December 24th.

The popular Middle Creek special flintlock/archery hunt took place on Wednesday, December 18th. The weather cooperated early in the day and 50 hunters took to the field for the hunt. Overall, the day ended up being a little slower than in previous years with five deer being harvested. Three of those deer being antlerless along with two antlered deer. It was not for a lack of deer, many hunters reported seeing 20 or more deer and several reported missed shots as well.

It's not too late to get out and hunt at Middle Creek. Remaining waterfowl hunt days for this season are December 24th, 31st and every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday up until January 18th. Please visit the Middle Creek webpage to apply for hunts.



Editor's note: a HUGE thank you to all who offered their photographs for this newsletter. We received more wonderful photos than could possibly fit!



Muskrats, in addition to beavers, are vital architects of wetlands in North America. Both in the rodent family, muskrats are smaller, have a rat-like tail, and build small lodges but not dams like beavers do. Both are present here at Middle Creek. However, many states have been experiencing population decline of varying degrees and the causes have been so far linked to a diversity of issues such as diseases, pollution, and habitat loss. All the more reason why Middle Creek is a valuable location for wildlife and their habitats to thrive.

Photo by Bonita Palm

Sandhill cranes are an uncommon sight at Middle Creek, but are maybe spotted once or twice a year, usually during the late winter/early spring when migrating. Although water levels are drawn down to mostly benefit early migrating shorebirds and to grow vegetation for waterfowl (that we hope will arrive when the vegetation is then submerged in the late fall) this year's drought further shows that plenty of other species are more than happy to pick around in the shallow mudflats for a quick meal. Perhaps they would have kept flying by had it not been for lower water levels.



Photo by Betsy Dallas



A frozen lake is a good lake, at least when it comes to snow goose migration. If there is snow on the ground and ice on the water at Middle Creek, in all likelihood, conditions further north are just as frosty. Snow geese, and some other waterfowl, do not prefer such situations and need open water or fields to feed. Therefore, the bulk of the population is generally further south where they can feed until conditions to the north are more favorable. That "bottling-up" of the population can result in huge migration numbers at Middle Creek when things do thaw out. Milder winters means less ice for shorter times, and geese can hurry north.

Photo by Ken Reinard

2024 Carp Roundup

Many have seen our nets out on the lake this past summer and have asked what they were and what they were for. Others, familiar with the common carp (native to Eurasia) removal trials over recent summers, were eager to know how this year went. Drumroll, please...

The carp trapping season ended in September with 7,802 common carp removed from the main lake. An additional 219 mirror carp (genetic variation causing these carp to grow larger scales) were captured as well. Our carp numbers were significantly higher than 2023 which removed 3,732 carp and 115 mirror carp. This doesn't mean the population necessarily went up, but our trapping procedures and timing may have improved. The Middle Creek habitat crew, Visitors Center staff, and volunteers can't be thanked enough for their efforts in making the carp removal such a huge success. The carp removal is part of our lake habitat and water quality restoration project.

Due to the high population of common carp feeding in the lake, the sediment on the bottom is constantly being stirred and disrupted. This sediment disruption causes the water color to turn brown and restrict light penetration needed for vegetation growth. It also gets higher levels of nutrients into the water column which exasperate algal blooms. The carp are constantly feeding on the vegetation within the lake which leaves little cover for desired fish species. Additionally, this destroys the vegetation we have been attempting to grow for waterfowl through our lake drawdown efforts.

With the continuation of the carp removal program, we hope to get a handle on the population to support the vegetation growth on the lake shoreline to benefit waterfowl. In addition, we caught and released back into the lake 3,531 channel catfish, 137 brown bullhead catfish, and 79 white catfish. These fish, to an extent, are native to some Pennsylvania waterways, are good sport fish to catch and eat, and cause less harm to the overall ecosystem than the more numerous and destructive common carp. Our staff will be reviewing our efforts during the winter months to determine if we can implement any additional strategies to improve our captures. Improvements may include further manipulation of water levels to stress the common carp during their spawning period. In 2024, the main lake hit record low levels due to the drought. As a result, different areas were exposed to trap carp that were not available the previous year. We look forward to the third year of carp trapping and working with all of the individuals who dedicate their time and efforts to help improve the lake habitat.

Work Begins on New Wetland Habitat at Middle Creek

Ducks Unlimited and Middle Creek staff have begun building a new 3.3-acre water impoundment located off of Sunnyside Road. The site has been marked, flagged out and erosion prevention systems have been put into place. Our groups also coordinate with the Department of Environmental Protection to ensure existing wetlands aren't impacted and the soil we are working with doesn't erode into more sensitive areas. The first stage of construction consisted of soil removal to reach the shallow clay layer which is needed to build the holding berm. The clay is transported to the berm and compacted in "incremental lifts." Clay is necessary to prevent water from infiltrating into the ground and is less permeable than more organic soils.

The images (on page 6) show a bulldozer and loaders scraping off the sod and topsoil to reach the clay needed to hold water on the berm. Topsoil and sod are being placed in different piles to be put back once the correct depth to hold water is reached. The topsoil and sod will be used to grow wetland-loving and aquatic vegetation species for waterfowl and other wildlife once the area is flooded. Once the holding berm is complete, a water control structure will be installed to allow for the manipulation of the water captured by the berm. Middle Creek's main lake and other ponds use a similar system, and staff will be able to fluctuate the water levels within the water impoundment to mimic seasonality, promote vegetation growth, and attract migrating birds. This project is the first of three total projects taking place on the Middle Creek property with the help of Ducks Unlimited. **(Continued on Page 6).**



Work Begins on New Wetland Habitat at Middle Creek *(Continued)*

A project of this scale could not be accomplished without the hard work and dedication of the Ducks Unlimited and Middle Creek Staff. We are all excited to see these projects come to fruition and the future benefits to the wildlife and habitat of Middle Creek. More information will be shared on the progress of wetlands projects in future newsletters and on our Facebook Page.

Snow Goose and Spring Migration Outlook

As winter sets in across the Mid-Atlantic region, the spectacular natural phenomenon of winter waterfowl migration unfolds across the region's agricultural fields and wetlands. The snow geese in particular are on the move, painting the sky with their distinctive V-formations and creating a breathtaking display of wildlife resilience.



Work being done on a new wetland.

The sound of huge flocks of snow geese taking off at dawn is not to be missed.

In recent years, Middle Creek has continued to serve as a critical stopover for these magnificent birds making their annual journey back to their Arctic breeding grounds from wintering areas along the Atlantic Coast.

Year	Peak Date
2017	2/22
2018	2/21
2019	3/12
2020	2/18
2021	3/8
2022	2/25
2023	1/31
2024	2/24

This year's Farmer's Almanac winter prediction for central Pennsylvania suggests a season of variable temperatures and potential significant snowfall. These conditions play a crucial role in the snow geese's migration strategy. The birds typically begin arriving at Middle Creek in large numbers during late January and can continue into March. Peak numbers and timing are very weather dependent and food availability, and has ranged from the end of January through the first week of March in recent years.

As you can see from the chart, trying to predict when the peak of migration can be somewhat of a moving target on exact timing. For example, when you dig into last year's data of population numbers week to week, numbers were up as high as 47,000 at the beginning of February, but then weather became a factor with snow and lingering ice for several weeks pushing the birds back south to find open water and fields. We saw them return in similar and then increasing numbers as the area thawed around the end of February and then they by the second week of March they had largely pushed through.

Climate change is increasingly influencing migration patterns and timing. Warmer temperatures and shifting agricultural practices have created both challenges and opportunities for these remarkable birds. Farmers in central Pennsylvania have become inadvertent hosts, with harvested corn and wheat fields providing critical feeding grounds for massive flocks.



Photo by Sally Copeland

For Middle Creek, the arrival of snow geese and other winter migratory visitors such as tundra swans, Canada geese, ducks, and owls is more than just a natural spectacle. We are gearing up to welcome thousands of visitors who want to take part in the viewing of the beautiful spectacle migration season.

The snow geese remind us of nature's incredible journey – a testament to adaptation, survival, and the delicate balance of our local ecosystem. We look forward to another migration season here at Middle Creek and look forward to welcoming our visitors for another unforgettable year!

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Upcoming Events at Middle Creek December 21st - March 20th 2025

Saturday, February 1st at 5:00 PM in the Auditorium: Deer Processing Workshop

Processing and butchering a deer you harvest can be quite a barrier to the new and even seasoned hunter. Join Game Commission staff at a hands-on workshop where you will be guided through processing a deer. Processing tools provided. Limited to 15 processing trainees. Contact the Visitors Center to sign up. Participants must be 18 years of age or older.

Wednesday, February 12th at 6:30 PM in the Auditorium: Allegheny Woodrats on the Road to Recovery in Pennsylvania

Allegheny woodrats are a native species found only in rocky habitats along the Appalachian Mountains. Unfortunately, the species has experienced significant population declines in the past two decades and is listed as a state-threatened species in Pennsylvania and a regional species of greatest conservation need. To recover the species and avoid federal listing, Pennsylvania Game Commission staff and partners have been working diligently to address the three primary drivers of Allegheny woodrat decline: decreased food availability, disease, and habitat fragmentation. This talk will discuss the Allegheny woodrat recovery program in Pennsylvania.

Wednesday, March 12th at 6:30 PM in the Auditorium: Conserving Lancaster County's Wildflowers

Lancaster isn't just an expanse of farm fields as far as the eyes can see, it also has some interesting and diverse habitats. Join the Lancaster County Conservancy in a virtual trip around the county to learn about the diversity of native wildflowers and what the Conservancy does to protect and manage them. Where to visit to see them, and how volunteers make a difference!

Saturday, March 15th at 10:00 AM at the Visitors Center: Deer Public Prescribed Fire Demonstration

This year will be the fourth consecutive year of burning a field by the Visitors Center for the public to come learn about and view prescribed fire. Habitat workers and foresters will be on hand to answer questions and to display the equipment that enables the safe use of fire as a natural management tool for forests and fields. This event has a rain date, so keep an eye out for last minute information on this event happening or not. Call the Middle Creek Visitors Center for more information.

All these events and more will be featured in our 2025 Event Guide! Guides will be available on our webpage, Facebook Page, and at the Visitors Center in January. Be sure to grab a copy and mark your calendars so you don't miss an exciting event!

