

2015 Maine Wildlife Park Volunteer Newsletter

If there was one word to choose to sum up 2015 at the Maine Wildlife Park, it would be something like “spectacular” or “exceptional”. All who worked at the Park this year are undoubtedly aware of our phenomenal attendance that set new records. What always strikes me is that these results, and the same adjectives that describe them, can also be used to sum up the workforce at the Park. Our volunteers and staff are in fact the very vehicle that brings about record years like 2015. It is therefore not a coincidence that exceptional people bring about exceptional results. The Park’s visitors, animals, projects, and programs can thank what has always been our greatest asset - YOU!



So just how great was 2015? It will be a year to remember - the new record to beat for future seasons. With over 122,000 visitors, this year’s attendance was a 16% increase over last year; and an 11% increase over our previous record in 2013! This is an increase that dramatically exceeds that of Maine State Parks in general. That’s a lot of transactions at the Gate, Nature Store, and Snack Shack, a lot of park furniture to fix, litter to pick up, and dirty bathrooms to clean! It’s also a lot of fun for everyone to see this kind of payoff for their hard work, and to watch the park grow as we attract new audiences and keep our regular patrons coming back for more. Finally, it is also a privilege for us all to pause and think how fortunate we are to be involved in a unique chapter in the Park’s history. As this facility begins its 85th year, three of the past four years have been record-breaking. This demonstrates the growth of an attraction that would have been impossible to imagine when the “Game Farm” was started decades ago.



WHAT’S THERE TO LIKE ABOUT THE MAINE WILDLIFE PARK?

It is always interesting to see what our visitors are most excited about at the Park. Beyond “growth” in general, a look at our sales categories, customer feedback, and virtual tour data reveal how our patrons are casting their “votes” on what they like about the Maine Wildlife Park.

Several sales categories continued to show exceptional growth in 2015. The Nature Store and Snack Shack both broke records with excellent sales figures, demonstrating growth beyond what was proportional to attendance. Shelter reservations and Photopasses are also fast growing categories, with 125% and 90% increases from our record in 2013 only two years ago. These programs offer tremendous value for our visitors. For those seeking a unique but affordable birthday party, the park now offers several options beyond the traditional shelter reservation, including discounted feed, educational packets, and Nature Store grab bags. The photopass offers once-in-a-lifetime experiences with our wildlife that participants rave about.

Our visitors provide feedback about their Park experience through a variety of methods. From the old-fashioned log book at the gate, to Facebook and websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor, customer feedback is overwhelmingly positive; and the Park is consistently awarded “Best Of” designations. Of course, our patrons enjoy our wildlife as their favorite, but the animals fit within a larger framework of the overall park experience. Visitors love our clean grounds, beautiful gardens, friendly workers, and our natural setting. Everyone reading this newsletter is an integral part of these elements and can be congratulated for contributing to this imperative of the Park’s operation - our visitors’ satisfaction!

In 2015 the Park's audio tour was enhanced to a mobile web application. This launch did more than provide our visitors with a wealth of information and resources, it also allows us to measure the popularity of different species, learn where our visitors are from, and bring the park's animals beyond their enclosures and into classrooms and beyond. With thousands of calls and page views this past year, this program is anticipated to explode with popularity in 2016 when our species signs link to the application at every stop.



PARK PUBLICITY AND EVENTS

In 2015 the Park continued to enjoy television publicity from two live broadcasts and our own WMTW commercial. The park was also featured again in Animal Planet's "North Woods Law" series. While it's always difficult to directly measure the results of media attention, there is no doubt that it has an impact on our attendance. Many of our biggest special events either broke records or rebounded to our highest turnouts in years. What's more, some of our other events and weekends also produced huge audiences that came close to big event attendance. Beyond "the big 4", the Park had 13 days of attendance exceeding 1,200 people in 2015!

A LOOK AT PARK PROJECTS

In addition to being an excellent year for attendance, 2015 also allowed for the completion of some maintenance and construction projects. In the spring we held the grand opening of our new lynx enclosure, courtesy of the Friends of the Maine Wildlife Park. Our 2015 opening featured several other changes and improvements such as new admission fees, a new Park brochure, mobile web application, small shelter, and many other facility improvements. During the open season, the fawn and Visitor Center fences were replaced, our IF&W mural was completed, a new beaver exhibit was constructed, and several buildings received new paint, repairs, or partial replacement.



Winter is finally delivering its sting at the wildlife park, but it is on the heels of an unusually mild December. The warm weather has allowed Park staff, volunteers, and MCC workers to complete a tremendous amount of work on the bear exhibit renovation; including extensive earthwork, fencing replacement, and pool expansion. As of the writing of this letter, we have poured concrete, set poles, and begun framing just in the past few days!

The weather will eventually become prohibitive for future progress, but the list of spring work for the bear enclosure has been shortened significantly. As with a typical winter, the arrival of snow will shift our attention to indoor maintenance projects that keep our signage, picnic tables, grills, benches, and other park furniture looking their best. Other winter projects include mounting and installing new species signs, transforming the fish house for alternative species exhibition, completing the addition of the "Wildlife & Wood" station, and many others.

PARK SERVICE RECOGNIZED

It is always difficult to single out volunteers for recognition among so many who give so much of themselves at the Park. However, 2015 brought some changes that cannot go unmentioned. For decades the Park has enjoyed a unique inter-departmental relationship with the Maine Correctional Center (MCC) in Windham. In the past several years, Correctional Trade Instructor Butch Vickerson has been the principal officer bringing work crews to the Park on a daily basis during winter months. December marked Butch's retirement from State service and his involvement in the Park's projects. As with so many of our volunteers, it can be said that Butch's work crews have

had a hand in building and maintaining much of the Park's infrastructure. The contributions of his support and that of the crews that worked under him cannot be overstated, and his presence will be sorely missed. Thank you and congratulations on your retirement Butch!

Sadly, with each new year there is often the news of current and former volunteers that have passed away:

Nancy Brandt: Everyone entering the Park for the past few years enjoyed the beauty of Nancy Brandt's island garden at our main entrance. Day after day, Nancy would brave the fast-moving traffic of Route 26 to tend her colorful Zinnias that were enjoyed by Park visitors and workers alike. Nancy passed away in early May after a battle with pancreatic cancer. Her vibrant personality and friendly nature were expressed in her beautiful flower gardens.



Frank Wood: Like Nancy, Frank brought his own hobby to the Park that provided tremendous benefit - carpentry. As a retired master carpenter, Frank designed and help build the Snack Shack, coyote gazebo, and other Park construction projects. Frank volunteered for many years at the park and had a special appreciation for our captive wildlife, which he loved sharing with others. Frank passed away in July at the age of 88. The buildings and structures he worked on are a monument to his talents and dedication.

Sharon Harvie: Sharon also brought beauty to the Park by way of gardening. For several years, she and her husband Lee would make the long drive from Scarborough to tend the garden in front of the eagle exhibit. The Harvie's brought their love of gardening to the Park in several ways; tending their eagle garden, helping with the greenhouse operation, and assisting with the annual plant sale. Sharon passed away this past December after a long battle with lymphoma. She would be pleased to see that gardening continues to be a major focus of the Friends.

These volunteers have all left their legacies; from the beautiful gardens to the buildings and structures, these elements ultimately shape the experience of our visitors, volunteers, and staff. They are the "quality" of our facility that visitors are so willing to compliment us on, and may we never forget the people who make it possible.

Looking back at the past 84 years of Park history, we can marvel at the changes that so many have worked for. The Park has become a revolving door of people whose talents, energy, and dedication have sculpted a facility that serves as a monument to their efforts. Our volunteers and staff have contributed countless thousands of hours to a labor of love that more and more people are noticing. Despite our growth, the Park has maintained a "family culture" among our workers that I am ever grateful for. Thank you for giving your time and energy so faithfully, and what's more, always with a smile!

