Friends of Thacher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center ● 87 Nature Center Way ● Voorheesville, NY 12186
September—October 2024 ● Vol. 28 No. 5

Reimagining Thacher Nature Center

The Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center originated from an extraordinary act of generosity when Fred Schroeder approached State Parks about building a Nature Center at Thompson's Lake. As long-time Director of Camp Thacher and several branches of the Albany Boys Club, Fred was passionate about connecting city youth to nature. With the dedication of the Center in 2001, thus launched a public – private partnership in nature-based education that thrives to this day. Now the Center welcomes over 8,500 visitors per year to observe nature, go on a guided hike, or participate in programs about the area's animals, plants and geology led by the education staff.

Keeping true to Fred's vision, the Center reigns as one of the most popular attractions for children's education in the Capital District.

In 2023, Thacher's educators provided nature-based programming to over 3,000 students from local school districts on field trips. Not only was the Center built with private philanthropy, but Fred and Martha Schroeder also established an endowment to ensure that the Center would always remain vibrant. Proceeds of the Schroeder endowment enable the hiring of an educator to augment the State's investment in a Center Director and other program and maintenance staff.

A Call to Reimagine: The Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center still sports the original exhibits and displays which worked well for that time. We have learned a lot over the decades about what works best to capture the attention of young minds and how to efficiently manage space for large groups of children, families and chaperones. Many of the displays, exhibits, and finishes should be reconsidered after decades of service.

• With floor space at a premium, exhibits were evaluated for their size and utility.

• Improvements to expand access will make the Nature Center welcoming to people of all abilities.

We propose an interior transformation of the Center in celebration of its 25th anniversary. With thoughtful direction from dedicated nature education professionals and the creativity of an architectural design firm specializing in public exhibit spaces, the Center can be made more accessible, more useful, and more engaging to children, our prime audience.

Budget: Our goal is to amass this funding through a combination of private donations and grants. State Parks will continue to maintain and invest capital improvements as needed for utilities, building envelope and site work including parking, trails, gardens and more.

Proposed Plan Renderings: The final scheme is organized thematically around four habitats of Thacher: Meadow, Pond, Forest, and Devonian Sea. Each habitat features an element that children can climb on or crawl into, transforming the space into an all-season attraction. The displays emphasize the harmony between the learning and discovery that takes place inside the Nature Center, and the wonderful resources found throughout the park. The memories made here spark a lifelong appreciation of New York's natural places.

The Meadow area features hexagon structures stacked like a honeycomb. Each cell is large enough for younger children to crawl into or sit in as they discover the lifecycle of a honeybee through photos on the back of the cells, and imaginative play. The stack of cells is low enough for younger visitors to climb across or walk over.

The Wet Meadow/Dry Meadow exhibit is a curved tabletop with two sections each with space for a live animal tank and horizontal and vertical surfaces for seasonal displays.

The Forest area features a tall eight-sided wood framed tree, surrounded by on open play area, giving visitors the opportunity to explore inside, and climb on the outside of this exhibit.

The Ancient Sea Geology room features an accessible fossil dig. Two long countertops and base cabinets flank the fossil dig and open shelves line three walls.

The Pond Room features a stick -built beaver den and a Blue heron nest set on a tree trunk and branches, a Lily pad jump activity, and an animal magnet activity. A pond landscape mural on all walls and doors defines the space.

To support these exciting updates to the Nature Center exhibits, checks made out to Natural Heritage Trust can be mailed to:

Thacher Nature Center, 87 Nature Center Way, Voorheesville, NY, 12186

Or, scan the QR code to the right to donate online (Please be sure to select Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center as the site.)

- by Becky Schneider
Environmental Educator

Conversations with Acorn

– a playful dialogue

Acorn: I am so sick and tired of that old cliché: "Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow." It doesn't give me enough credit. I may be small, but I'm powerful.

Thacher Visitor: What do you deserve credit for? You're just a little nut.

Acorn: Don't call me a nut! I'm not crazy. But I am very nutritious.

Visitor: How can you be nutritious? You're just a hard brown shell with a silly little cap.

Acorn: Yes, but you should see what's inside. I'm a perfectly designed nugget of energy. I have protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, lots of B vitamins, and even copper! And my shape makes it easy for animals to pick up and store. Since I fall off the tree in the fall, I'm a really good winter survival food.

Visitor: OK, but here is something I don't understand. You can only be nutritious if something eats you – from a tiny beetle, to small mammals like squirrels and chipmunks, up to deer and bears. That can't be very comfortable for you to think about.

Acorn: You are right about that. It makes me queasy to know that one deer can eat up to 300 acorns per day, and then to think about how many deer live in Thacher Park and how many days there are between fall and spring. You mentioned mammals, but I've also got to worry about ducks and blue jays eating me whole and small birds pecking me apart. The big scratching feet of the wild turkeys terrify me.

Visitor: Yeah, I read that on the average, only 1 in 10,000 acorns survives to become a tree. But I guess that is countered by the trees themselves. Over its lifetime, a single Northern Red Oak can produce 10 million acorns.

Acorn: Do you know how we acorns entertain ourselves? When you hear whispering sounds in the night, we are chatting about how much fun we will have when a bunch of us drop in the middle of the night and go 'bumpety, bumpety, bump, bump' down the roof over a person's bedroom. It would be especially fun to pelt the tents of people camped at Thompson's Lake.

Visitor: I shiver to think of it. Let's change the subject back to the full grown trees.

Acorn: I'm really proud of those trees. Since Paleolithic times oaks have been a major building material for humans. Just think: the soaring roof beams of Notre Dame Cathedral, the masts of the tall ships, down to the framework of ordinary houses, are all made of oak.

Visitor: Wow I'm impressed. You know a lot about acorns and the history of oak trees.

Acorn: Yes, I find studying the history of my kind is a good distraction from lying around worrying that a chipmunk or blue jay is going to come and eat me. However, although it scares me to think of being buried alive in a deep hole in the ground, that does provide me with hope that I will sprout a root and over time become a mighty oak tree myself.

- by Sigrin Newell

Photo by Christine Gervasi

Pondering about Ponds

What is a pond?

Oxford dictionaries tell us that a pond is a small body of still water formed naturally or by hollowing or embanking.

Now, what does that mean?

Ponds are small bodies of water that can be found near or far from larger, active bodies of water such as oceans, lakes, rivers, and streams. Ponds can form naturally through the flooding of these larger bodies. When flooding occurs, excess water can spill over and away from the main body, filling depressions and embankments. When the larger body recedes and stabilizes, a pond may be created and become isolated.

However, what about those landlocked ponds far from larger bodies of water? These ponds often form through groundwater seepage and seasonal runoff (melting snow/ice & recurring rains). The water from these sources gathers in depressions, similar to the process described for flooding, resulting in a pond.

We also create ponds artificially. Maybe not you and me, but we could. People create ponds by hollowing out space in the earth and constructing embankments along its perimeter. Water can either be added in or gathers naturally if the pond is dug below the water table. Often, people must use liners in their ponds to retain the water they add. Natural ponds also must have a proper substrate at the bottom to help retain water and maintain stable water levels.

Once these small water bodies are created, they can develop into highly variable ecosystems overtime. A pond's size has a lot to do with the type of life it can support.

The pond's ecosystem can be separated into four zones. The littoral zone is made up of the shallow waters along the shore of the pond where light penetrates well, allowing plant life to thrive. These plants provide shelter for insects and amphibians. The limnetic zone is the open water of the pond towards its middle. This zone also receives plenty of light, which supports the growth of plankton near the surface. Fish live in the pond mid-water. Ponds may or may not have a profundal zone. This zone forms the depths of the pond, with little to no light penetration and cooler temperatures. It supports fish that have adapted to these conditions. The last zone is the benthic zone. This zone includes the soil and its organisms at the bottom of the pond and is inhabited by decomposers and scavengers. In these four zones, a cycle of energy and nutrient flow is created, and an ecosystem is born.

Ponds can support a variety of life including algae, plants, insects, invertebrates, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Whether small or large, ponds provide essential habitats and are critical components of many ecosystems.

- by Chase Carson
(Seasonal Educator)

Friends of Thacher Park Meeting Dates for 2024

Meeting dates are September 11, and November 13.

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center. Come join us!

Check for updates at www.friendsofthacherpark.org

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As always, call (518) 872-0800 or (518) 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call board members with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Becky Schneider, Sigrin Newell, Chase Carson and Annika Dahlin for their contributions to this newsletter.
— Christine Gervasi (Editor)

Friends of Thacher Park
c/o Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center
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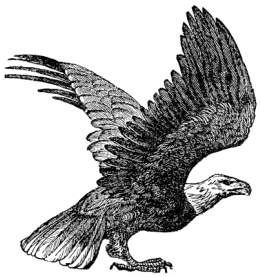

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Next:

Wednesday, September 11, 2024

Board Meeting

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center

Three Pairs of Eagle Eyes Watch Over Thompson's Lake

Photo by Bert Schou

A successful Bald Eagle hatch requires around-the clock vigilance on the part of parent Eagles. Not only must the adults keep their eggs warm in chilly winter weather and protect them from predators like the Great Horned Owl, but they also must roll the eggs every 2 hours to keep the growing embryo from sticking to the inside of the shell. Even with the careful doting of parent Eagles during incubation, conditions might not be quite right, and the eggs might not hatch. Last year, the park's resident Bald Eagles were unable to hatch any eggs. This year was different.

Staff and visitors noticed incubation behavior through February and March: an adult Eagle could be seen sitting low in the nest at nearly all hours of the day. At the end of April, we began to catch glimpses of a growing chick moving around in the nest. By mid-June, the hatchling had grown considerably and was seen walking around the nest, stretching its wings, and preparing for flight. Come July, the eaglet had begun to fly and could be seen soaring over the lake and perching by the lakeshore. The eaglet successfully fledged!

At this point in the young Eagle's life, it is working on learning all the skills it will need to survive as an adult. On the lakeshore across from the Nature Center dock, the juvenile has been spotted practicing and perfecting its flying, landing, and hunting skills. While it learns, the fledgling continues to rely on its parents for food. A high-pitched pealing call rings out over the lake as the young Eagle requests a delivery of fish. Unlike its parents, the juvenile is all brown with white flecking on its underside. It won't develop the characteristic pure white head and tail feathers for 4 and a half more years. Surprisingly, juveniles are also slightly larger than adults. Larger wing and tail feathers give the beginners more lift as they learn to fly.

At about 5 or 6 months old, young eagles are ready to leave the nesting area and take care of themselves. Our young Eagle will spend the next 4 years wandering and exploring until it reaches maturity. Stop by the Nature Center to inquire about the latest Bald Eagle sightings and walk down to Thompson's Lake to wish the juvenile good luck on its next phase of life.

- by Annika Dahlin
(SCA Environmental Education Intern)