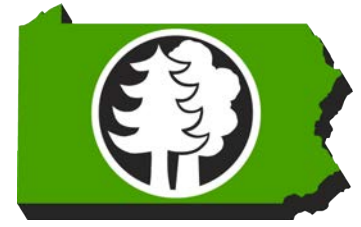


Pennsylvania Forest Stewards News



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Chairman's Column

By Bob Slagter, PA Forest Stewards Steering Committee Chair, '08

Walking with Nature

"The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness."

- John Muir, circa 1890

There is an exciting new movement out there and, believe it or not, it makes all previous forest beliefs pale in comparison. I recently read the Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and, after discussing it with some folks, I found that it is not a long stretch to see the connections between trees and everything around them.

This award-winning novel is based on the author's premise that trees communicate over decades and, in some cases, millennia with each other, with other creatures of the forest, and, if we know how to listen, with us! What this brings is a new way to think about our relationship with the natural world. It takes away the excuses for deforestation and adds a dimension, not of anthropomorphism, but of partnership with our tree cohabiters on the planet.

It is so easy to believe we are the only boat in this pond and thus free to bring about whatever it is we need or wish for or can possibly imagine. We do this without the input of any other species on earth. It is pointed out that in terms of "Origin," we start out with 25% of the exact same genes that trees have. So,

if we start the same, is it such a long stretch to believe that we could have mutual interests, mutual needs, and mutual desires?

I quoted John Muir here because he obviously had this position in place in his time. In fact, Muir also said in an 1878 paper, "We all travel the milky way together, trees and men..." And the entire quote I started this article with is, "In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness."

I noticed he states we walk WITH nature, not in or within or anything other than we are accompanied by nature on our walks. He certainly was walking WITH nature, according to this quote and, as I thought about it after reading the book, isn't that how we Stewards look at our relationship with trees? We don't just

like trees for all the incredible gifts they bring, but we entirely believe they have much more to give than wood products.

Trees are in constant contact with the earth, with the sky, with other species, and with other trees. And they perform this contact every second of every day for, in some cases, thousands of years. They touch branches, they connect with other trees underground through fungal networks as they constantly dig for sustenance, and they produce oxygen together with others out of thin air. We Stewards see it and realize this relationship is far more than US and THEM—it is a true symbiotic approach to life. A walk with nature may be what life really is, don't you think?

And at the end of the book, the author concludes that, no matter what disasters we create for ourselves, trees know how they will survive. Take care and stay well.

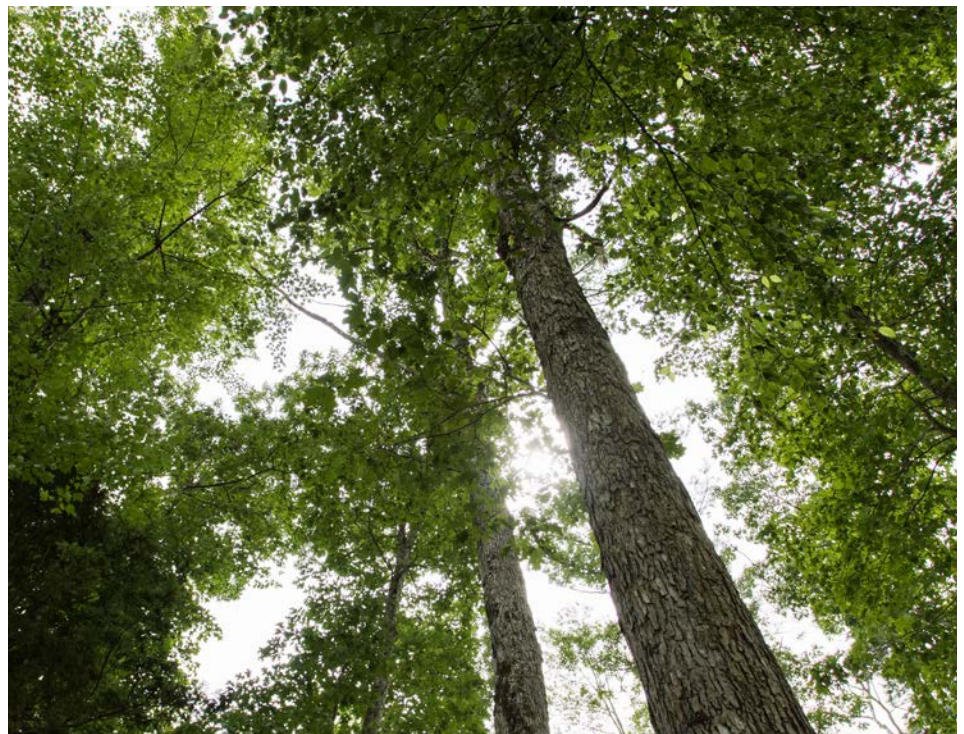


Photo by Laura Kirt

Richard Powers' novel The Overstory explores the connection between trees and everything around them.



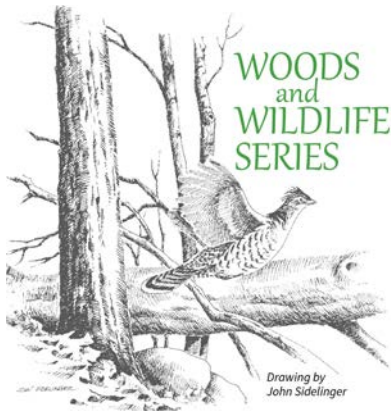
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PennState College of Agricultural Sciences

Let's Go on a Snake Hunt: Non-venomous Snakes

Article and Photos by Mike and Laura Jackson, PA Forest Stewards, Class of '00



This article is part of a series exploring animals and their dependency on forests. Each article blends personal experiences with factual information and will challenge you to look closely in your woodlot for evidence that you are a habitat provider for the species.

Snakes are scaly, slithery, but not slimy. These often misunderstood and underappreciated woodland creatures actually fascinate both of us, so we enjoy getting a close look by holding snakes. As science teachers, both of us had a variety of native snakes as classroom pets, which helped many students overcome their fear of snakes.

Where do children get that fear? Based on our experience teaching thousands of students, we think it is a learned emotion passed from adults to children. Many young children that we've taught don't show any fear when they see a snake, while others shudder or cringe. We think that the fearful child most often has parents who don't like or are afraid of snakes and shared this negativity with their child.

When Laura directed the Bedford Environmental Center in Bedford, PA, she was in charge of environmental learning activities for students K-5. The second-grade students were thrilled when they did the snake lab. Since we have a lot of eastern ratsnakes that lay eggs in our mulch pile, she collected hatchlings in early September and took 20 or 30 to school for students to hold and observe. The snakes were the shape and thickness of pencils, but about a foot long. Students didn't have to hold them, but many wanted to and quickly fell in love with these docile creatures.

If the students squeezed the snakes too hard, they might bite, but their sharp teeth are tiny and feel more like rough Velcro® than an actual bite. We hoped those positive encounters with snakes in our classrooms would help students appreciate snakes and understand the fallacy of the all-too common sentiment: "The only good snake is a dead snake."



Eastern ratsnake

Students of all ages were fascinated by hatchling eastern ratsnakes and were amazed to learn that snakes never blink. Snake eggs (you can see part of one below the snake) are tough and leathery, so baby snakes have a special projection on their nose called an egg tooth to slit open the shell.

Outside the classroom, we enjoyed exploring for snakes in our woods with our great-nephews and great-nieces. The boys wanted snake sticks like Uncle Mike's, so he made smaller versions for each of them out of a dowel rod and a big metal hook. We showed the kids how to look under rocks and logs and taught them to always replace what was moved.



The Jacksons' great-nephews

Over the years, we've had a lot of exciting encounters with snakes on our mostly forested property in southern Bedford County, so we thought we'd share a few with you. This article highlights non-venomous snakes, and the next article will feature venomous snakes.

A true denizen of forests throughout Pennsylvania, northern ringneck snakes (*Diadophis punctatus edwardsii*) are common, but very secretive. We found this one under a rotten log in the woods near our garden. Their yellow to gold neck ring and similarly colored belly are a striking contrast to their iridescent slate-gray dorsal surface, so these snakes are easy to identify. They are perfectly harmless to people, but like eastern ratsnakes, they can emit a foul-smelling musk when disturbed. Adult ringneck snakes are slender (about the thickness of a pencil) and grow 10 to 20 inches long, so children are seldom hesitant to hold them. We housed this snake in a



Northern ringneck snake

terrarium for a few weeks in early July and fed it worms and slugs. Imagine our surprise when we discovered that it laid eggs! We carefully placed the mother and her eggs under a rotten log in our woods, glad that she was increasing the population of these beautiful snakes.

Another forest dweller, the northern redbelly snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*) is even smaller than the northern ringneck, rarely exceeding 10 inches in length. It is also secretive and found throughout Pennsylvania but isn't common in the southeastern or southwestern counties. We found this snake under a rock upslope from our property on Tussey Mountain and

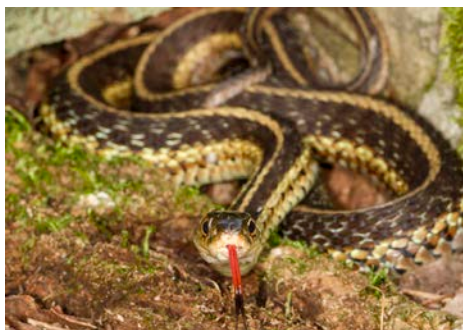
Snakes, continued on page 3



Northern redbelly snake

brought it home to observe and photograph. Redbelly snakes feed mainly on slugs, and extract snails from their shells. Unlike ringneck snakes, they don't lay eggs—the females give birth to live young. Imagine our surprise when we checked the terrarium and found these wiggly babies in a surprising number of colors. The babies that were red matched the belly color of their mother. We released the babies and mother under a rock in our woods, thankful that we got to enjoy these snakes for a short time.

The eastern garter snake (*Thamnopsis sirtalis sirtalis*) is perhaps the most often encountered snake since it is common, active during the day, widely distributed across the state, and found in a variety of habitats ranging from wetlands to damp woodlands. Garter snakes also eat a wide variety of foods. Laura once heard a very loud croaking sound by our pond and discovered a large green frog being devoured by a garter snake that



Eastern garter snake

must have grabbed its hind legs. Garter snakes average around 22 inches in length, but some can reach 4 feet. They eat their prey live, their sharp teeth are used for gripping, not chewing. Their most common food is earthworms, but they also eat mice and small birds. Their brightly colored tongue isn't used for eating but serves as a sensitive smelling and tasting organ. Like many other snakes, they release musk when attacked

or frightened as a defensive mechanism to deter predators. Mike is sometimes called to rescue snakes from homes in Bedford County. Years ago, he removed a garter snake from under a bed in a basement where the owners were living while they renovated the upstairs. That garter snake gave birth to more than 30 babies a few hours after he rescued it. Needless to say, the homeowners were exceedingly grateful that Mike showed up promptly when called and put the snake in a bucket before it gave birth under their bed. We released mother and babies near an adjacent stream.



Eastern ratsnake

The snake that we see most often on our wooded property is the eastern ratsnake (*Scotophis alleghaniensis*), the largest native snake in Pennsylvania. It can grow to over 8 feet in length. Not only are eastern ratsnakes attracted to our mulch pile where they lay their eggs, they also benefit because we raise chickens

and turkeys. Mike photographed this ratsnake eating a turkey egg in the turkey coop. An eastern ratsnake actually killed one of our chickens by constricting it, but the chicken was too large to swallow. Another time Mike found what he thought was a dead chicken laying on its back in the nest with a snake wrapped around it. Mike removed the snake, the chicken jumped up, shook vigorously, and acted like nothing had happened. Eastern ratsnakes are excellent climbers—we've seen them high in trees emerging from a hole and we've found them on our downspouts. One summer we came outside after eating lunch, only to find an eastern ratsnake spiraling down our downspout with a full belly—it had just lunched on four young phoebes in their nest built on top of the downspout. Mike placed a small platform away from the downspout so now the phoebes nest safely out of reach of hungry snakes.

Of the 21 species of snakes found in Pennsylvania, we've only found nine on our property. We are still searching for the very beautiful eastern smooth green snake (*Opheodrys vernalis vernalis*) and the unique eastern hognose snake (*Heterodon platyrhinos*). We have found them in Bedford County, but not on our property.

One of the best ways to get kids excited about spending time in the woods is to go on a snake hunt. Our great-nephews and great-nieces are older and spend more time on the soccer field now than in the woods, but their fascination with snakes remains. Their parents will inherit our property and we're glad they value snakes as much as we do. Like other wild animals, snakes have important ecological roles in our forest and it's reassuring to know that the next generation to care for our forest will value these unique creatures.

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- Shaffer, Larry. 1999. *Pennsylvania Amphibians and Reptiles*. Harrisburg (PA): Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

Welcome to the PA Forest Stewards Class of 2022!

This year marks the 32nd year of the Pennsylvania Forest Stewards volunteer program and featured one of the larger classes of volunteers trained to date. In early October, we welcomed 29 new PA Forest Stewards into our peer network after completing basic training at Krislund Camp. Ten of our new Stewards are “second generation” family members in the program.

At times during the four-day training, participants felt like they were “drinking from a firehose” as they learned about tree ID, creating wildlife habitat, silviculture, forest measurements and assessing timber harvest sustainability, carbon programs, outreach opportunities, creating

a dynamic plan, forest legacy, and more. On Saturday afternoon, current Stewards joined us and shared their outreach efforts and challenges in an engaging and informative panel discussion. And, even with the remnants of hurricane Ian in the area, a Saturday afternoon field trip to John Hoover’s property allowed the new class and current Stewards to see firsthand good stewardship in action.

As they wrapped up their training and set their goals, the Class of 2022 is ready to put their new skills and knowledge to work helping private forest landowners across the state. We welcome them into the volunteer program!



Class members learn to identify common invasive plants along the gravel road at Krislund Camp.



Top left: Measuring tree diameter during a simulated timber harvest. Top right: Welcome to the Class of 2022! Middle right: Comparing autumn olive and honeysuckle. Bottom right: Following the dichotomous key for tree ID. Bottom left: Assessing a tree’s merchantable timber.



Pennsylvania Forest Stewards Join the Fight

By Adam Katrancha, PA Forest Steward, Class of '09

Most folks wouldn't think of southwest Pennsylvania as a likely battleground for an alien invasion, but it is. And Pennsylvania Forest Stewards have joined the fight. On June 18, 2022, Forest Stewards Bob Stewart and Adam Katrancha rallied with a diverse group of motivated combatants at the Johnstown Flood National Memorial in St. Michael, PA to skirmish against invasive plants such as giant knotweed, exotic honeysuckle, autumn olive, and multiflora rose. The field of battle was



All photos provided by Adam Katrancha
Above and below: Adam Katrancha works to clear honeysuckle and other invasives from the trail edges.



actually the Walk Through the Ruins Trail along the South Fork of the Little Conemaugh River near the ruptured embankment that caused the Johnstown Flood of 1889. The group cut, pulled, dug, and carried a seeming mountain of undesirable plant material from along the trail and river to a staging area for disposal. The warriors also replanted the riparian buffer with over 700 native seedlings that will help stabilize the streambank and provide food, forage, and cover for wildlife. Friends of the Johnstown Flood, a volunteer group helping to keep the history alive, braved the damp, windy day to provide refreshments for the workers. Learn more about this group at <https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-the-Johnstown-Flood-National-Memorial-134354226640129/>.

Margaret L. Speicher, Interpretive Park Ranger and Volunteer Coordinator for the Johnstown Flood National Memorial and the Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site, is looking for volunteers to help with an array of projects supporting the local National Park sites. Anyone interested in volunteering their time can contact Margaret at 814-886-6137 or by email at margaret_speicher@nps.gov.



Above: Bob Stewart prepares to start the battle against invasives. Below: The crew takes a quick photo break from work on the Walk Through the Ruins Trail.



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University Park, PA 16802

SAVE THE DATE!

5th Biennial
Forest Landowners Conference



March 24-25, 2023

at the Penn Stater Hotel
and Conference Center
State College, PA

Join hundreds of woodland
owners and the professionals
who serve them.

Early Bird registration opens soon!
Find out more at ecosystems.psu.edu/forest-conference

We will have a special breakfast meeting Saturday, March 25 for PA Forest Stewards and their guests. Registration information will be in the next PA Forest Stewards newsletter.

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