



## Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve Components \$2,000,000

### **Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve History and Background**

Thanks to the combined effort of two conservation organizations – Audubon Society of Western PA (ASWP) and Western PA Conservancy (WPC), Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve has helped to connect people to birds and nature since 1979. Two years prior, Mrs. John F. Walton, Jr. and Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Whetzel, Jr. donated 90 acres of abandoned farmland to WPC. The Conservancy, while retaining ownership of the land, chose Audubon to operate it as a nature reserve and environmental center. With initial support from the Evans Family Foundation and Laurel Foundation, and tremendous support from the local community, ASWP hired its first staff members and created the infrastructure needed for office and educational space.

Over the next 35 years, Beechwood has grown from its original 90 acres to 134 acres of wooded rolling hills with over 5 miles of trails, a 125-seat auditorium, nature store, administrative offices, education complex, and native plant center. Most recently we added DiscoverGround, the region's first nature-play area that encourages nature exploration and provides unstructured play opportunities for younger children and their parents. These attributes have enabled ASWP to become one of the premier environmental education organizations in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Capping off our many public offerings are our Environmental Education programs—the hallmark of Beechwood and many people's first touchpoint with our organization. The programs are designed to take advantage of the reserve itself and utilize many of its features including the pond, streams, fields, and woodlands. Throughout Beechwood's 35-year history, programs have been developed to take advantage of the changing environment or to meet the evolving needs of students and teachers.

- When the pond was installed in 1981, ASWP began programs on Watersheds and Wetlands. These programs stressed the importance of wetlands as filters in our environment and focused attention on local water quality.
- We continued to utilize Beechwood's grounds as a teaching tool during the Gypsy Moth infestation of the late 1980s. We educated people about natural vs. chemical controls and established a series of programs to teach about cycles in nature and the role of natural predators.
- As deer population densities increased and the catastrophic impact of deer over-browsing became apparent across Pennsylvania, ASWP began education programs on the impact of deer and initiated a deer management plan on both of its reserves.
- And when non-native invasive species began moving into Beechwood, we developed programs to promote the importance of native plants and habitats.

From these real-life situations sprung our award-winning Schoolground Habitat Enhancement and Restoration Program and the Beechwood-based Backyard Habitat Academy. These programs teach people the techniques of habitat restoration and the importance of native wildlife and equip them to apply the learned techniques in their own backyards and communities.

### **Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve Physical Elements**

#### **Beechwood ADA Accessible Trail**

**\$250,000**

While the steep and uneven topography contributes much to the beauty of Beechwood, it can make it challenging for those with physical disabilities to fully explore. By creating an accessible handicapped trail, Audubon will allow all of our visitors, regardless of physical abilities, an opportunity to connect with birds and nature. Audubon looks to address this issue by creating a fully accessible trail loop that will allow easier access to Beechwood's many treasures. A flat, wheelchair accessible trail, with crushed limestone for support, and elevated boardwalks when necessary, will enable guests with physical disabilities the opportunity to enjoy all that Beechwood has to offer.

#### **Additional ADA Accessible Improvements (outdoors)**

**\$75,000**

In addition to the creation of a new trail, Audubon will make a series of improvements to existing outdoor amenities to make them more accessible and in compliance with all current safety codes. This include a new pond boardwalk, new display gardens at Audubon Centre for Native Plants, new ramps and railings at "Birds Nest" (trail overlook), and improved access and viewing at the Raptor Center.

#### **Access Road to Pond and Lower Lot/Maintenance Building**

**\$100,000**

The pond at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve is one of the property's most popular features. It is the primary destination for many visitors and incorporated into many of our school visits. Access to the pond, though, can be difficult for those with mobility issues. Audubon plans to resurface an existing gravel "cartway" (useable now only by 4-wheel drive vehicles) to allow Access vans and other service vehicles to safely reach the level of the pond. This will also provide access to the planned new trail maintenance facility.

#### **Parking Lots and Entrance**

**\$200,000**

Beechwood's existing parking lot is compacted gravel that has been in place since the Reserve opened in 1978. Partially sloped and with poor drainage, it does not fully meet current stormwater Best Management Practices and is extremely difficult to maintain in winter. Utility poles partially obscure a driver's line of sight at the exit and there is minimal lighting in the lot. Audubon plans to reconfigure the parking lot to improve access/egress, allow for bus drop-off that does not require students to cross in front of vehicles, resurface the lot, and add sufficient LED lighting for safe nighttime activities. Two

different techniques of porous-pavement will be used to demonstrate options for homeowners/businesses to consider at their locations.

### **Trail Maintenance Building and Equipment**

**\$125,000**

Audubon takes great pride in the condition of Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve and dedicates considerable resources to keeping the trails and grounds in a condition that maximizes the appeal for both people and wildlife. Our 1960's-era Massey Ferguson tractor is no longer serviceable and much of our other equipment is beyond their expected life span. Additionally, storage for tractors, lawnmowers, and other power equipment at Beechwood is minimal. Audubon proposes to replace key pieces of landscaping equipment and to build a small pole building adjacent to our lower parking lot to house the equipment.

### **Building Improvements**

**\$250,000**

As part of our commitment to increasing accessibility throughout our facilities and our goal to being a carbon-neutral organization, Audubon has outlined a series of enhancements and upgrades throughout our existing buildings. Beechwood's offices and nature store are housed in a farm building over 125 years old. Although routine maintenance is conducted and some major mechanical systems updated, many parts of the facility date to the 1979 remodeling. The roof and the windows are both in need of replacement, and the main heating system should be upgraded. Lighting, which was the most efficient available at the time it went in, also needs to be replaced. Throughout the administrative building and the adjoining education complex, doors, thresholds, some flooring surfaces, and other building elements need to be updated to meet the most current ADA recommendations. A new paved pathway around the back of the building will enable better access to our 125-seat auditorium.

### **Beechwood Legacy Fund**

Audubon has recently entered into a new 75-year joint operating agreement with Western PA Conservancy for the management of Beechwood. To help insure that we can continue to operate Beechwood in perpetuity, ASWP has established the Beechwood Legacy Fund. This fund will be part of Audubon's permanent endowment fund, the proceeds of which are used to support our operating budget. The Beechwood Legacy Fund will be funded at an initial level of \$1,000,000 through our Centennial Campaign, with an eventual goal of \$4,000,000 through future legacy (estate) gifts. Several long-timer Beechwood Supporters have indicated their plans to support Audubon with estate gifts and the formalization of the Beechwood Legacy Fund should encourage more. The fund will have two primary objectives – continuing Beechwood as a best-in-class nature center and reserve and funding the Whetzel Land Steward position.

### **Whetzel Land Steward**

Josh and Farley Whetzel, and their gift that became Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve, are at the center of the most important event in ASWP's storied 100-year history. It transformed the organization from an all-volunteer organization to the region's most respected environmental education organization.

Because of the success of Beechwood, organizations and municipalities throughout western PA turn to Audubon for advice on managing their property and creating healthy green spaces where wildlife can flourish and people can connect with nature. Often, these small parks and green spaces, are the only connection people have with nature and serve as an urban oasis in our rapidly built-over landscape. They also serve as critical stopover habitats for migrating birds that need both the food and shelter they provide. Unfortunately, ASWP cannot currently accommodate all of the requests for support that it receives.

To address this growing need, ASWP proposes to create the Whetzel Land Steward. This position will conduct and/or oversee the following items:

- Manage Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve property in a manner that maximizes both the visitor experience and its ecological value;
- Create demonstration projects at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve and other ASWP properties from which other land managers can learn;
- Conduct research and prototype new advances that would benefit small-parcel land management at Audubon properties and throughout the region; and
- Consult with other organizations and municipalities on land-management techniques and grow opportunities to connect people with nature.

The immediate focus of the Whetzel Land Steward will include:

Addressing the impact of Emerald Ash Borer at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve by implementing a tree replacement plan.

Coordinating a comprehensive Invasive Plant protocol for Audubon properties that can be extended to neighboring private and municipal properties.

Creating a re-vegetation demonstration program for our Zeloyle property that converts a 50-acre cornfield in a manner that maximizes wildlife value and carbon sequestration potential.

Developing a toolkit based on the American Trails guidelines, customized for western PA that also incorporates ASWP's expertise in interpretation and habitat management. Incorporate demonstration projects into Beechwood that can serve as examples for trail developers, with particular emphasis on accessibility.