



Middle Creek in Motion

Fall 2024

Summer Songbird Summary

Oh no, it's time for the Fall Newsletter already!? Shorter days, cooler weather, and falling leaves mark the beginning of fall and the end of our MAPS songbird banding season.

As a refresher, Middle Creek participates in MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) songbird banding station run by biologists and educators from the PA Game Commission. The data collected during this banding season helps track changes in populations of bird species and allows our agency to alter our management practices to benefit species in need. It also provides insight into nesting success within the state and the management area.

Following MAPS protocol, our banding station operated for eight days this summer, beginning May 24th and ending July 30th. These eight days consisted of early mornings, hot temperatures, and fascinating bird species! Our crew arrived early in the morning to open mist nets and worked throughout the day to extract and band birds and educate members of the public who joined us for our banding days.

In the 2024 season, we captured 486 birds, 375 of which were newly banded birds, and 111 were recaptures or birds banded in previous years. Since this is our third year of banding, the high number of recaptures represents favorable habitat and resources at Middle Creek WMA. This year, the banding station saw 37 species, including three new species, the pileated woodpecker, mourning warbler, and house finch. Gray catbirds were 51% of our newly banded birds this year, most of which were born this spring. While gray catbirds might be a familiar and unexciting bird to many, they are a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in Pennsylvania. 10% of the North American population breeds in Pennsylvania; therefore, it is a mission to manage and protect specifically for this species. We love having a high capture percentage of gray catbirds at our banding station.



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Photo by Nancy Reber

Important Reminders!

As summer turns to fall, some look forward to cooler temperatures and hunting season, while others wonder how summer could have come and gone so quickly. Middle Creek saw lots of exciting events. Some interesting birds visited during the peak of our lake drawdown this year, notably a white ibis and a marbled godwit.

Now as we move into fall, some highlights include work that will continue on new wildlife viewing areas, first detailed in our all 2023 newsletter and upcoming controlled deer and waterfowl hunts.

Wearing orange is recommended, even if it is not required in the fall. However, it is unlawful to be on State Game Lands from Nov. 15th to Dec. 15th without wearing 250 sq. in. of orange.



Summer Songbird Summary (Continued)

Three years of banding has led to fascinating discoveries and **1,406** birds of **58** species captured at the station. **1,117** of these birds were birds captured once, while the **296** remaining birds were birds caught multiple years, deeming them as recaptures. Gray catbirds are our most caught species, making up **47%** of the total capture. Common yellowthroats and ovenbirds are our second and third most common species.

In upcoming years, we are looking to make this banding station more of an educational opportunity by welcoming members of the public and visiting school students to experience MAPS songbird banding. Keep a lookout for next year's MAPS dates in upcoming newsletters. Please join us for banding to learn more about how the PA Game Commission monitors bird populations, breeding success, and how we manage and protect these species.

Tired Old Tires Finally Get Removed

On Monday August 5th, the Middle Creek habitat crew, interns, biologists, and other volunteers conducted a tire and trash clean up of the Middle Creek main lake while the lake was drawn down.

Most tires collected were not dumped, but were actually used as old Canada goose nesting structures, or erosion control structures decades ago. At the time, this was seen as a good way to both recycle used tires and to provide nesting structures for geese.

They were placed in the lake using metal supports.

However, without regular checks and maintenance, these old tire structures began to deteriorate over the years, causing the nesting structures to break down and drift. Today, all of our nesting structures are in a GIS database and are checked and maintained annually.

Most of these old tires were unmapped, and only seen as a result of the Middle Creek main lake draw down program,

which exposes more shoreline than normal. In August when drawdowns are nearing their peak, habitat crews were able to access the normally submerged tires and metal supports and remove them. In total, the crew was able to remove 70 tractor trailer tires from the lake and a small dump truck's load of metal and other plastics. With everyone's help, we were able to provide better water quality for our migratory birds and other species that utilize Middle Creek's main water impoundment.



Thank you to everyone who helped out for the day and did not mind getting too muddy!

Update on New Wildlife Viewing Areas

Get your binos and spotting scopes ready! The wildlife viewing platform, that will be located off Chapel Road to improve viewing opportunities to the locally named Risser's wetland, impoundment will be constructed shortly! The Risser's impoundment is approximately 15 acres and is the second largest body of water at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area with the largest being the main lake. Risser's attracts lots of waterfowl species including Tundra Swans, Snow Geese, and a diversity of ducks in the winter, as well as migratory shorebirds when mudflats are exposed during intentional periods of lower water levels called drawdowns.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission's engineering department has completed the design work for the viewing platform, all site prep work has been completed by the local habitat crew, all permits have been secured, and an outside contractor will begin construction in the coming months. The platform can be accessed from two locations; one from the north parking lot on Chapel Road off route 897 and another small parking area is being created near the intersection of the internal portion of the Wildlife Drive and Chapel Road. Chapel Road will remain closed to vehicular traffic. The anticipated completion date will be during the month of December, so everything will be ready to go for wintertime wildlife viewing when the interior roads open March 1st!

Future wildlife viewing projects were first detailed in our Fall 2023 version of *Middle Creek in Motion*.

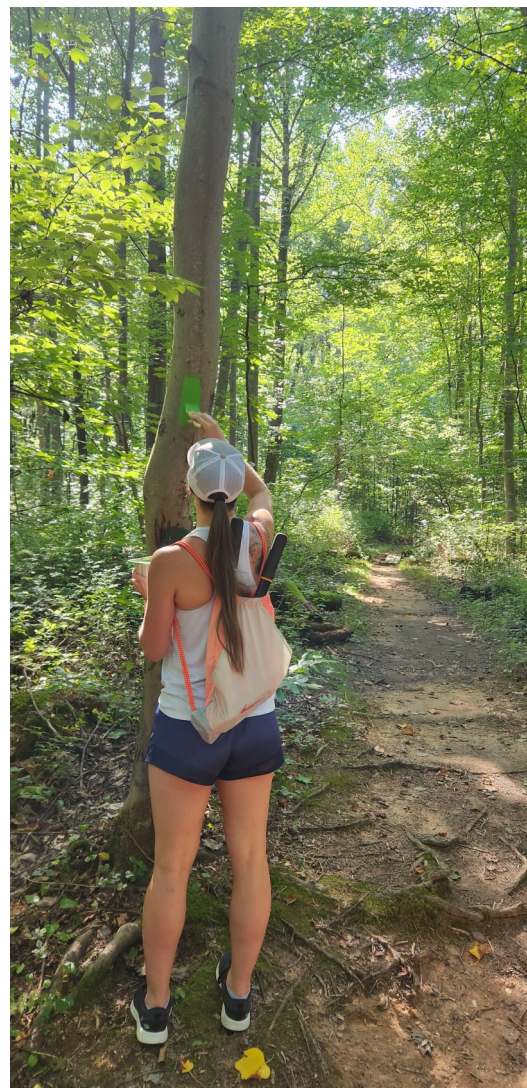
Adopt-a-Trail

Our trails are always a busy place for all who visit Middle Creek. Visitors may be looking to photograph songbirds, admire wildflowers, scout deer for hunting season, or are just looking for a short escape from all the hustle and bustle.

Lots of improvements have been put into our trails in recent years. Extensive boardwalks have been installed to get hikers out of wet sections of the trail, thanks in part to many local Eagle Scout projects and volunteer weekends. Recently we merged three trails into one to create the "Explorer Trail." Other continuous needs include cutting up and clearing blowdowns that normally follow big storms that move through the area, but they also can occur at any time of year. One big task for the entire growing season is keeping trails trimmed back. Invasive multiflora rose seems particularly good at throwing new growth into the paths all season long.

All trails at Middle Creek can be adopted by a user who regularly travels our trails. The task of being a trail adopter simple: when you go for a hike on your trail, carry a pair of clippers with you to trim any vegetation that is starting to get in the way. Boom! That's it! It gets you out while hiking and giving back to Middle Creek. We ask that the trail you adopt be walked at least every couple weeks and especially after a storm event

If you are being interested in being a trail volunteer and adopting a trail, stop by the Visitors Center and we can have you fill out a volunteer form. Our Trails Coordinator will contact you with more information or volunteer opportunities.



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!



Our seasonal drawdowns began earlier in the summer this year, which likely resulted in increased vegetation that grew on the exposed mudflats. Many areas of the lake took on the appearance of calm, green pastures. That didn't stop some unique visitors from feeding in such areas, like a white ibis and marbled godwit. This fall we will see how the waterfowl will benefit from the increased feeding opportunities of submerged vegetation, as long as the non-native carp, which will voraciously feed on aquatic vegetation, don't outcompete everything. More on our carp trapping efforts in the winter newsletter!

Photo by Ken Reinard

Seeds are adapted to move around. Some seeds have tasty fruit to get animals to move them. Others rely on the wind. One of the best-adapted native plants at utilizing the wind is the common milkweed. In the fall on a breezy day, lots of puffs of white fuzz can be seen drifting around carrying a seed to start a new plant. Other members of the milkweed family have similar looking seeds, although usually smaller. If you see lots of these blowing around mid-summer at Middle Creek, it's usually due to the seeds of non-native creeping thistle which can really overtake disturbed areas.



Photo by Kim Reese



Double-crested cormorants are a common waterbird in North America and have greatly expanded their populations over the last few decades. Pennsylvania's 2nd Breeding Bird Atlas found almost a 1,000% increase in the number of blocks where these birds are likely breeding. Although none at Middle Creek, yet. However, they are common migrants here and they are often seen sitting on stumps with their wings spread open to dry them out. Even though they are a waterbird that can swim on the water, and dive for their food, their feathers are not actually waterproof! Thus why they always seem to be drying them off.

Photo by Bonita Palm

Bumper Crop of Barn Owls

This summer proved to be another brilliant nesting season for many of the birds at Middle Creek. Goslings were seen grazing in the shorter grassy fields; wood thrush, scarlet tanagers, and other forest birds were heard staking out their breeding territories in song. Our MAPS banding station seemed to have an endless supply of recently fledged catbirds to be processed and released. While many species had nesting success this year, one type of bird quietly went about breaking statewide records with its productivity.

This summer we confirmed three different pairs of barn owls that successfully nested at three different sites at Middle Creek. This is the first time in recent decades where this many successful barn owl nests have been documented on ANY single property in Pennsylvania. This of course begs the question... why Middle Creek and why now?

Well, there are several reasons why Middle Creek would have the potential to have so many active barn owl nests this year. For one, the habitat is excellent. With approximately 1,650 acres of grassland meadows and agricultural fields,



Middle Creek has an abundance of exceptional habitat that's optimally managed by our land managers for the entire suite of grassland birds in the area including bobolinks, kestrels, meadowlarks, northern harriers, and yes... barn owls. A combination of habitat management practices such as prescribed fire, staggered and delayed mowing regimes, and seed mixes with a diversity of native grasses and forbs lead to structurally diverse meadows that are also ideal habitat for meadow voles which are the preferred prey of barn owls and make up approximately 75% of their diet here in Pennsylvania. In addition, the majority of land surrounding Middle Creek for miles to the north, south and east is primarily agricultural fields interspersed with small woodlots which provides habitat for barn owls at the landscape level and place Middle Creek within a travel corridor dominated by open fields which is ideal for dispersing barn owls searching for a new site to call home.

Speaking of home, barn owls don't actually build a nest like most other types of birds but instead search out a cavity or other dark, secluded location to lay their eggs that provides protection from the weather and potential predators. Examples of suitable nesting locations for a barn owl might be the

inside of a large tree cavity, on top of silage within a silo, or in a nestbox constructed specifically for these owls. Recently, there have been several Eagle Scout projects that have added new barn owl nest boxes at Middle Creek. These enormous, rectangular boxes are painted white to reflect the heat from the sun, and are perched 12 feet in the air on stout posts that are highly visible to barn owls passing by and are proving to be frequently used when placed in suitable habitat. This past year two of the three successful nest sites at Middle Creek were in these new barn owl boxes. This once again demonstrates how partnering with other groups such as scouts and local bird clubs exponentially increases what we can collectively do for the benefit of wildlife.

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Bumper Crop of Barn Owls (Continued)

In total, there were ten nestling barn owls that fledged successfully from the three nest sites at Middle Creek. Since barn owls are known to occasionally have second clutches, it's certainly a possibility that additional nestlings could be produced later this fall as well. If you like to associate owls with autumn and Halloween, consider taking a visit to Middle Creek this fall when there's a clear evening sky with a full moon and scan the fields for barn owls as they slowly glide over the meadows hunting their meadow vole prey.

Middle Creek's Hunting Opportunities and Updates

With the days getting shorter and the weather turning cooler, it's hard to keep your mind off hunting season. Here at Middle Creek, we are gearing up for another exciting fall and the hunting opportunities that come along with it.

On September 14th, our mentored squirrel hunt took place. Ten new squirrel hunters, each paired with an experienced mentor, enjoyed a day of education and time in the field learning not only about the hunting aspect but also hunting safety, scouting, and cleaning and cooking. It is a great way to get outdoors and begin your hunting career, especially if you haven't experienced years of hunting before and are looking for a good way to learn with a mentor.

The drawing for the Middle Creek archery deer hunts recently took place and 45 lucky hunters are set to head to their stands starting in October. Last year hunters found success over the course of the three weeks of hunting and harvested 10 large, healthy deer.

The application period for goose blinds ended August 28th as well and drawn hunters will be ready to take to the blinds on November 23rd. If you did not get selected during the pre-season for a waterfowl blind, duck blinds and no-show goose blinds are available throughout our waterfowl hunting season which begins on November 23rd. You can go to our Middle Creek webpage on the Game Commission website for more information on how to apply for no-show blinds and duck blinds. Hunting days are Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays and can also be applied for on the Middle Creek webpage.



This is a very special year for waterfowl hunting at Middle Creek. Although work on "The Project" began in the late 1960s, and the Visitors Center opened to the public in 1973, the first controlled waterfowl hunt wasn't until 1974, making this year's waterfowl hunt the 50th anniversary of waterfowl hunting at Middle Creek!

Opportunities exist exclusively for waterfowl hunting, and a youth waterfowl hunt day will take place on November 9th.

These hunts can all be applied for free of charge on huntfish.pa.gov during the preseason (not to be confused with the no-show application process). The application period takes place in the summer. If you missed out this year mark it on your calendar for next summer when licenses go on sale.

The good news is you haven't missed out on all the hunting opportunities at Middle Creek this year.

Our popular flintlock/archery deer hunt takes place on December 18th and the application period is open until October 25th and is available on huntfish.pa.gov. Last year, nearly 25% of our hunters for that day were successful in harvesting a deer. Some of the largest deer are harvested on the property during this hunt.

Please visit the Middle Creek webpage for more information or feel free to call the visitor center at 717-733-1512.

Upcoming Events at Middle Creek

September 22nd - December 21st

Sunday, September 22nd from 11:00 AM and Throughout the Day: Birding on the Habitat Hayride

Join Lancaster and Lebanon's bird clubs on National Hunting and Fishing Day's famous Habitat Hayrides to look for birds and learn about the habitats that those species utilize. Please note that seating on the hayrides is limited and are first come, first served. Numerous hayrides will run throughout the day. Rain will cancel this event.

Sunday, September 22nd from 11:00 AM - 5:00 PM: National Hunting and Fishing Day

Join us at the Middle Creek Visitors Center for our annual National Hunting and Fishing Day Celebration where we will have plenty of activities and local organizations to learn about wildlife, hunting, fishing, and much more! There will be a food truck on site and educational sessions in the auditorium.

Saturday, October 5th at 8:00 AM: Fall Migration and Big Sit! (Rain Date: Sunday, October 6th at 8:00 AM)

Join the Lancaster County Bird Club (LCBC) on a morning bird walk in search of fall migrant birds. The walk will end at the LCBC-sponsored Big Sit conducted up the hill from the Visitor Center. The Big Sit is an annual fundraiser held by LCBC and part of a nationwide event to see how many birds can be spotted during the day from inside a 17-foot circle. Bring binoculars!

Wednesday, October 9th at 6:30 PM in the Auditorium: Borders for Birds: Creating Early Successional Habitat and Promoting Healthy Forests on Private Lands by Utilizing USDA Programs

Expand the knowledge of private landowners on what conservation practices they can implement on their land to provide quality wildlife habitat within forests with USDA NRCS programs. We will review some of the practices available including treating noxious and invasive species, types of timber stand improvement, practices to create early successional habitat creation and many more. We will go through step-by-step process of applying and receiving funding from NRCS and what to expect.

Friday, October 25th: Deadline to apply for Middle Creek's Archery/Flintlock hunt

Saturday, November 2nd at 10:00 AM: An Up-Close Look at Our Wildlife Nesting and Roosting Structures

Join the Game Commission for a behind-the-scenes tour of the many different nesting and roosting structures found around the Visitors Center. Houses and roosting structures include those for purple martins, American kestrels, barn owls, eastern bluebirds/tree swallows, chimney swifts and bats. The talk will include all sorts of information for these structures such as characteristics of a well-made nest box, preferred habitat, installation tips, how and why to monitor these structures, and how to prepare wildlife structures for the nesting or roosting season.

Wednesday, November 13th at 6:30 PM in the Auditorium: Solid Air, Invisible Killer: Saving Billions of Birds from Windows

This presentation will present an overview of an important conservation issue for birds and people using Dr. Klem's 2021 book on the topic. The book describes the cause and breadth of this universal problem of windows as indiscriminately lethal and devastating hazards to free-flying birds, and how to solve it. Detailed objective observations and experiments reveal that birds behave as if clear and reflective windows are invisible to them. Alarmingly, among the dead are the fittest individuals in species populations. Unlike the complexities of other environmental challenges, such as climate change, this human-associated avian mortality factor can be solved. The means to do so will be described and are documented in greater detail in the pages of his book.

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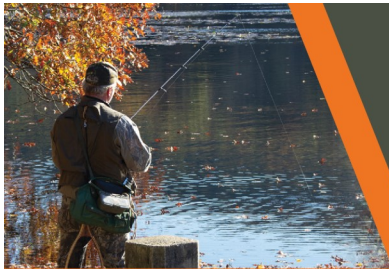
Upcoming Events at Middle Creek September 22nd - December 21st (Continued)

Wednesday, December 11th at 6:30 PM in the Auditorium: Monitoring for Non-native Aquatic Invertebrates in the Great Lakes: A Sentinel Site Approach

Non-native species have significant economic and ecological impacts across ecosystems. Scientists at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center lead an aquatic invasive species monitoring program with many partners in the US Great Lakes to detect new species and inform management decisions. This group uses various techniques to collect and analyze samples for non-native organisms.

Saturday, December 14th at 11:00 AM: Winter Animal Tracking

Learn about animal tracks and how best to find them in the winter. This program will start by learning about common animal tracks and signs to look for, including scat, browse, and more. Attendees will learn how this relates to trapping, law enforcement, hunting, and other activities. Tracks will then be searched for in the field in places like stream banks, fields, and if possible, snow.



20 National 24
HUNTING AND FISHING DAY
SEPTEMBER 22ND | 11 A.M. - 5 P.M.



**MIDDLE CREEK
WILDLIFE
MANAGEMENT
AREA**

**FLY TYING | MUZZELOADER BUILDING
DECOY CARVING | FALCONRY | LIVETALKS**

**ARCHERY SHOOTING | LIVE K-9 DEMOS
WOODMOBILE | SIMULATED TARGET SHOOTING**

**CONTRIBUTE TO CONSERVATION WITH A SPECIAL ITEM RAFFLE
OVER 35 DIFFERENT VENDORS! | FOOD TRUCK ON-SITE**



Contact us! Have a question or comment about Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area? We would love to hear from you!
Please contact us at middlecreek@pa.gov.