Pennsylvania Forest Stewards News

Volume 30, Number 3 November / December 2023

Chair's Column: Gifts

By Nancy Baker, PA Forest Stewards Steering Committee Chair, '00

'Tis the season, right? The Black Friday rush is on; the mad scramble to check off whatever for whoever is on a dead run toward your holiday of choice.

I'm an unhappy participant. I'm an only child... In fact, among my generation of cousins, all except two of us are only children. I won't hesitate to tell you that there are advantages to the "only" status, but there are disadvantages too. There's only one egg in the basket so there's a lot of oversight. For sure, there's no blaming anything on a sibling! And in case you were wondering, I wore a lot of hand-me-down clothes from neighbors and friends; I was bowled over by a brand new dress from my godmother for my ninth birthday—so memorable I still have it.

I'm also the youngest cousin in my generation. That carries with it a family task: as soon as you can reasonably read, it's your job to distribute all the gifts to the gathered multitudes at the family holiday celebration (you're small and can crawl under the tree). But for me, the task presented a major dilemma (and because I'm an only, I've never shared that with anyone—I just silently soldier on).

You see, Papa Kast is in his 90s; the appropriate gift that everyone in the 1950s (pre Kleenex) presents to an older gentleman is a nice handkerchief—in a flat handkerchief box tied with a ribbon. Easily opened—just pull the end of the ribbon. He gets multiples, and responds to each with a quiet thank you. On the other hand, everyone loves Aunt Kathryn to the point that they devise multiple elaborate gifts, always packaged with special papers and intricate bows and involved writing on the card. And "Aunt Kitty," as we call her, thrives on anticipation. It takes ages for her to dismantle any package, interspersed with long and animated conversation with each gift-giver.

I'm five. I'm under the tree, searching unknowable packages and memorizing each label, counting, tracking, and mindfully trying to keep everyone equally occupied. I'm also worried that whatever is in that package is an item that has no meaning for the recipient; it is just an emotional place-holder—a thing to be quickly dismissed. It's an impossible task: trying to keep every person "happy." After all these years, it still makes me anxious.

On the other hand, I love to give someone an unexpected gift, straight out of the blue on some random day, something secretly desired but never expected. Maybe they don't even know they want it. Somehow/somewhere they let slip that some item or experience or encounter was deep in their heart. And I was listening when they let that slip... and I can sometimes make it happen!

A real gift doesn't have a thing to do with timing, nothing to do with size or amount, may indeed have nothing to do with money. It's really a gift of yourself. Your listening. Your sensitivity. Your thoughtfulness.

Nancy at four or five years old.

So, here's something for you: You didn't know it, but you all gave me a gift this year! I'm thanking you for listening to me blather along about all sorts of nonsense with a few bits of intelligence thrown in and letting me think I'm communicating. I'm thanking you for coming up to me with all sorts of ingenious forest questions that I never thought of—but which reveal multiple topics that we all should pay attention to. I'm thanking you for being patient on woods walks so we can both enjoy the sound of oak leaves falling. And you didn't really complain about wildfire smoke, or rain, or the ticks, deer keds, and no-see-ums... You were my excuse for rambling all over parts of Penn's Woods so beautiful that even my GPS didn't quite believe they existed. You said, "I wonder..." and let wonder mean so many different things.

You cared about all of us, and for Penn's Woods. What a gift! For that, I am profoundly grateful!

Thank you,
Nancy

bakerii@epix.net

There's Still Time to Complete Your Surveys!

Your input to the 2023 PA Forest Stewards Biennial Survey and PA Forest Stewards Futuring Survey is very important! If you haven't already done so, there's still time to participate.

PA Forest Stewards Biennial Survey: You can complete the paper copy we sent in early November and mail it back in the included postage-paid envelope or go to **https://tinyurl.com/yhsuvsy2** to complete online.

PA Forest Stewards Futuring Survey: complete this survey online at **https://tinyurl.com/3xau9dnk** or request a paper copy: call 814-863-0401 or email PrivateForests@psu.edu.

Deadline to respond to both surveys has been extended to December 15!

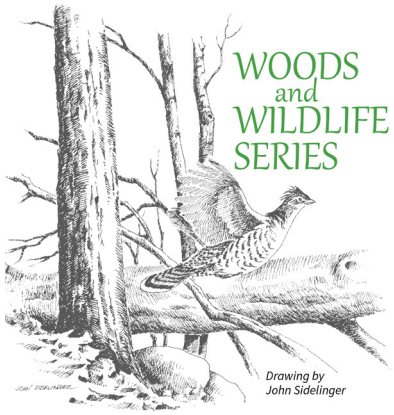
Pennsylvania DCNR Forestry

THE JAMES C. FINLEY CENTER FOR PRIVATE FORESTS

PennState College of Agricultural Sciences

Wildflower Wanderings, Part 2: Wonders of Native Wildflower Meadows

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



This is the second part of a two-part article about native wildflower meadows. In Part 1, we explained how we turned three fallow farm fields into meadows filled with native wildflowers. In this article, we want to share some of the wonders we found as we explored the meadows.

The seed mix that we bought from Ernst Conservation Seeds (ERNMX-105) was custom designed to contain native grasses and flowers. Grasses hold the soil in place and provide nesting sites for native bees. The various native wildflowers bloom in succession from spring to fall, so a variety of insect pollinators benefit. Many insects are short-lived as adults, with different species appearing as the seasons progress. Take honey bees as an example. Although a queen honey bee may live for one to two years, the busy worker honey bees only live about 15 to 38 days in the summer.[1] New worker bees are produced throughout the summer to replace those that die, but most native bees are solitary and only have one brood a year.

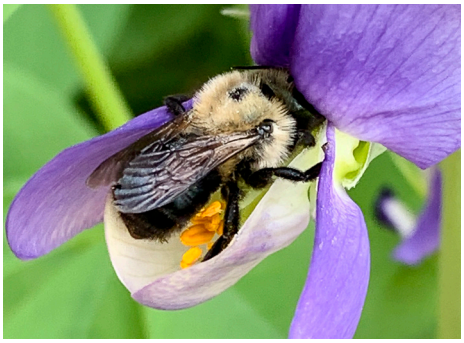
Although we don't have any honey bee hives, we see thousands of honey bees from early spring until frost, busy pollinating and gathering nectar. We have found feral honey bee nests in tree cavities our woods—one swarm even took over a wood duck box that was used as active nesting habitat by a pair of screech owls. The box is in the woods along our lane, so we watched the bees over several years, marveling that they were able to evict screech owls, but eventually the ever-so cute screech owls reclaimed their home.

As the bee flies, the closest honey bee hives that we know of are about 2.5 miles from our property, certainly within the range of foraging honey bees, since beekeepers tell us that bees can fly up to five miles for nectar and pollen. We eat a lot of honey, but we've seen honey bees compete with native pollinators and we wonder if the abundant honey bee is one reason why native bees are in decline. We often see the larger honey bee displace a native bee feeding on a wildflower. Research verifies our observations: "over a period of three months, a [honey bee] hive collects as much pollen as could support the development of 100,000 native solitary bees."[2]

According to the Xerces Society, honey bees are not endangered or close to extinction, but many of our native bees are in serious decline. Eight species of native bees are on the U.S. Endangered Species list and others are under review.[2] We hope that our meadows will help native bees find food, shelter, and protection.

This past summer, Laura spent a lot of time exploring our meadows—some are eight years old while others were planted three years ago. No matter the age of the meadow, all were full of blooms from spring to fall that attracted thousands of bees, beetles, flies, and butterflies. Here are a few photos that offer a tiny glimpse of the wonder of it all, in order of bloom time:

One of the earliest flowers to bloom in our meadows is beardtongue penstemon (*Penstemon digitalis*), shown in the photo above. It's called beardtongue because of the white hairs lining the lower petals that force bees deeper into the flower. The pink lines on the petals act like runway lights, enticing bees like bumble bees to wiggle back to the nectar source. This tiny, almost hairless Hylaeus bee (5 to 7 mm), emerging upside down from the flower, can't carry pollen like other bees, so it eats the pollen and stores it in its crop until it regurgitates the pollen in its nest. Like most other native bees, Hylaeus bees are solitary.



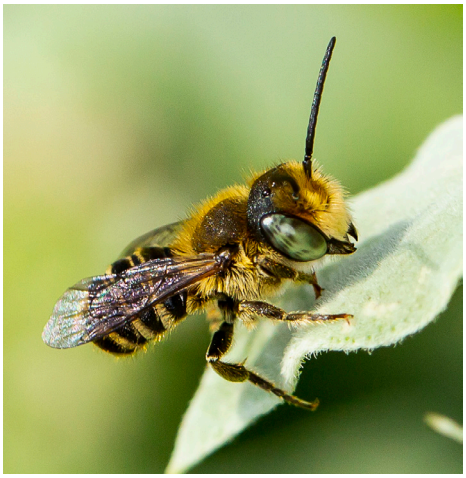
The beautiful flowers of blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) bloom in May and June—the only time we can find the bufflehead mason bee, but it also feeds on a variety of other tubular flowers. There are over 400 species of mason bees in the U.S., and some are important pollinators in our state's fruit orchards.[3]

Although milkweeds don't do well within the meadows, they thrive along the edges, where we photographed this bumble bee resting on the flower buds of butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). Laura was puzzled by the yellow dangling decorations on the bee's legs—something we had never noticed before. Research revealed that these are sacs of pollen called pollinia, hidden in grooves in the milkweed flowers. A single pollinium may contain more than a million pollen grains![4] When an insect lands on a milkweed flower, its legs often slip into grooves that contain the pollinia, which are sticky, so they get a free ride on an insect's leg to pollinate the next

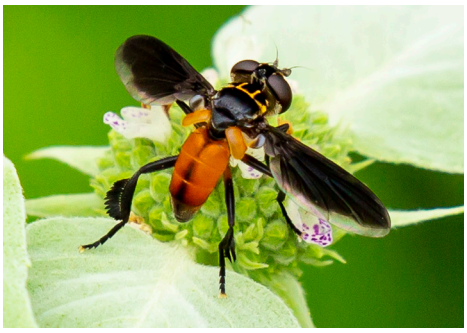
Wildflowers, *continued on page 3*

milkweed flower. Unlike loose pollen, pollinia aren't collected by bees to feed their young, but milkweeds do produce a lot of nectar that attracts many different insects. Even though pollinia are a very efficient way to spread pollen, they are only found in two plant families: orchids and milkweeds.

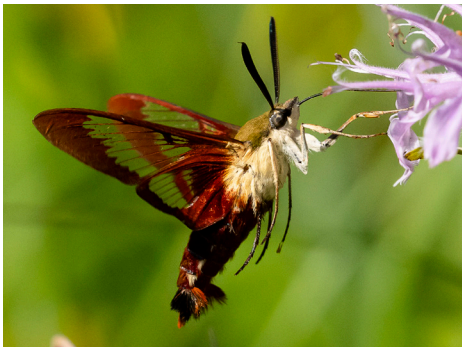
Our meadows are bursting with blooms in mid-July through August, which also seems to be the peak time for insect diversity. Various species of mountain mint are perhaps the favorite plants for pollinators in mid-summer. This metallic green sweat bee is feeding on the tiny blossoms of showy mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*). Sweat bees are small, but the individual flowers are even smaller. Mountain mints are one of the premier pollinator plants because they are rich in nectar that's easy to reach and they bloom for almost two months. Mountain mints are truly a biodiversity hot spot for pollinators. Laura likes to hover over our largest patch of mountain mint, watching in awe as thousands of insects feed and interact.



This tiny bee is a leaf-cutter bee, resting on a mountain mint leaf. Leaf-cutter bees have long hairs on the underside of their abdomen which act like a brush to collect pollen, so they are members of the "hairy belly bees." They are one of Laura's favorite bees since they are cute with large eyes and large heads (they need extra muscles for their strong jaws). They use their jaws to cut out semicircular pieces of leaves or flower petals to line their brood cells.



A lot of insects are imposters, masquerading as a venomous insect so other insects leave it alone. Such is the case with this cute insect that looks like a bee, but it's actually a feather-legged fly in the genus *Trichopoda*. The black feathery section on its hind legs is thought to mimic a "pollen basket" found on bees. We love to see this fly since its larvae are parasites of squash bugs, which sometimes kill our zucchini plants.



Our meadows are ablaze with swaths of purple, lavender, and red when different species of *Monarda* (commonly called bee balm) bloom in mid-summer. These showy flowers attract a lot of bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds, as well as the daytime flying moth called the hummingbird moth, shown above. A small black sweat bee, *Dufourea monardae*, is a specialist of *Monarda fistulosa* in Pennsylvania and nearby states.[5] Laura collected some small black bees from the flowers last summer and sent them to Penn State for identification, hoping that our meadows support this specialist bee.

It's August now and the meadows glimmer with goldenrod. Early goldenrod (*Solidago juncea*) is first to bloom, but it's followed by a succession of five other species, with the most spectacular blooming in mid to late September: showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*).

What looks beautiful to us could be a deathtrap since there is a possibility of danger hidden in every flower. We've watched predators like assassin bugs lying in wait, ready to inject venom into insects. One time Laura photographed a flower fly just as a square-headed wasp swooped down, grabbed the fly and carried it away. In this photo, a female goldenrod crab spider captured a honey bee feeding on goldenrod, then injected paralyzing venom to subdue it. The spider then used its fangs to inject digestive enzymes, so it could suck out the liquified organs.

Laura also noticed two tiny black flies—one on the honey bee and one on the crab spider. The free app, iNaturalist, identified them as freeloader flies.[6] These flies are kleptoparasites, which means the flies are stealing the food from the spider by ingesting the liquified internal organs of the honey bee. This strategy is what gives them their common name, freeloader flies. It is thought that the flies are attracted to the aromas released by the feeding crab spider.

It's fall, and pollinators are busier than ever in the meadows. A honey bee tried

Wildflowers, *continued on page 4*

Pennsylvania Forest Stewards: Supporting the James C. Finley Center for Private Forests at Penn State

This has been a busy year for the Finley Center, from holding the 5th biennial Forest Landowners Conference to completing the forest landowner survey to hosting two PA Forest Stewards regional meetings to embarking on the PA Forest Stewards Futuring initiative. Through the accomplishments reporting, we know that it has been a busy year for all of you as well. Collectively, you have reached hundreds of thousands of other landowners and members of the public, helping them to understand the importance of the decisions they're making in caring for their woods and how to move to better care. We are grateful to each and every one of you for your investment of time, energy, and passion to making Penn's Woods a more sustainable forest, and thank you for your help in making our program stronger.

Philanthropic contributions also are important in enabling the Center to fulfill its mission. As many of you think about your end-of-year charitable giving, we would be grateful if you would consider supporting the Finley Center with a monetary donation. The Center has a well-established endowment and gratefully accepts tax-deductible financial contributions.

All of the funding the Finley Center receives into the endowment is labeled for our exclusive use and is invested by Penn State to provide income for our future use. To date, gifts to the Finley Center endowment have supported undergraduate internships, graduate student fellowships, staffing for project capacity, professional and leadership development efforts, and programmatic resources.

Funds from the endowment have also significantly supported the PA Forest Stewards Volunteer Program as we've faced some funding shortfalls from federal grants in recent years. We have been most fortunate to have the endowment resources to support basic trainings, regional meetings, and the printing and distribution of our newsletters, enabling us to carry on as we have in the past, with minimal disruption of resources and services.

If you'd like to support the Finley Center with a tax-deductible charitable contribution, you can visit the Center's donation website at **https://raise.psu.edu/FinleyCenterNews** or scan the QR code below to take you there.

We thank you for your support, in all the ways you give it.

Wildflowers, *continued from page 3*

to land on a New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*) where a leaf-cutter bee was feeding. While most bees would be scared away by the honey bee, the leaf-cutter bee raised its head, showed off its sharp mandibles, and scared off the honey bee.

Chalk one up for this male leafcutter bee since it stood its ground against the honey bee. The hairy "moustache" on males hides most of the sharp mandibles.

It's late fall now and the humming and flutters of insects are replaced by birds busy feeding on all the grass and flower heads that have gone to seed. The meadow continues to give food and shelter to wildlife throughout the winter, but we are already dreaming of warmer days and spring flowers!

References:

[1] **https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2527632/#:~:text=Honey%20bees%20(Apis%20mellifera)%20are,200%20days%20in%20the%20winter**

[2] **https://www.xerces.org/sites/default/files/publications/22-011.pdf**

[3] **https://extension.psu.edu/orchard-pollination-solitary-mason-bees**

[4] **https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00984105**

[5] **https://xerces.org/blog/plants-for-pollinators-wild-bergamot**

[6] **https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/329891-Milichiidae**

Toll-free Number Reminder

Note that the PA Forest Stewards toll-free number, 800-235-9473, will no longer be in service after December 31.

You can reach our office at **814-863-0401**; staff is typically available M-F 7:30-4. You can also email us at **PrivateForests@psu.edu** or at any one of the staff email addresses listed on page 6 of this newsletter.

Woods in Your Backyard Series Starts in January

Penn State Extension is offering the Woods in Your Backyard nine-week series on Wednesdays, 7:00-8:30 p.m., January 17 through March 19. This series, designed for owners of smaller woodlots, is open to all. Registration fee is $50; deadline to register is January 10.

Finley Center director Allyson Muth will kick off the first session. Topics covered during the nine sessions include:

- Why Manage Forests
- Forest Ecology
- Creating and Managing Wildlife Habitat
- Identifying and Controlling Invasive Plants
- Forest Health Issues and Management
- Forests and Water
- Selecting Native Trees for Various Sites
- Establishing Meadows and Forests
- Creating Plans for Your Property

Each participant will receive a full color, 108-page copy of *The Woods in Your Backyard* manual. Registrants will also receive access to the webinar recordings.

This is a great entry-level series to share with landowners interested in learning more about managing their woodland. For more information, go to: **https://extension.psu.edu/woods-in-your-backyard-webinar-series**.

The Back Page: The Colonel's Table, Part 2

By Bob Slagter, PA Forest Steward and Retired Steering Committee Chair, Class of '08

In Part 1 of this story (in the September-October newsletter), Bob traveled to the Half Moon Inn in the Devon village of Sheepwash to try his luck fishing England's River Torridge. Bob set out to Ole Jim's property, The Pond, one of England's fine fly fishing spots by the River Torridge. The fee for access? A mandatory trout dinner with fish supplied by Bob (who had never before killed a fish) and prepared at the Inn. Let's pick up Bob's tale:

Good omens for a day afield abounded on the walk to The Pond, even though I still carried some trepidation (along with the rod and creel) about catching and killing some fish that day. As I rounded a hedge covered with fresh raindrops and small red multiflora roses, I found it housed a cute little hedgehog and a majestic ringneck rooster. Both watched with that certain British detachment as I passed by, as if I was the guard changing at Buckingham Palace. The songbirds sang in the rain, the cows bawled in the fields, and I trudged the course to the fishing.

The Pond was as advertised. It was almost a perfect rectangle with no casting obstructions and a light dimple of rain on the slate grey surface. I learned quickly how to load the buggy whip rod and was able to hurl the most gaudy-looking fly in the box to mid-pond. The first retrieves brought nothing, so I started varying both the sink time of the fly and speed and type of retrieve.

Nothing. I moved slightly and tried again with no success. I was beginning to think that, a.) the Brits had found a real mark and were putting this Yank on, or b.) my talents weren't up to the task of catching these fish in this barrel.

What would a Brit worth his salt do in this situation? I believe he would sit down and stoke his Meerschaum and, as they say, "sort it out." This I did (without the pipe) as I took a seat on a rock and studied the water as the nearby Jersey cows studied me. I began to realize that I had been fishing essentially the same areas with slow or fast retrieve for the past hour, and so the fish (if they existed) might be at or near the deepest part of the pond. So I walked around until I saw the least vegetation and sharpest drop-off and began casting from that bank, gradually letting the fly sink as far as it could before beginning a swimming retrieve with short quick strips.

Was that a strike? If so, it was very, very tentative...like the trout gave the fly a lick to test the taste. Well that won't happen again. If they want it, they'll have to chase it. No more free tastes! Oh, drop dead, cows... you couldn't do any better. Now, same cast, let it drop...down... down... down. Start the strip. Slowly, then a little faster, imagine the fish seeing it, starting to follow, strip faster like the prey making a getaway.

THERE HE IS.

The strike was hard and unmissable. He fought valiantly as well, until I was able to bring the 18-inch rainbow to hand. Vindication! I could catch these fish, but could I kill them?

Sure, I could...those were the rules coming out, so I gently broke the fish's neck and set him in some grass I had placed in the bottom of the creel, with no regrets. I was simply in Rome doing that Roman boogey.

The rest was easy, and I caught six more rainbows, all around the size of the first one...killing two more for Ole Jim's dinner...figuring three was enough with a side of potatoes and maybe some greens. The cows went back to munching the grass, the ringneck strutted along the hedge, birds sang, and rain fell. It was a perfect English afternoon and, at teatime, I reeled in and walked back to the Inn, feeling like a proper nobleman strolling home in the gloaming.

Back at the Inn, I was greeted like a nobleman as well. The pub at the Inn was full and, as I parked the rod in the corner and the creel on the bar, I was introduced to a pint of stout and Ole Jim, who was holding down his customary spot at the end of the bar. As the innkeeper showed off the catch to the smiles and "Ayes" of the patrons, I got a proper toothless smile and nod from Ole Jim, no doubt the longest conversation offered from that gentleman at any time.

I was "bought for" by several of the patrons and asked to relate the story of the outing to the assemblage—which I did with increasing ease in a malt-aided tone as the evening began. I was such a hit that I was asked to join the Colonel's table for dinner promptly at 8. I was given a tie to wear with my khakis and tweed and made a sufficient cleanup in time to be punctual for the meal.

Bob brought three large trout back to the Inn for Ole Jim's dinner, and found himself a celebrity among the locals in the pub that evening. Photo by cutlerc, Pixabay.

It was traditional English fare with roast and mash and pudding and even mushy peas. All was served to the Colonel—a man British to the toenails with his huge mustache, salt and pepper hair, and a Sandhurst accent of the first order—first, then passed to me, sitting on his left, to be passed on. We were treated to some of the Colonel's special Madeira and conversation about politics, hunting, and fishing.

He held court and led the conversation, poured the wine and was stuffy, yet affable at the same time. He was what Peter Sellers would have portrayed as the perfect English Colonel. It was a thoroughly wonderful way to dine... a lost art, really. This is the way they have taken supper in these villages for centuries, with the most prominent at the head and the rest aiding the conversation. The dinner lasted precisely two hours, and at 10 o'clock, we retired back to the pub for a nightcap, which I gladly covered for the house. The night ended with handshakes, well dones, and safe travels from all as they departed.

As I lay in the attic that night, looking out at and hearing the rain pattering on the sill, I felt part of this timeless place. More than that, I felt a part of the tradition of fly fishing. I had taken fish by angling with a wet fly and had killed the fish to eat, and this act was seen to be the right thing to do by the people who lived here. I had learned that to kill a fish is why the sport started and the way it still is today in the land where it all began.

Pennsylvania Forest Stewards
The Pennsylvania State University
The James C. Finley Center for Private Forests
416 Forest Resources Building
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Help Us Tell Our Story!

The Communications Committee of the Finley Center Council would like to invite PA Forest Stewards with an interest in writing for the Center's website, social media pages, and other publications to join us as volunteers. Your involvement will help raise awareness of the wonderful work all of you and the Finley Center are doing to inspire stewardship of privately owned forests.

To learn more about this opportunity, please contact Jeanne Riley, Communications Committee Chair and PA Forest Steward, at ariley202@comcast.net or Jeff Osborne, the Center's Forest Stewardship Program Associate, at jao5194@psu.edu.

Dates for Your Calendar

Friday, December 15. PA Forest Stewards Surveys due. (See article on page 1.) Thank you for your response. You can submit your data online or by mail.

Saturday, January 6 – Saturday, January 13. PA Farm Show, Harrisburg, PA. PA Forest Stewards are invited to help staff a booth along with Penn State Extension personnel. For more information and to sign up, contact Jeff Osborne, jao5194@psu.edu.

Wednesdays, 7-8:30 p.m., January 17-March 13, 2024. Woods in Your Backyard Series. (See article on page 4.)

For more information about other upcoming events, check the Finley Center website:

ecosystems.psu.edu/private-forests

Take special note of regional forest landowner conferences held by woodland owners associations during the first three months of 2024.

Program Sponsors and Partners

The James C. Finley Center for Private Forests at Penn State

Penn State Forestry and Wildlife Extension

PA DCNR Bureau of Forestry

USDA Forest Service

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