

quill

FROM THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION | FALL 2020



we're (carefully) reopening on sept. 8

WHILE OUR TRAILS HAVE BEEN OPEN THROUGH THE PANDEMIC, our Visitor Center closed on Friday, March 13—and has not been open since. Until now.

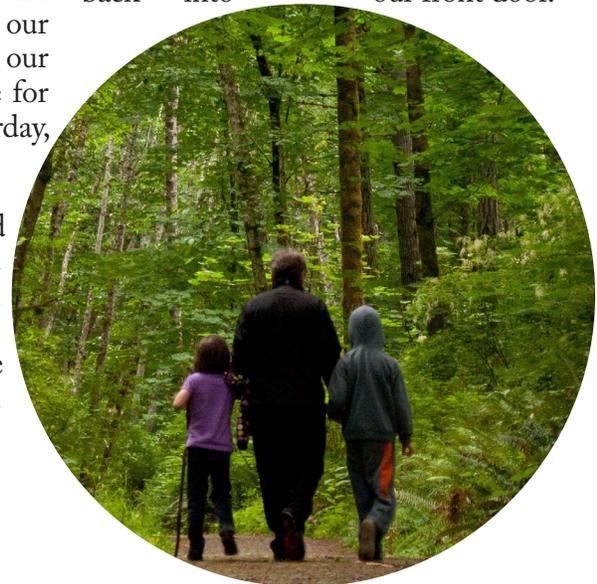
We are happy to share that our Visitor Center—at last!—reopens to regular hours on **Tuesday, September 8 at 9:00 am**. From that day moving forward, we are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. weekdays and Saturday; our Sunday visitors may park at the Hagy's Mill lot and walk on our trails, as always, but the Visitor Center remains closed on Sundays.

We welcome you to again visit our center and its exhibits, art gallery, and gift shop. Yes, you can even purchase our world-class birdseed again! In fact, our acclaimed native plants also will be for sale at our front door starting Saturday, September 12.

Of course, visitors will be required to wear masks, there are posted limits on the number of people in each room, and our reception staff is behind a plexiglas barrier, all for the protection of both you and our staff.

While we are still not offering person-to-person programming yet as well, please check out our robust schedule of virtual programs, including the popular Thursday Night Live, every Thursday evening at 7:00 pm, starting on September 10. The fall lineup includes a conversation about honeybees, a dive into the connection between bats and COVID by a bat researcher (see page 4), and much more.

For everyone who has been on our trails the last six months, we are honored that our forests and fields have offered solace at this challenging time. Now, we greatly look forward to welcoming you back into our front door.



director's cut

RAIN, RAIN GO AWAY!



A FUNNY THING HAPPENED when tropical storm Isaias plowed through here in August. The same exact utility pole that was pulled down by the freakishly strong June 3 derecho caught fire that day; the brand new pole lasted only two months. That's it.

While the city's official rain gauge measured 4.16 inches of rain that day, our own rain gauge measured a whopping 7 inches of perception. Manayunk's Main Street was creamed, the street and businesses flooded, and the Wisahickon overtopped Bell's Mill Road.

As of August 13, the city's official weather station says we've had 30.81 inches of rainfall this year when we'd normally expect just above 26.04. No surprise: we are 4.75 inches above normal. But this is not normal anymore. As Isaias reminded us, we are in the New Abnormal. Projections indicate that while we'd have expected 42.1 inches of rainfall (the average between 1971 and 2000), it's possible that this will jump to 52.6 inches by 2080, a 25% increase.

And gentle rainfall is increasingly a thing of the past. Of the top 50 American cities with the largest increases in heavy downpours, Philadelphia ranks number 3 nationally: the number of annual downpours jumped a

remarkable 360% between 1950 and 2018. Harrisburg ranked number 7 and Lancaster 14; Pennsylvania is getting wetter across the state.

Since 2010, we have suffered through the two wettest years on record, the wettest day ever, two hurricanes, two derechos, and the snowiest winter ever. That's the New Abnormal, increasingly erratic record-setting weather.

This weather has also thrown our staff for a loop, as we have spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning up after all these storms, and that pole has set us back financially. In the New Abnormal, we have more work to do repairing our property.

As if a pandemic, a critical civil rights reckoning, and an economic meltdown were not enough, Isaias reminds us that climate change is on that crowded front burner too. Our climate is not just getting warmer, it's getting wetter and weirder in the New Abnormal.

Mike Weilbacher, Executive Director
mike@schuylkillcenter.org
@SCEEMike on Twitter

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clinic transition

CHRIS STRUB BECOMES NEW DIRECTOR

By Amy Krauss, Director of Communications

MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO, the Schuylkill Center embarked on an extraordinary journey with Rebecca Michelin, who then began her tenure as our Director of Wildlife Rehabilitation. She had a formidable task of reopening our Wildlife Clinic, and did it with enthusiasm and an incredible amount of hard work.

In July, Rebecca made the difficult decision to return to her home country of Canada to pursue veterinary medicine and the once-in-a-lifetime possibility of collaborating on a wildlife medicine program with the veterinary college. She acknowledged that she was “honored to have been a part of this incredible team, and I hope that what I have contributed to this community and this organization equals the extraordinary gifts that I have received in return.”

To ensure a seamless transition over the summer, Chris Strub, her Assistant Director for the last two years, assumed the role of Director, and Rebecca became our consulting rehabilitator. Liz Ellmann, an intern before joining the permanent team in 2019, stepped up into Chris’ former position. Having worked as a volunteer with Chris and Liz, Board Trustee Staci Vernick commented, “Chris brings solid wildlife rehab experience and deep commitment to the clinic’s mission to his new role. As a team, Chris and Liz will continue to play a critical role as key members of the regional wildlife rehabilitation network.”



ABOVE: CHRIS STRUB SYRINGE FEEDING A REDTAIL HAWK SUFFERING FROM DEHYDRATION AND SHOCK.

Chris, himself a veteran rehabilitator, joined our staff in 2018 after a five-year stint at New York City’s Wild Bird Fund, where he acquired the fundamentals of avian rehabilitation. His foundation included knowing what to feed them, stress minimization, safe handling practices, and evaluating patients for release. He also acquired a deep understanding of medical knowledge by learning common causes of injury and illness, wound care, medications and dosing, and triage of critical patients. When Chris arrived here, he quickly expanded his knowledge to mammals and reptiles under Rebecca’s tutelage.

With Chris taking on more animal care, he has handed off the responsibility of managing the robust volunteer program to Liz. The clinic’s staff can only perform their lifesaving work with the help of an army of volunteers that assist in feeding, housing, and cleaning the thousands of animals that visit the clinic annually. While we have paused new volunteer orientation for the moment, Liz is now responsible for the innovative training program which includes online courses for progressive skill development for current volunteers. She knows that the most important part about developing a clinic volunteer is “to give them the building blocks to hone their skills so that they will have the confidence to eventually handle the animals and feed many hungry little mouths.”

Executive Director Mike Weilbacher offers, “the Wildlife Clinic made great strides in the last two years under Rebecca’s leadership. All of us here look forward to supporting Chris and Liz in continuing the arc of the clinic’s growth.” 🦋



ABOVE: LIZ ELLMANN EXAMINING A BOX TURTLE DURING A NEW INTAKE



naturalist's notebook

THE BAT-COVID CONNECTION

By Mike Weilbacher

AS THE WORLD WRESTLES with both treating current patients while racing to find a cure for COVID-19, many biologists worldwide are focusing their attention on an unlikely COVID connection: bats. Long misunderstood, feared, and underappreciated, bats just might be patient zero for the virus—scientists widely believe that the virus evolved in bats and jumped to humans either directly or through an intermediate host, likely a Chinese mammal of some kind.

To explore this connection, join us on **Thursday, September 17 at 7 p.m.** for Thursday Night Live, where we are joined by biology professor Dr. DeeAnn Reeder, a bat expert who is studying the link between COVID and bats.

Reeder and her team at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA have been recently given a rapid research grant from the National Science Foundation, and this summer, her group has been carefully examining 240 samples of bat tissue from Reeder's extensive collection, deactivating the viruses within, and analyzing the DNA to better understand the family of viruses. During the Thursday event, she'll share her research and answer your many bat questions.

While these samples likely will not have the COVID coronavirus, Reeder expects the tissues to contain many other coronaviruses, as this group likely evolved in bats. But when these bats were alive, they were completely healthy with none of the many side effects that have infected millions worldwide, killing so many. What can we learn about bats from studying these viruses?



LEFT: THE PIED BAT OF AFRICA, SO UNIQUE IT WAS PLACED IN ITS OWN GENUS, WAS DISCOVERED BY OUR SPEAKER, DR. DEEANN REEDER.



ABOVE: BAT EXPERT DEEANN REEDER WITH A FEMALE HAMMERHEAD BAT.

“We’re using the bats as a tool to tell us ‘How do you survive?’” Reeder told the Philadelphia Inquirer this summer.

In addition, Reeder will share the latest on white-nose syndrome, the fungus that has been decimating bat populations across North America, including Pennsylvania. And she’ll share the important ecosystem services that bats perform, including and especially the removal of thousands of mosquitoes from our night sky.

While the world waits with bated breath for a cure for COVID, Reeder and host Mike Weilbacher will also highlight another aspect of the pandemic—that preservation of intact ecosystems might reduce the possibility of pandemics like this. It is the deforestation of habitats worldwide that puts humans into contact with novel viruses—like this and Ebola—that, never having evolved with or come into contact with our species, wreak havoc once they do.

When noted 19th century naturalist Henry David Thoreau wrote, “In wildness is the preservation of the world” all those years ago, he was certainly not considering pandemics—but turns out truer words may never have been written. ✂

preschool spotlight

KINDERGARTENERS DEEPEN THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

By Amy Krauss, Director of Communications

FOR OUR 5- AND 6-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTENERS, learning outdoors is an ideal place to set the classroom scene. Given the evidence of the overall health benefits of being outside, especially in the context of the current health crisis, our kindergarten is shifting to all outdoor classes this fall. As a nature preschool, one that uses nature as the primary context for learning, we believe that nature improves physical, mental, and emotional health and development in children. In this setting, they are learning a language and literacy skills to become actively engaged as explorers, mathematicians, storytellers, readers, authors, and stewards of the environment.

The Nature Preschool has honored the relationship between children and nature as the core of its mission since its founding. According to Interim Director of Nature Preschool Marilyn Tinari, “in both the preschool and kindergarten classes, the children are offered the gift of developing their emerging skills – academically, socially and emotionally – through engagement with the natural environment on the grounds of the 340-acre Schuylkill Center.”

Ann Ward, our kindergarten lead teacher and 30-year veteran in the field of early childhood education observes, “the majority of other schools have indoor programs where they need to take the student outdoors to learn or they take them on short field trips. So what we're doing is essentially flipping that and our children will be spending all of their time outdoors this year.” We incorporate all of the Pennsylvania standards into those activities so our children are growing physically and cognitively.

Our outdoor programming offers a rich and healthful alternative to traditional early childhood education, something that is essential now more than ever. In the midst of natural and social crises, we have the opportunity to amplify our relationship with nature and one another, starting with the education of our youngest citizens. ✂



The Nature Preschool and kindergarten are offering on-site programming outdoors for the 2020–2021 school year. We are following all required safety procedures as described in our COVID-19 plan (required by the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning, one of our regulatory agencies). Masks are required for children (over 2 years of age) and adults, cleaning and sanitizing, monitoring health (of children and staff) and, as much as possible, social distancing. Additionally, in order to reduce exposure, we will create “pods,” small consistent groupings of 6 children with one teacher.

trustee spotlight

THANK YOU FOR 27 YEARS OF SERVICE

AT OUR ANNUAL MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 8, the Center's Board of Trustees bid a fond farewell to three beloved trustees, each completing three consecutive three-year terms: Kathy Wagner, Tim Szuhaj, and Chip Lee. The threesome also includes the last three presidents of the organization.

"I'm not sure we've ever had three former presidents cycle off at one time," said Executive Director Mike Weilbacher. "Together they offered a combined 27 years of service to the Center, which is remarkable, and each of the three provided uniquely invaluable insights as we grew and developed in the last decade. They will all be greatly missed."

Kathy Wagner

When Kathy became president a year and one half after joining the board, she was succeeding Binney Meigs, the son of Henry Meigs, one of the Center's founding visionaries. Kathy imagined it would be a challenge following in his footsteps given his family history and style of leadership, but she hit the ground running. She built on Binney's structure and played a huge role in our strategic planning efforts. She facilitated workshops for the board and staff, and was instrumental in helping write our new mission and vision statements in 2014.

"I'm particularly proud of encouraging the development of a task force to look at how to replace the departure of the Green Woods Charter School with the new Nature Preschool." Kathy was also pleased to have celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Center while she was President, which included the planting of Jubilee Grove.



ABOVE: KATHY, CHIP AND TIM ENJOYING A MOMENT IN OUR TREE CANOPY PRE-PANDEMIC

Tim Szuhaj

Tim, a practicing attorney, served as both secretary and president, not to mention chair of many committees. He recalls, "what was so rewarding for me was working on both strategic plans," first in 2014 and again in 2019. Tim chaired the second strategic planning committee. He added, "I was pleased to be a part of the conception and implementation of the preschool program. And the programming put it on the right path with the center's goals." Today, Nature Preschool is one of our most bustling places, welcoming about 80 children to the Center each day, giving children a unique opportunity to explore and learn about their relationship to the natural world.

Chip Lee

As part of the finance committee, Chip, an investment banker, was delighted to be part of the process that greatly improved our financial reporting. "For an institution of our size, we have an extremely good process. While this doesn't necessarily impact the organization from the exterior, internally, it helps us as a business to be more in control and to be able to adapt and react to changing situations."

Chip, it should be noted, is completing his second round of three-year terms. He had served on the board in the mid-1990s as well.

Our board members bring incredible enthusiasm and specific knowledge that will continue to be helpful for the Center to move forward. Given the pandemic, there's a renewed energy in our mission and Tim, Kathy and Chip know that they're leaving the institution in great hands with the current and incoming board members.

"The three graciously gave the Center their skills, energy, commitment and leadership collectively for almost three decades," said Christopher McGill, current treasurer and the next president, "making the Center better than when they arrived, leaving us a stronger, more dynamic organization with a bright future. I take comfort knowing that all three will be lifelong friends as we continue to build on their hard work."

Mike Weilbacher also noted they will not be going too far away. "They all join our Advisory Board, the wonderful group of former presidents, some dating back to the 1980s, who continue to meet to make sure we are pointed in the right direction. Hope we see them later in the fall when that group next meets." ✂



staff spotlight

CURATOR JOINS OUR FAMILY

WE ARE PLEASED TO WELCOME TINA PLOKARZ to the Schuylkill Center as the Director of Environmental Art. Having curated exhibits at the Independence Seaport Museum, Vox Populi, and Philadelphia Contemporary, Tina brings broad expertise and involvement within the Philadelphia environmental art community. In this role, Tina will oversee all aspects of continuing our rich environmental arts program in our gallery spaces and on the Center's grounds.

Tina is enthusiastic about joining the team and remarks, "I am excited to be in a place which has backed artists' creative explorations in the environment over the last two decades. In this moment of change, I look forward to growing an inspiring and welcoming art program that challenges our understanding of art, nature and the environment."

"Tina is uniquely positioned to advance our art program," said Mike Weilbacher, our executive director. "She already serves on the program's advisory board, so she knows the program well, and is a highly experienced and respected arts professional. As the most ambitious art program in an American nature center, Tina will push this pioneering program forward." ✂



ABOVE: TINA PLOKARZ, CREDIT JULIA STAPLES

A heartfelt thank you to the following staff who have recently moved on from the Schuylkill Center:

Christiana French-Franco
Preschool Teacher

Emily Harkness
Assistant Director of Early Childhood Education

Emily Smulowitz
Program Coordinator

Michael Verla
Kindergarten Teacher

opening september 21

ECOTACTICAL: EARTH DAY AT 50

Through a variety of media, artists in our exhibition explore connections between the activist origins of Earth Day in the 1960s and more contemporary expression of artists in activism today.



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support

THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER

Make a gift today to help us connect
people and nature, restore the land, and
foster future environmental stewards



RESUMING IN SEPTEMBER

online thursday night
L!VE programs



www.schuylkillcenter.org