



USFWS

## MIDDLE CREEK INITIATIVE

The Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, located on the Lebanon-Lancaster County line about one mile south of Kleinfeltersville, is a special tract owned and set aside by the Pennsylvania Game Commission for the protection, propagation, management, preservation and controlled harvest of wildlife. This area of more than 5,000 acres provides habitat for waterfowl, forest wildlife and farmland wildlife and includes a 400-acre shallow lake and 70 acres of impoundments. Visitors to the wildlife area in November and from late February to late March are fortunate to witness and photograph the flocks of beautiful tundra swan that stop in Pennsylvania during migration.

The tundra swan breeds in northern Alaska and Canada and migrates south to wintering grounds on both coasts of the United States. The larger eastern population winters from southeastern Pennsylvania down to coastal North Carolina, with greatest concentrations in the southern portion of that range. In late winter, tundra swans begin funneling up the Susquehanna River drainage system, which is an historic gathering, or staging, area for these birds.

Middle Creek hosts a significant portion of the eastern population of tundra swans while the birds are wintering, staging, or making a migratory stopover. In years that Middle Creek's large water impoundment retains open water throughout the winter, several hundred swans may spend the entire winter there. In a given year, during late February and early March, several thousand swans will spend time there. The highest recorded number of tundra swans observed at Middle Creek WMA was 14,700 during one winter.

While Middle Creek WMA provides a secure water-roosting area for tundra swans, the birds do not tend to feed on Middle Creek's acreage. For feeding, the swans rely on agricultural areas near Middle Creek, especially privately owned farmland to the northwest in Lebanon County. Swans are especially attracted to feeding in winter wheat fields; fortunately, it is a hardy crop and can recover from some grazing.

However, like much of southeastern Pennsylvania, Lebanon County is under intense pressure from development. Fields that a few years ago held winter wheat and tundra swans now hold housing subdivisions. The concern is that if the Ag-lands are lost, the area will be lost to the swans, and thus the area will lose its swans. Given the importance of the general Middle Creek area to the tundra swan population, an effort is being made to preserve farmland and open space. There is still time to save farmland and open space in Lebanon County, but that time is now and the window of opportunity is rapidly closing.

The Lebanon Valley Conservancy (LVC) has taken the organizational, educational and fundraising lead in a program called the **Middle Creek Initiative**, which is intended to insure that adequate farmland is retained in southeastern Lebanon County to satisfy the needs of Middle Creek's migratory waterfowl, including tundra swans. The LVC has been meeting regularly with local individuals and organizations to develop an educational and financial assistance strategy. Individuals and organizations such as the Lebanon County Conservation District, PA Game Commission, Nature Conservancy, Planning Department, members of the farming community, municipal officials and administrators of the WMA have come together to develop strategies for preserving farmland and raising the necessary funds to do so. The Lebanon Valley Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Lebanon Valley program has also been included in the discussions.

The success of the **Middle Creek Initiative** will be measured in dollars raised to purchase agricultural easements and the number of acres of farmland removed from development. Since Middle Creek is an important migratory stopover for tundra swans and other waterfowl, which forage in nearby agricultural areas, the success of this initiative will also be evident in the numbers of birds that continue to journey through the area on their way to Canada and Alaska. And finally, the feeding of these birds in terms of crop damage to local farmers can be limited provided that sufficient acreage is available to the birds for foraging.

Inaction is not an option for Lebanon County if the cropland necessary to sustain the feeding habits of these migratory species is to be protected. Possible consequences of losing their source of nourishment include reduced bird numbers or changes in flight patterns; regardless, it will have a direct and negative impact upon the local and regional economy. The steps necessary for protection of the migratory habitat require the participation and dedication of a broad cross-section of groups and individuals.

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