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Thanks to Delco Anglers, the trout are biting

Group has been preserving, improving and expanding fishing in Delaware County



Members of the Delco Anglers transfer brook trout from the nursery tank to a tank on the trailer before transporting the fish to nearby creeks to stock. Doing the transfer are, from left, Dylan Pywell of Media, Tony Merola of Norwood, Mike Hittinger of Broomall, and, in front, Mason Pywell, 9.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN GALLAGHER

By Peg DeGrassa

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MIDDLETOWN >> The trout are biting in the creeks of Delaware County this spring thanks to the tireless efforts of the all-volunteer Delco Anglers & Conservationists.

For 62 years, the Delco Anglers have stocked the Ridley Creek, Ithan Creek, Darby Creek, Little Darby Creek, Chester Creek and West Branch of the Chester Creek with brook trout and golden trout, making sure there's plenty of fish in the six local creeks for fishermen and fisherwomen to continue enjoying their beloved pastime.

The Delco Anglers & Conservationists are a group of local men and women, with a passion for fishing, dedicated to preserving, improving, and expanding fishing in Delaware County, as well as raising and stocking trout in local creeks so that everyone can enjoy the sport of fishing.

“We come from all walks of life,” explained board member and assistant nursery manager Martin O’Kane. “We have over 100 members, all volunteers, who bring their passion for fishing to the table. We do this all on our own time. We are lawyers, carpenters, dental surgeons, realtors, truck drivers, business owners — you name it — but when we are here, we are all the same, with a common purpose.

“We know that fishing is way more than sitting on a bucket and throwing a line into the water. We not only make it possible to continue the tradition of trout fishing, but we also realize the importance of conservation and education.”

O’Kane, a resident of Drexel Hill for 29 years, has been a member of Delco Anglers for seven years.

“I grew up in Ireland and have fished all over the world through my life,” O’Kane shared. “One day, I was at Ridley Creek and I saw people at the nursery. I was curious, so I stopped by and found out what Delco Anglers is all about, and they put me to work. I’ve loved every minute of it since.” The Delco Anglers begin getting ready for each fishing season’s stocking in early October when they obtain their baby trout, called “fry,” from the Pennsylvania Fish Commission’s hatcheries. The trout are put into the underground tanks at the co-op nursery in Delaware County, that the Anglers operate in conjunction with the state agency.

“We raise 4,000 trout, predominately brookies,” stated Kevin Gallagher of Ridley Park, the Delco Anglers’ vice president. “The state does not stock brook trout so we elect to fill this need.”

The state stocks rainbow trout, golden trout and brown trout in the creeks of Delaware County, but does not stock brook trout in the waters of southeastern Pennsylvania.

Delco Anglers fill the void by supplementing the state’s stockings with brookies and some extra goldens. Delaware County stocks more creeks than any other county in Pennsylvania.

Located at 508 Barren Road in Middletown Township, the Delco Anglers & Conservationists’ co-op nursery is one among 160 nurseries operated throughout Pennsylvania.

Formerly located on the grounds of Tyler Arboretum, the Delco Anglers relocated their nursery in 1999 to the parcel on Barren Road, which the group leases from Ridley Creek State Park.

“We are completely unique from other nurseries in the country because we raise our fish in underground tanks, using no artificial means,” O’Kane explained.

Most other nurseries use well water, he said, whereas the Anglers use natural water.

“Club members credit the late Steve Kosiak of Havertown for spearheading the move to our current location,” O’Kane shared. “Steve was one of the original founders of this club, as well as the former manager of the nursery. He moved our organization forward in so many ways. He pioneered the tank system we use to raise the trout naturally, as if they’re already in the creek. Sadly, Steve passed away earlier this spring, but he truly left a legacy here with all he accomplished.”

Once in the tanks at the nursery, 14 volunteers alternate times and days to feed the trout, which takes about 60 to 90 minutes. When they initially arrive at the tanks, the baby trout are only about 2 to 4 inches long. The food is one of the club's biggest expenses. Electricity is the Anglers' second largest expense.

The Anglers' membership dues, sale of merchandise, and other donations help to pay the expenses. The Anglers do not sell or charge for any fish. The fish belong to the state and the Delco Anglers only caretake them.

"The cost of fish food has risen over 35% from last year," O'Kane reported. "We spend a few thousand dollars on food alone."

The stocking

According to Bill Spring, the nursery manager who oversees the day-to-day tank operation, "We can't keep the trout year round at the nursery, because our natural water gets too warm for them. The water temperature becomes marginal in May so we have to get them all to the creeks by then. Nurseries in other parts of the state might be able to keep them longer, but our water temps start rising as we progress toward summer, so we want to move them out of here. We are a put-and-take operation."

Every week, from the first week of March to mid-May, volunteers are picking up fish at the Anglers' nursery and transferring them to the county's creeks. This year, the creek stocking began as soon as the calendar turned to March, when the nursery's trout measured about 12 to 14 inches.

The Anglers' work began by stocking 150 brook trout in Chester Creek at Locksley Road, 150 brook trout in Ridley Creek at West Rose Tree Road and Ridley Creek Road, both done on March 2.

The Anglers have continued every week since stocking brookies and golden trout in local streams, and doing second and third stockings at some locations, until they finish up on May 24. Changes to the stocking locations are voted on annually.

The Anglers don't stock Crum Creek because of its proximity to the reservoir.

"The mileage that we cover,

from top to bottom of the county is pretty large and impressive," O'Kane stated. "And we've been doing this for decades!"

The fishing season opened this year on April 6.

Like with all fishing done within the state, anyone over age 16 needs a Pennsylvania Fishing License, as well as a trout permit. The state's creel limit is five fish per day, and that's a combined total of brown, golden, brook and rainbow trout.

The fish continue to thrive in the local streams for recreational fishing throughout the summer months. If not caught and consumed, some trout are known to be still living and growing after three years in some locations.

Donations and education

As a nonprofit group, the Anglers appreciate any and all donations to help cover expenses not met by their membership dues or the sale of Delco Anglers' merchandise.

The group's biggest claim to fame is their affiliation with brook trout and even their logo is "Catch Our Brookies."

"We are the only nursery in the state that raises brook trout," Spring said. "And the brook trout is Pennsylvania's State Fish."

The group is keen on education, too, and members look forward to any chance they get to educate the public, especially youth.

"We are very big on teaching our young people," O'Kane commented. "We want to keep the tradition of fishing in Delaware County alive now and in the future."

Young people from schools, Scout troops, church youth groups, and camps take field trips to the nursery to learn about the process of raising and stocking fish, as well as to get an education on environmental and conservation topics. Adult groups and organizations are welcome to visit, too. The Delco Anglers also create awareness through their public service announcements.

Paul Cress of Ridley Park, president of Delco Anglers & Conservationists, has been a member of the group for 32 years. He thinks that he is probably the longest member currently in the group.

"I think we all like being a part of Delco Anglers because it's giving something back to the community," he said. "We like helping people to learn about nature and conservation, and to continue enjoying the recreational sport of fishing."

Membership in the Anglers has grown exponentially in the last few years, with 105 paid members.

While many say they found out about the group through word of mouth, 60% of the new members say they discovered the Anglers through social media.

At its last monthly meeting, the group had 127 attendees. Annual membership dues are only \$30 for individuals ages 21-59; \$17.50 for ages 16-21; \$25 for ages 60 and older; and a the family membership is \$35.

Volunteers are always welcome. Help is needed to stock fish, feed fish, do streamside cleanup, fishing trips and nursery maintenance.

The group meets at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of every month at the Middletown Township Roosevelt Community Center, 464 S. Old Middletown Road, Middletown Township.

Those interested in membership are invited to attend. Anyone can stop by to see the facility and learn more about its operation and purpose.

He was hooked

Vice President Kevin Gallagher, who has been a member for five years, says he enjoys the camaraderie of belonging to the Delco Anglers and sharing fishing experiences with other like-minded individuals in the organization.

“Everyone here is a volunteer who has an interest in fishing and conservation of our natural resources,” Gallagher stated. “My passion is fly fishing and I want to get my grandkids involved in fishing.”

“I got involved in the Delco Anglers, quite by accident,” added Spring, of Middletown Township, who says he has enjoyed fishing throughout his entire life. “I was driving down Barren Road and I saw what looked like a water treatment plant near Penncrest High School. I stopped to see what it was all about and have been going there almost every day since!”

The Delco Anglers & Conservationists group is led by Paul Cress of Ridley Township, president; Kevin Gallagher of Ridley Park, vice president; Ken Grandel of Aston, membership chairman; Martin O’Kane of Drexel Hill, executive board; Pege Reali of Philadelphia, executive board; Bill Spring of Middletown, nursery manager; Jacquelyn Willoughby Grandel of Aston, treasurer; and Jerry Leggieri of Newtown Square, secretary.

Anyone wishing to find out more about joining the Delco Anglers & Conservationists, to preserve the sport of trout fishing and protect natural resources, can contact Paul Cress, president, at 610-818-8356, follow “Delco Anglers” on Facebook or @delco_anglers on Instagram.