

2017 Maine Wildlife Park Volunteer Newsletter



Each passing season at the Maine Wildlife Park leaves its mark - a noteworthy happening or series of events that comprise the substance of our memory book. If 2017 were given such a designation, it would have to be remembered as the year of the comeback. Just as the New England Patriots

made sports history at Super Bowl 51, the Park had its own 2017 legendary comeback that defied any reasonable prediction for the season. The result was another all-time record year squeaked out by closing day, and on the heels of a storm that nearly put an early end to the season!



Before looking at how it all ended for the park in 2017, we'll start with the beginning. Unusually wet weather made for a disappointing opening and spring season. This was in stark contrast to a record-breaking opening in 2016 that raised the bar high for future comparison. After the first few weeks, the park's attendance was down nearly 40% relative to the previous year. Before summer started we were still behind by 30%; but then everything changed. A summer of beautiful weather began and with it brought droves of visitors to make up for lost time! During July and August, the park hosted over 56,000 visitors! This was an all-time record for summer attendance, and rapidly closed the gap created by the slow spring.

A review of the enclosed admissions and revenue figures reveals that there were no "heavyweight" sales categories that carried our record in 2017. Most are consistent with previous years and show little deviation from existing trends. The true strength of these figures resides in the internal; the organizational structure, culture, and energy of the park that are created by our greatest asset - its people. The volunteers and staff that carry out the park's work on a daily basis are a force to behold. If you're reading this newsletter, you are part of that powerful workforce. If any of you have any doubt about the importance of your role at the park, it will be my pleasure to prove it to you!



This year, we reviewed over 2,000 visitor comments left in the gatehouse logbook. 98% of the feedback was positive, with customers commenting on many dimensions of their visit beyond our wildlife. Examples include the appearance of the facility, cleanliness, the gardens, customer service, etc. Every park volunteer has a role in one of these dimensions, and is therefore part of the positive experience that our visitors enjoy. While our wildlife is captivating and magnificent, they alone won't keep people returning week after week and year after year. It takes an all-around positive experience to draw in repeat visitors during the season - thousands of them. In short, you are what our visitors keep returning for!

Another part of our visitor's positive experience is the constant upkeep and enhancement of our infrastructure. In 2017 we opened our new Nocturnal Creature Exhibit, showcasing new species and behaviors. We were also able to complete maintenance and renovation projects to our turtle, bobcat, beaver, and herpetological exhibits. Other new displays included new species signage, a wildlife and wood display, and countless painting, roofing, and general maintenance projects.

As the 2017 season came to a close, Mother Nature provided an end to the season that was even more dramatic than the spring's weather. On October 29th, the park sustained more damage than from any other storm of the past decade. Several of the park's inhabitants could have easily taken advantage of downed fences to try out life in the big woods, but they chose to stay with "the good life" at the park! However, the wind storm did present some major setbacks to our operation. Several fall projects were stalled while we focused on clearing trees, limbs, and repairing fence damage. The park was closed for three days, without power for a week, and experienced a decrease in business that lasted through park closing. Even as I write, there are still remaining repairs that will have to wait until spring.

2017 also brought a much greater type of loss with the passing of Lou Twohearts and Caryl Widdowson. Lou organized the Native American Pow-Wow for 8 years at the park, launching a program that defied all expectations of how big a park event could be. During those years, the park hosted over 30,000 people for the event. Lou was a man of inspirational strength and perseverance, and the park's largest and most dynamic event will forever bear his legacy. Caryl Widdowson's passion was the rehabilitation of Maine's wildlife. For decades, she operated "Safe and Sound" rehab center in Gray, caring for countless animals that came in under her watch. Caryl's involvement with the park ranged from her employment as an assistant Gamekeeper to a recipient of injured animals received by the park on a daily basis. Her impact on the 'rehab' community would be impossible to overstate.



Despite the big storm, this fall/early winter brought the completion of our songbird exhibit design and the start of its groundbreaking work. Throughout the winter months, we will work with contractors to do as much building as winter weather allows so that the new exhibit can be ready sometime during the 2018 season. This winter will also mark the completion of many other projects such as a new park map, a renovated wagon rental program, the "Walk of Fame" installation, fencing repairs, and several other maintenance projects. We have also begun the planning and design phase of a major renovation to our Nature Store that will include a Game Farm Museum!

While it is always important to measure the park's figures and successes; and to review feedback from our customers, the numbers will never tell the entire story of the park's dedicated group of workers that tirelessly and passionately give of themselves every day. The collective efforts of over 9,000 volunteer hours equals an immeasurable sum that is not always tangible. The work that takes place behind the scenes, the positive culture that permeates the park, the educational impact on young children, and many other factors are not always visible to us. Yet their impact is very real to our visitors, very enjoyable to our daily work, and very relevant to the park's growth.

Thank you, for sustaining and enhancing a facility that offers a one-of-a-kind experience for our visitors and workers. It is truly a privilege to be part of the Maine Wildlife Park!

Curt Johnson
MWP Superintendent

