

WWIA NEWS

Winter 2024

President's Message and Annual Report 2023

By John Hilewick, WWIA President

Wow, the first month of 2024 is already in the rearview mirror. Sometimes things go by fast and sometimes life becomes a slog. I am sort of in a slog period regarding programming and presenters. As you'll see in the calendar of events, we have numerous program possibilities but at this point no confirmed events. I continue to strive to get it done!

I'm pleased to announce that WWIA is now back up to pre-Covid levels of 80 members in good standing. That's quite a few new members plus people renewing after their memberships had lapsed, sometimes for several years!

The first board of directors meeting for 2024 was on Thursday, February 15. As always, notices of future board meetings will be emailed to all WWIA members, who are always welcome to get actively involved in running the group.

Annual Report

WWIA held board meetings at the WCD Barn on January 19, June 22, and October 12, as well as the annual meeting of the membership, including elections, on October 19.

Each meeting included treasurer's reports by Tony Quadro, membership status reports by John Hilewick, and all other necessary or pertinent business. Minutes of these meetings are available upon request to any WWIA member.

2023 Programs

March 4. PA Forestry Association Annual Conservation Dinner & Fundraiser, held in State College.

May 6. A field trip led by Dr. Eric Burkhart of Penn State to a ramps (wild leeks) site in Forbes State Forest for a demonstration and on-site lecture.

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Recap of September Program on CPF Landowner Survey

By Lois Noonan

On September 21, staffers from the James C. Finley Center for Private Forests presented the results of the 2021 Forest Landowners Survey: Giving Voice to the People Who Own Pennsylvania's Forests.

The survey was sent to 6,600 PA woodland owners who own land ranging from 1 acre to 17,000 acres. There was a statistically significant response rate of 36%.

The survey's purpose was to gather information about the values, goals, and activities of private landowners, with the primary objective to determine how best to convey the message of forest stewardship to Pennsylvania landowners.

Presenters were Allyson Muth, director of the James C Finley Center for Private Forests, and Sasha Soto, Ph.D. candidate at Penn State Forest Resources. Here are just a few highlights from the survey:

- The majority of landowners own less than 10 acres.
- The average age of landowners is 66 years, with the oldest being 100 and the youngest 24.
- About half of respondents live on their property.
- The majority of landowners purchased their property outright.
- 32% have done a timber harvest for sale; the majority were satisfied with the outcome.
- Respondents stated that forests are important and humans should love and admire forests. Clean water for drinking and protecting groundwater were also important to them.
- The top five reasons why people own land are wildlife, solitude, beauty, enjoyment, and recreation.

- The top five activities that take place on their land are non-hunting recreation, hunting, wildlife, non-herbicide management and sale of trees.
- The survey also obtained information on how many people have made plans for the future of their property. The majority will be leaving their property to their heirs, others to a trust. Some plan to subdivide and others plan to sell as is.
- The three resources landowners trust most to assist them with their land are the PA DCNR, consulting foresters, and county conservation districts.

In summary, the survey yielded very detailed information about the values, goals, and activities of private landowners in Pennsylvania. This information will be compared to the results of a similar survey conducted in 2010. This will allow the researchers to monitor shifts in landowner demographics, values, goals, and activities over a decade.

Allyson and her team will use that information to improve their outreach, education, and other activities to support landowners across Pennsylvania.

The evening concluded with a presentation by Jeff Osborne, forest stewardship program associate. He talked about what the Forest Stewardship Program is, the basic training required to become a forest steward, and the current status of the program.

In 2021, forest stewards contributed more than 15,000 hours of outreach to their peers and their communities. This included over 45,000 one-on-one conversations with other landowners.

Recap of October Program on Restoring the American Chestnut Tree

By Lois Noonan

On October 19, 2023, WWIA hosted our annual potluck dinner and talk. Our guest speaker, Sara Fern Fitzsimmons, has worked at Penn State with The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) since 2002. Her presentation was “Restoring the American Chestnuts for Robust Forests in the Eastern US: Considerations and Challenges for the Next 200 Years.”

Sara started with a brief history of American chestnut trees in eastern forests. The blight arrived in the United States from Asia sometime before 1900. The chestnut blight is a fungus that can get in through any opening in the tree bark.

Prior to the blight, American chestnut trees were an important food source for wildlife. They produced a consistent, dependable crop, even more so than oaks. Research has shown that when the blight came through, 25% of hard mast production in eastern forests was lost.

American chestnut trees are not threatened, endangered, or extinct, but they are functionally extinct, meaning they no longer play a significant role in ecosystem function. Currently there are 430 million American chestnut trees in the eastern U.S., but the vast majority (84%) of them are only an inch in diameter at breast height (dbh).

The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) strategy for making a disease-resistant chestnut tree is known as 3BUR. B1 is Breeding, B2 Biotechnology, and B3 Biocontrol United for Restoration.

Restoration of the American chestnut is a multidecade project with many challenges to overcome. One major challenge is that planting American chestnuts is not profitable. Today across the eastern U.S., 1.2 billion hardwood seedlings are planted on 2.5 million acres.

But one billion of these seedlings are loblolly pine because they yield a much faster economic return. Pulp and paper can be produced at eight years and pole timber at 15 to 20 years, making loblolly much more profitable for growers.

The remainder of the seedlings planted include oak and tulip poplar, which are planted on about 43,000 acres.

To conceptualize the scale of restoration needed, Sara asked her audience to consider how many American chestnut trees should be planted to reproduce ecosystem viability and how many acres should be planted. She used 1 million acres as a starting point.

If you planted 2 million chestnut trees each year at 500 trees per acre, it would take 250 years to plant one million acres. Even if you covered more acreage by planting only 330 trees per acre, it would still take 165 years to plant one million acres.

And even if many more people got involved in planting American chestnuts, disease-resistant seedlings could not be produced anywhere near quickly enough.

TACF has produced only a total of 200,000 seedlings in several decades. State and private nurseries are not equipped to produce the number of seedlings required for planting on a large scale.

State funding would be needed to produce more trees for planting. In fact, the American Forestry Foundation is making an effort to reinvigorate our state nursery programs.

“Every tree you plant on your property will make an impact,” Sara told the enthusiastic audience. “They can be planted in fields and gaps in your woodlands.”

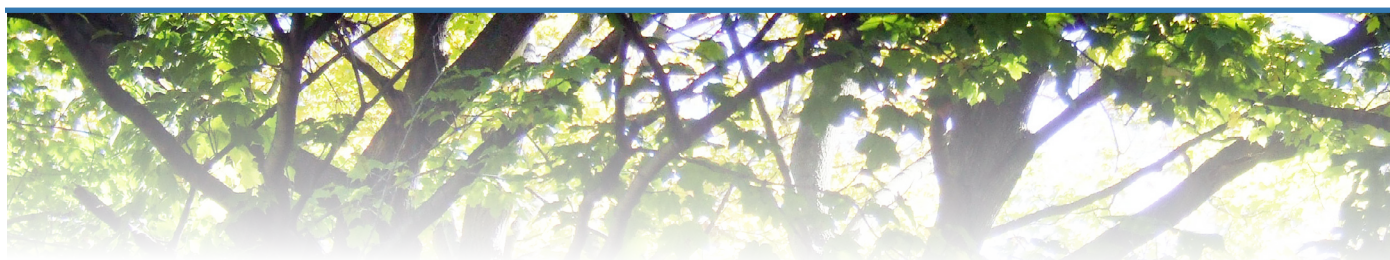
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However, to maximize genetic diversity and get the optimal growth, it is best practice to plant 300 seedlings on an area of 1 to 5 acres. With an average survival rate of 50%, that will leave 150 trees remaining. Planting a research plot like this comes with an obligation to care for the trees over a period of 20 to 30 years.

Hybrid American chestnut seedlings are available through The American Chestnut Foundation.

To learn more about American chestnut trees, visit tacf.org.

Finally, if you locate a healthy, resilient American chestnut tree in the woods, visit treesnap.org to report the tree. Scientists will use the data collected to locate trees for research projects such as genetic diversity and to help us understand why some trees are able to survive the blight.



Westmoreland Woodlands Improvement Association *2024 Calendar of Events (Tentative)*

This calendar is still very much a work in progress. We'll be adding dates and other details as we get speaker confirmations. Please check www.westmorelandwoodlands.org for the latest info and date confirmations.

February or March, date TBD. Scott H. Stoleson from the U.S. Forest Service research and development section will discuss wildlife and forest management, with an emphasis on birds.

March or April, date TBD. Jeremy Weber, an environmental economist at the University of Pittsburgh, will discuss the Family Forest Carbon Program.

Date TBD. An IUP graduate student in herpetology will talk about woodland frogs and other amphibians.

Date TBD. A panel of DCNR-BOF service foresters and private consulting foresters will each describe what information, advice and management options they can offer to woodland owners.

July, date TBD. Our annual Forbes State Forest Field Trip, Skills Day and Forestry Tour. Forester

Michael Doucette of DCNR-BOF Forbes District 4 will be our host, possibly joined by another professional from the forest resources and management side.

August. A repeat of last year's Pennsylvania Forest Stewards and WWIA display booth at the Westmoreland County Fair.

Date TBD. Rob Loeb from Penn State will discuss the study he's been conducting about forest regeneration at the Otto and Magdalena Ackerman Nature Preserve, a property of the Westmoreland Land Trust in North Huntingdon Township.

October 6, afternoon. Site TBD. WWIA's part of the statewide Walk in Penn's Woods on the first Sunday of October.

October 17 or 24. The annual meeting, potluck dinner, and short business meeting. Program TBD.

Date TBD. Melissa Kreye, Ph.D., of Penn State will discuss "Social & Economic Values Associated with Private Forests, Including Wildlife, Carbon Sequestration, and Water Resources."

July 8. 12th annual Forbes State Forest field trip, skills day, and forestry tour. Michael Doucette hosted us for a lecture at the Bureau of Forestry's Forbes District 4 office building and some fieldwork involving forest measurements and management protocols. Then we visited nine timber stumpage sale sites in the Forbes to see various forestry management activities conducted by three different BOF resource management foresters from 1982 through 2016.

July 14. Pennsylvania Forest Steward volunteers' regional meeting, held at the forestland property of WWIA members Tim and Sandy Troup in Armstrong County.

August 5. Field day with three speakers who discussed woodland management; freshwater stream health/bank restoration; and aquatic organisms and freshwater pond/lake ecology. WWIA member Bob Phillips hosted at his woodland along PA Rt. 259 in Fairfield Township. Bob graciously grilled burgers and hot dogs for lunch.

August 18-26. Nine WWIA members who are also PaFSers and two DCNR-BOF service foresters volunteered to staff our display booth at the Westmoreland County Fair. Mary Jane Busch did an exceptional job of organizing and setting up the booth in the large commercial building.

September 21. Staffers from the Finley Center for Private Forests at Penn State reviewed the findings of a 2021 survey sent to 6,600 private forest landowners. The goal: "Giving Voice to the People Who Own Pennsylvania's Forests."

October 1. As part of the statewide Walk in Penn's Woods, WWIA partnered with the Westmoreland Land Trust again. This year we walked at the St. Xavier Nature Preserve, a recently opened 248-acre property near Latrobe. Betsy Aiken, executive director of WLT, gave us a tour of Bellbrook, a 19th-century guesthouse that is the last structure remaining of the Sisters of Mercy's Xavier Academy.

October 19. Annual WWIA meeting, with a potluck dinner followed by the business meeting and election. Then Sara Fern Fitzsimmons, chief conservation officer of The American Chestnut Foundation, spoke on "Restoring the American Chestnut for Robust Forests in the Eastern U.S.: Considerations and Challenges for the Next 200 Years."

Business Items Accomplished in 2023

We re-established the newsletter with a volunteer staff except for Mark Jackson at WCD, with whom we contracted to provide layout and design for three issues per year.

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2024 Officers

President

John Hilewick

Vice President

Fred Lau

Secretary

Terry Gates

Treasurer

Tony Quadro

Publicity, Newsletter Editor

Judith Gallagher

Newsletter Layout and Design

Mark Jackson

Technical Advisors

Michael Doucette

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Levi Canon

Voting Directors

Mary Jane Busch

Rus Davies

Rodney Gerhart

Tim Troup

Associate Directors

Bill Baber

Raul Chiesa

Lois Noonan

Janet Sredy

We retained GoDaddy to provide continued service for our website and domain name.

We also filed our annual statement as a 501(c)3 nonprofit with the State Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations and our IRS Form 990 EZ for 2023 (using the services of R, R & K Accounting of Bedford, PA).

As WWIA is a nominating organization for the WCD, we voted for Jay Bell (farmer director) and Ron Rohall (public director) to be retained as WCD Directors.

Announcements

We congratulate two WWIA members, Caitlyn Hogan and Sandy Troup, for completing the 2023 PA Forest Stewardship training at the Ligonier Camp & Conference Center.

It is with great sadness that we make known the passing of Thomas Fitzgerald, our dear friend, DCNR-BOF service forester, long-time WWIA director, and mentor to so many of us in the forestry community. Tom was 83.

Richard W. Shaver, 83, of Ruffsdales died on January 24. He had woodland property enrolled

in the Tree Farm System and had accomplished many forestry goals on it with the help of consulting forester Michael Wolf.

Annual Meeting Election Results

Our four officers were all re-elected for another two-year term (2024-2025):

John Hilewick as president.

Fred Lau as vice president.

Tony Quadro as treasurer.

Terry Gates as secretary.

Mary Jane Busch was elected a voting director to replace Neva Shields, who resigned after serving several two-year terms. Lois Noonan was elected an associate director to replace Bob McBride, who had also served several terms.

Annual Meeting Raffle Winners

Lois Noonan won the fundraiser raffle of a handcrafted dual-sided, edge grain and end grain cutting and carving board valued at \$150.

Russell Gibbs won the door prize of an eastern bluebird nesting box. He kindly donated the box back to WWIA to be raffled off at a future program.

Recap of Walk in Penn's Woods at St. Xavier

By John Hilewick

On Sunday, October 1, 2023, a group from the Westmoreland Land Trust and four WWIA members met to participate in the statewide Walk in Penn's Woods. Betsy Aiken, executive director of the land trust, led a tour of St. Xavier Nature Preserve near Latrobe.

Betsy opened the three-story brick 19th-century guesthouse Bellbrook for a tour and informative lecture about the structure. That included an opportunity to view vintage photographs of the property when it was the Sisters of Mercy's Xavier Academy and Convent. The guesthouse is the last remaining vestige of the academy.

The 248-acre property includes the former St. Xavier Grove and the grounds adjacent to

Bellbrook, as well as fields, forests, wetlands, and more than a mile of Monastery Run.

Among the many mature trees that make up the grove are oaks, walnuts, maples, cherries, various conifers, northern pecans, and hickories (as well as some that I could not identify).

Betsy said the land trust's future plans include identifying and labeling all the trees of the grove and improving areas of the property for walking paths and additional uses.

Our walk in this branch of Penn's Woods was a wonderful experience. We may go back to St. Xavier Nature Preserve for a future WWIA walk. Thank you for the opportunity, Betsy!

Go Nuts for Acorns!

PART ONE

By Mary Jane Busch

One of the most recognized seeds is the rotund acorn. Like brilliant fall foliage, oak nuts are associated with autumn and are introduced to young children in their science studies for the seed's role in nourishing wildlife and propagating oak trees.

Most people's knowledge about acorns probably concludes with these simple facts, and the importance of these oak gifts is little comprehended or appreciated.

Acorns are the fruits or seeds of oak trees, but not all acorns are created equal. The nuts are species specific and vary in size, shape, color, cupule (cap), and nutrients.

For instance, in the United States, the red oak and black oak have hybridized so extensively that experts argue that the two species cannot be identified by their leaves. But their acorn sets them apart. The black oak acorn's 0.5-1.0-inch body is covered by half or more of the acorn's cupule. The red oak acorn's 0.75-1.25-inch cap sits like a beret on top and covers only a quarter of the fruit.

Oak species are categorized into two main groups, the white oak group and the red oak group. The latter are recognized by the soft bristles on the leaf lobes' tips; the former have no bristles on their leaves. Also, species in the white oak group produce acorns every year, but the red oak group's acorns mature in two years.

In Pennsylvania, the most abundant white oaks are the chestnut oak and the Eastern white oak. The most abundant red oaks are the red oak, black oak, pin oak, and scarlet oak.

Each acorn is one seed (rarely two), protected by a hard outer shell and cupule. The fruit has a high nutrient content, with large amounts of protein, carbohydrates, and fats and critical dietary minerals such as calcium, phosphorus, potassium, and niacin. Acorns also contain bitter, toxic tannins that vary with the species.

To make them palatable, Native Americans



Red oak with acorns on limb. Note the "beret" cupule on the red oak acorns.

Photo by
Mary Jane Busch

gathered acorns and leached the bitter poisons from the nuts. Sometimes the ripe acorns were first ground into flour using a mortar and pestle and then leached. Some tribes roasted the seeds to kill the acorn weevil larva that often metamorphoses inside the nuts.

Each tribe had its species preference and depended on the variety of acorns available in the local environment. Even though they are generally smaller, acorns from the white oak group were often preferred because they are less bitter than fruit from the red oak group.

Mast is the fruits, seeds, and nuts of trees and shrubs that wildlife eat. Soft mast includes fruits and berries. Hard mast includes acorns, hickory nuts, hazelnuts, and beech nuts. Oak trees produce more hard mast (by weight) than all other nut trees combined. An older oak can drop up to 10,000 acorns in a year!

Particularly heavy acorn yields are dubbed mast year events. One hypothesis for mast bumper crops is that the huge seed quantities overwhelm the seed eaters, so more seeds escape for germination.

The significant impact of these acorn bonanzas is evident in nature's food web. A windfall event in 2021 provided abundant food for rodents, the black-legged tick's (aka deer tick's) host, which caused an increase in ticks in 2023.

More than 100 species of vertebrates consume acorns in the United States. Mammals feasting on or caching the nuts include white-tailed deer, squirrels, chipmunks, bear, mice, voles, rabbits, foxes, raccoons, opossums, and wild hogs.

Part 2 of "Go Nuts for Acorns!" will appear in the next issue.



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c/o Westmoreland Conservation District
218 Donohoe Road
Greensburg, PA 15601

Westmoreland Woodlands Improvement Association

Membership Application and Renewal - Dues \$10 per year

Name: _____

Phone: _____

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New Member ☐ or ☐ Renewal

Date: _____

If you own property, how many acres do you own? _____

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