

## **BELL ACRES NATURE PARK**

**By Diane Abell**

*The park is open from sunrise to sunset with the trail head located at the intersection of Sevin and Turkeyfoot roads. There are no facilities.*

In December of 1986, the Western PA Conservancy received a gift of 625 acres of land in Bell Acres from the Laurel Assets Group. Some of the land was fairly level with open fields and meadows, but the majority consisted of heavily wooded, environmentally-sensitive steep slopes and stream valleys with lots of special natural areas filled with mature trees, trickling streams, and wildflower stands.

Of the total property, 460 acres were considered land of conservation value, while the remaining acres were considered suitable for development. In a departure from its usual role of protecting land from development, and since the donor had placed no restrictions on the use of this land, WPC engaged the firm of Joseph Hajnas and Associates to develop a subdivision plan known as Sewickley Heights Estates for the more level acreage, making sure that sound conservation practices were put in place. The properties along Beech Ridge Drive were a part of this original subdivision plan. WPC used the proceeds from the sale of these properties to acquire environmentally important land in the Laurel Highlands, an area where the donor lived and had a strong interest in seeing protected.

The remaining acreage drained into two separate watersheds – the Little Sewickley Creek watershed and the Big Sewickley Creek watershed. Over a period of time from 1993 through 1996, WPC donated 278 acres of conservation land to the Borough of Bell Acres with the goal of protecting the forested tributaries to Big Sewickley Creek from development or destruction. This land is all under conservation easement with WPC with deed restrictions that state that the land is to remain “forever wild”. A WPC Land Steward visits the Borough lands annually to ensure that the deed restrictions are being followed. These lands comprise the Bell Acres Nature Park. ***\*See the map of Bell Acres Green Space***

In the 1990’s, WPC donated two properties to the Little Sewickley Creek Watershed Association whose mission is to protect and conserve the Little Sewickley Creek and its watershed: the 93-acre parcel known as Waggoner’s Hollow and the 77-acre parcel known as Devil’s Hollow. Both properties drained into the Little Sewickley Creek watershed, one of the highest quality watersheds in Allegheny County. In 2016, the Watershed Association in turn donated Devil’s Hollow to the Allegheny Land Trust and Waggoner’s Hollow to Sewickley Heights Borough to be annexed to Sewickley Heights Borough Park. These properties too are under conservation easement with deed restrictions to remain “forever wild” and are also visited every year by a WPC Land Steward checking to be sure that the easement restrictions are being enforced. ***\*See the map of Bell Acres Green Space***

In 1994, the Allegheny County Natural Heritage Inventory identified all of the Bell Acres land under conservation easement as being part of the Camp Meeting Woods Biological Diversity Area – land that is exceptionally significant for its wide variety of trees, plants, and wildlife. This

area of Allegheny County is now identified as a County Natural Heritage Area, and is the largest in all of Allegheny County.

As can be seen from the map of ***Bell Acres Green Space***, the Allegheny Land Trust whose mission is *“to conserve and care for local land for the health and well-being of current and future generations”* has acquired many acres of land within the Borough that is now also under permanent protection. All of the protected green space within the Borough – the Bell Acres Nature Park, the Allegheny Land Trust properties, and Waggoner’s Hollow - are open for public hiking and other passive recreational activities.

One of the goals of the Borough’s current Comprehensive Plan Update is to design and develop trails to provide more access to these natural treasures that are protected within the Borough. Through the combined efforts over the years of Bell Acres, the Western PA Conservancy, the Allegheny Land Trust, the Little Sewickley Creek Watershed Association, and countless volunteers, we will continue to benefit from a natural heritage that will remain “forever wild”.