

WWIA News

Winter 2022



President's Message

By John Hilewick, WWIA President

Here we are in the depths of the winter season. February and a nasty storm with freezing rain, sleet, and snow give us pause to ponder the possible benefits of migration to a warmer climate. If only I had the wherewithal to make such a move and no northern responsibilities to hold me and my wife back.

We were able to get in a few programs in 2021. The annual report in this newsletter includes a roundup of those events.

This year we hope that WWIA will be able to advance a relatively full slate of program offerings. We're in the process of attempting to reschedule the presenters who had to cancel during the past two years due to pandemic restrictions. We're also brainstorming additional programs and presenters.

We look forward to making progress in that regard at an in-person **board of directors meeting on Thursday, February 17, at 4:00 p.m. at the WCD Barn**. Any member who is interested in attending will certainly be welcome.

Jeff Parobek has had to resign his position as a voting director since he's now working in another state and can no longer get back to the Barn for afternoon director meetings.

If you would like to volunteer to become a voting director to fill the now vacant seat, please contact me at 724- 925-1667 or Tony Quadro at tony@wcdpa.com or 724-837-5271, option #1.

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President's Message (cont'd)

Just a reminder: 2022 dues, still only \$10, are now payable. Send your checks, made out to Westmoreland Woodlands Improvement Assn., to WWIA, c/o Westmoreland Conservation District, 218 Donohoe Road, Greensburg, PA 15601, Attention: Tony Quadro.

We greatly appreciate those of you who have continued to support WWIA financially during this somewhat fallow period, since our expenses are ongoing.

Please continue to stay well and be careful. That nasty virus and its multiple variants are still circulating out there!

Annual Report of WWIA's Work in 2021

By John Hilewick, WWIA President

Because we were all immersed in the Covid-19 pandemic's continued grip in 2021, our programming was quite limited. The board of directors held a Zoom meeting on February 11 to satisfy bylaw requirements and to plan some programming in the hope that restrictions would soon be relaxed.

On Earth Day, April 22, we held a webinar at which forester Celine Colbert discussed "Managing Your Backyard Woods." She shared her expertise and a great deal of interesting information about how to create a refuge for native birds, wildlife, and pollinators, no matter how small your woods. At the Q&A after the talk we learned that we had several attendees from beyond Westmoreland County, a silver lining to Zoom events. You can watch the program at <http://www.westmorelandwoodlands.org/events.html>.

On June 17 we had our first in-person program at the WCD campus outdoors at the pavilion. Our presenter was Michael Doucette, the new service forester with the Forbes District of the BOF. His program, "The New Bad Bug in Your Backyard: The Spotted Lanternfly," was very good!

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Announcements

2022 dues, still only \$10, are due. Send your checks to WWIA, c/o Westmoreland Conservation District, 218 Donohoe Rd., Greensburg, PA 15601. Attn: Tony Quadro.

The WWIA board is holding a **meeting February 17 at 4:00 p.m.** at the WCD Barn. All members are welcome to attend.

If you would like a new **American Tree Farm sign**, contact the Forbes State Forest at 724-238-1200.

Ten Great Nature Books to Warm Your Soul

by Judith Gallagher

I thought I'd share a few of my favorite books to browse in the winter to keep my spirits up. These books sustain me and provide pleasure, comfort, and new knowledge, no matter how many times I read them.

***The Sense of Wonder* by Rachel Carson (1965).** A fast read (originally a magazine article, now with beautiful photos) that always reminds me to pay attention and use all my senses to connect with nature, from the shapes of trees to the sound of thunder to the feel of a cat's fur.

Carson sparks her young nephew's sense of wonder and his powers of observation by showing him birds and animals, sunsets and storm clouds, flowers and mosses. They listen to the living music of insects, smell the woods after a summer rain, and pick up crabs along Maine's coast.

She says, "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."

***The Photo Ark: One Man's Quest to Document the World's Animals* by Joel Sartore (2017).** When Sartore recognized in 2005 that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction on this planet, he began to photograph members of every one of the 12,000-plus captive animal species around the world in hopes of helping to turn the tide, or at least creating a record of the species that we lose.

Jane Goodall says, "This is one of the most scientifically important—and artistically brilliant—books ever." It has the high quality you'd expect from its publisher, National Geographic. The range of animals portrayed is amazing. Many of them look you in the eye. You sense their living presence and the hole their absence would leave in the web of life.

***A Place in the Woods* by Helen Hoover (1969).** Any time I start feeling that life on my mountaintop is just too hard in the winter, I dip into this account of Hoover and her husband as city slickers moving from Chicago to the North Woods of Minnesota in 1954.

Her adventures hand-feeding everything from bears to weasels, and her descriptions of the woods and the lake in all seasons, are among my favorite scenes. But it's the many nights the outside temperature sank to minus 65° that make me count my blessings. And the time their cabin caught fire,



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Nature Books (cont'd)

and the time the foundation wall collapsed during a flood. Hoover evokes the hardships and the joys of her chosen life and describes how she came to feel connected to the place and its nonhuman residents.

***Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1987).**

This collection by one of the greatest science fiction writers ever may seem an outlier in a list of nature books. But in it coyotes speak, as do wolves and rats and horses, and even plants and stones. Le Guin presents each unique consciousness in completely believable ways that resonate with mythic truths.

“The continuity, interdependence, and community of all life, all forms of being on earth, is a lived fact,” she writes in the introduction. She goes on to prove her thesis in stories and poems.

***The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors* by David George Haskell (2017).** (*Suggested by John Hilewick.*) Haskell repeatedly visits a dozen trees, from a ceibo in the Amazon to a balsam fir in Canada to a pear tree in New York City, even the charcoal remains of a hazel tree in Scotland. He contemplates each tree's complex relationships with other trees, webs of fungi, bacterial communities, animals, and humans. He shows how the Earth's climate emerged from exchanges among all these elements.

After decades of editing scientific writing that can be dry, I enjoy seeing Haskell dazzle readers with vivid verbs and enlightening metaphors while he pulls together scientific data, personal observation, and deep feeling to illustrate that all life is about relationships. Like the trees he studies and comes to love, the book is greater than the sum of its parts.

***Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* by Michael Pollan (1991).**

(*Contributed by Janice Seigle.*) This is the only book I've come across that with intelligence, humor, and great writing deals with the interface of gardening with nature. In its traditional sense a garden is almost anathema to nature, especially in our area, where nature's elements are far less easily subdued than in more residential places.

The American Horticultural Society named this one of the 75 greatest books ever written about gardening. It does a good job of enlightening us about nature's irrepressible part in the mix.

What's Your Favorite Nature Book?

What's a book about some aspect of nature that warms *your* soul? Send the title and author to me at jgallagher@LHTOT.com, and we'll run a list of reader favorites in a future newsletter. Feel free to add a few sentences describing the book and/or your reaction to it.

Foraging for Invasive Plants: Yum!

by Celine Colbert, Forester, Pennsylvania DCNR Bureau of Forestry

There are many approaches to tackling the aggressive invasive plants that make our forests home. We spray, pull, cut, and burn.

We take on these projects for the promise of a healthier forest, but what if there was an instant, tangible prize that would make the hard work immediately rewarding? Say, a tasty cobbler or flavor-filled pesto?

A surprising number of our invasive plant species are edible. Some, such as garlic mustard, were even brought over originally for culinary purposes. Here is a look at five edible invasives to whet your appetite.

If you do try these, make sure to positively identify the plant and collect it from an area that hasn't been treated with herbicide.



Knotweed. In the spring, when new shoots begin to grow, is the time to start harvesting. The new growth under 10 inches is the tastiest, packed with vitamins C and A and resveratrol. When harvesting, note that any part of this plant, even pieces as small as your fingernail, can root and start a new patch. Any parts that you won't be cooking should be double-bagged in the trash or burned. (This invasive isn't something you want in your compost pile.) The flavor has been described as lemony and sour. Knotweed is often used like rhubarb. Try it as a cobbler or jam or cook it into a sweetened purée that can be added to frostings, fillings, or mousse.



Japanese barberry. The red berries this plant produces tend to hang on into the winter, so you can forage some this time of year. The berries that persist through the winter may be a bit dried out and best used for making tea or boiled into a sauce high in vitamin C. Early-season berries with undeveloped seeds make a great mix-in for salads and are traditionally used in the Persian rice dish Zereskh Polow. The berries aren't the only edible plant parts. Young shoots can be eaten as a vegetable, leaves can be cooked into dishes or dried into tea, and the root is commonly used to make a tea due to its high content of berberine, an alkaloid with various health benefits.



Multiflora rose. Multiflora rose hips are packed with vitamin C, while the petals offer a spicy floral flavor when infused into recipes. The hips should be air dried before use. From there, they can be used whole as a tea or boiled and strained to make jellies, fruit leather, or even Swedish rose-hip soup. Do not consume the seeds inside the hip; they can induce itching and irritate the digestive tract. The flower petals can infuse a variety of liquids, such as vinegar, honey, and whipping cream.



Autumn olive. Autumn olive berries are a versatile backyard fruit. They can be sour, so wait until after the first frost for their sweetest flavor. The flavor can also vary from plant to plant. Those growing in more sunlight tend to be sweeter. The fruits are packed with 18 times more lycopene than tomatoes, and the seeds contain omega-3 fatty acids. The fruit can be subbed for currants, cherries, or raspberries in recipes. If you have a large harvest, the berries can be frozen and added to smoothies, or they can be boiled down and processed through a food mill to create a fruit leather or jam.



Garlic mustard. A great way to control garlic mustard is by hand pulling before it goes to seed. What better motivation to pull it than to add it to your table? Though garlic mustard is a biennial plant (meaning the first and second year's growth look different), young leaves can be eaten in both years. The greens can substitute for any bitter greens, such as spinach or kale, in recipes. They are great sautéed alone or added to soups and pasta. They can also be used to make a flavorful, slightly spicy pesto. The roots, though small, can sub for horseradish root.

This is just a sampling of the many edible weeds in our landscape. If you're interested in learning about others, mark your calendar for May 14. The Forbes State Forest will host a workshop on "Making the Most of Your Piece of Nature" at Mammoth Park from 9:00 a.m. to noon. We will have Barb McMillian presenting "Eat Your Weeds," as well as other talks and resources.



Showcase a Resource:

Tick Research Lab of Pennsylvania

By Celine Colbert, Forester, Pennsylvania DCNR Bureau of Forestry

Even during winter, it's still important to remain vigilant about checking for ticks. If you do happen to find a tick, your first concern is probably whether that tick has Lyme disease or one of the other nasty diseases ticks can spread. Now, there's an easy way to find out.

The Tick Research Lab of Pennsylvania, based at East Stroudsburg University, provides free tick testing to Pennsylvania residents. The lab has tested about 50,000 ticks so far, and about 15,000 of them have been infected..

The testing process is easy. First make sure to save the tick in a plastic bag, then head to <https://www.ticklab.org/> to fill out information on where the tick was located, print the receipt, and mail it and the tick to the lab.

Within three business days of receiving the tick, the lab will send you the test results. This information can be very useful when you choose a course of action after a bite, as symptoms may take weeks to develop and treating the infection as quickly as possible is key to avoiding long-term issues.

Not only does the lab accept ticks from human hosts, but you may also send ticks from pets free of charge.

In addition to the testing service, the Tick Lab's website is full of great resources and tips for preventing tick bites and reducing tick populations.

Annual Report (cont'd)

The board of directors held a second meeting on July 22, again outdoors at the WCD pavilion, to plan the remainder of 2021. We decided to again accept the Westmoreland Sportsmen's League invitation to share their tent at the Westmoreland County Fair in August. There we promoted our association and its mission to many attendees.

We also collaborated again with the Westmoreland Land Trust in the annual Walk in Penn's Woods at their property in North Huntingdon Township on the first Sunday in October.

Our annual meeting and biennial elections in October featured a presentation by Sarah Hall-Bagdonis of the Family Forest Carbon Program, a partnership among the American Forest Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, and America's 22 million private forest owners. Sarah did a wonderful job!

The four existing officers were re-elected for two-year terms. Tim Troup was installed as a voting director to replace Tom Fitzgerald, who chose to give up his position since he now resides in western New York state, too far away to attend meetings. All other voting directors and associate directors continue to serve, and Michael Doucette has come on board as well.

Species Spotlight: Black Birch

Betula lenta

By Celine Colbert, Forester, Pennsylvania DCNR Bureau of Forestry

Black birch, also called sweet birch, is one of the most common trees in our woods, for better or for worse. I'd be remiss to tell you the positive traits of black birch without first informing you that foresters in Pennsylvania commonly consider the black birch an undesirable weed tree.

Let's consider its faults first. Black birch can outcompete many other native tree species, particularly in sites that have been recently harvested. It's a prolific seed producer, and the seeds can travel relatively far to reach these sunny sites.

While other species like the oaks are working on their root systems, black birch grows quickly toward the sun and shades out the other species.

Eastern hardwood forests are healthiest when they contain a diverse mix of native species, so it's a problem when these dense, dark thickets of birch become monocultures.

Now for its virtues: Black birch is a great host tree for caterpillars. In fact, 400 native species feed on its leaves. It is also an incredibly hardy and adaptable species that can grow in rough, rocky soils and even on boulders.

For fall foliage it's considered the best of the birches, with golden yellow leaves covering the branches.

Historically, black birch was the source of oil of wintergreen. In Appalachia, 100 saplings and young trees would be harvested to produce each quart of oil. Today synthetic products have replaced birches.

Birch wood is considered low value and is often used as pulpwood or for furniture, cabinets, and millwork. When the wood is exposed to air it darkens to a color resembling mahogany. In times past, it was used as an inexpensive substitute for the more valued tropical wood.

To identify a black birch, the easiest thing to do is break off a twig. If the result is a wintergreen scent, then you know you have a birch tree.

Thin, smooth grey bark on young trees breaks into plates as the tree ages, and horizontal lines called lenticels are common on the bark.

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Westmoreland Woodlands Improvement Association
Membership Application and Renewal – Dues \$10 per year

Name: _____ Phone: _____

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If you own property, how many acres do you own? _____ Approximately how many of them are wooded? _____

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Westmoreland Woodlands Improvement Association

c/o Westmoreland Conservation District

218 Donohoe Road, Greensburg, PA 15601

Attention: Tony Quadro

www.westmorelandwoodlands.org

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