



# The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

working to protect the natural integrity of the Finger Lakes region

Vol. 32, No. 2 • Spring 2020

## Finding Solace Outdoors

*As we continue dealing with unprecedented challenges arising from the coronavirus pandemic, all of us at the Land Trust hope that you and your families are safe and healthy. We are glad that so many of you have found solace from the drumbeat of grim news by immersing yourself in nature at one of our 35 preserves.*

**I**n the face of such adversity and uncertainty, it was particularly reassuring to witness the emergence of another spring this year—from the return of the first tree swallows to the gradual greening of our hillsides to the first serenade of frogs in a woodland pond.

Our connection to the land—and all its occupants—can help get us through hard times like these. For this reason, we have been working from our homes to continue conserving the lands and waters that make our region such a special place.

*continued on page 2*





## Finding Solace Outdoors

continued from cover

*Even as we put health and safety first, we are continuing to look to the future and pursue important land and water conservation projects.*

Our conservation work is helping to forever protect our sparkling lakes, sequestering carbon to mitigate climate change, providing a home for our native plants and animals, ensuring the future of our local farms, securing recreational assets like the Finger Lakes Trail, maintaining scenic vistas, and, perhaps most importantly, uplifting our souls.

Even as we put health and safety first, we are continuing to look to the future and pursue important land and water conservation projects. To this end, we are working with partners to secure pristine shoreline on both Otisco and Skaneateles lakes. This spring, we hope to establish a new preserve in the town of Canandaigua with sweeping views and miles of quiet trails. Near Seneca Lake, we are poised to close on a conservation easement that will secure a hillside overlooking Watkins Glen.

We stand committed to these and other projects and will continue to bring you good news during upcoming issues of *The Land Steward* and through our monthly e-news and social media. Land Trust volunteer Scott Levine recently wrote to us that he was “so grateful that in times like these, there is a safe place to escape from home and find joy in the areas you have worked hard to secure and preserve.” We would love to hear how you are connecting with nature and staying well.

Thanks very much for your support and best wishes from all of us at the Land Trust. Please stay safe and keep in touch.



Andrew Zepp, Executive Director, Finger Lakes Land Trust

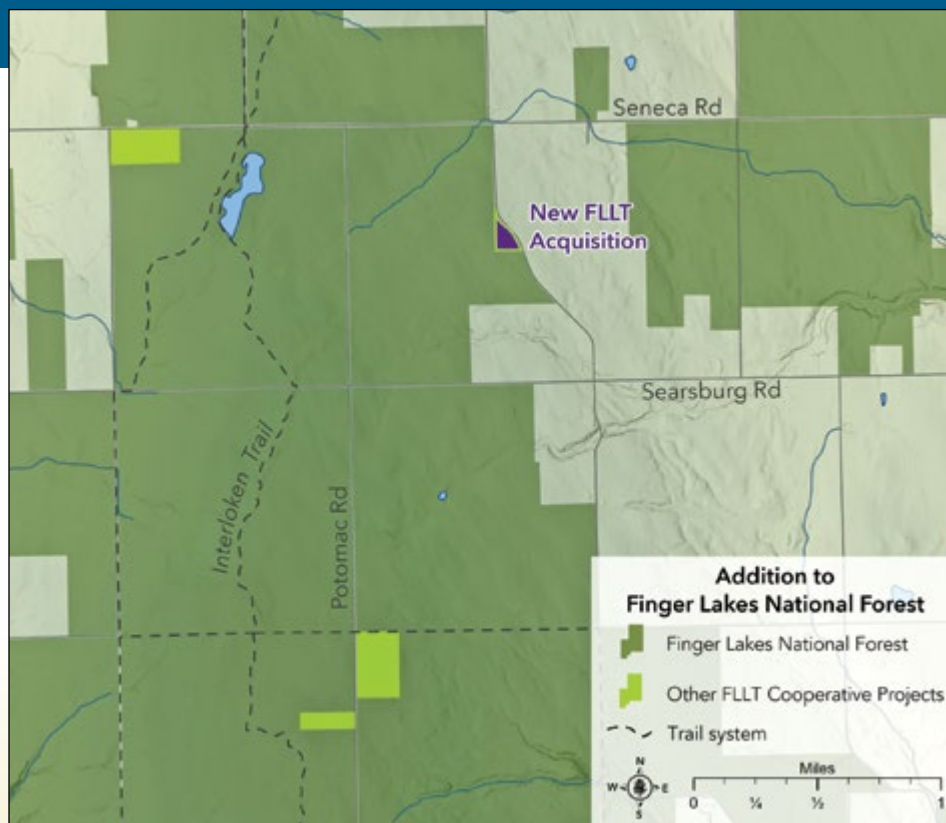
## Partnership Enhances Access to New York State's Only National Forest

Well known for its miles of multi-use recreational trails and dirt roads, the Finger Lakes National Forest (FLNF) spans more than 16,000 acres between Cayuga and Seneca lakes. The forest's patchwork of fields and woodlands also provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife and is recognized as one of New York State's Important Bird Areas.

Recently, the Land Trust acquired 5.5 wooded acres that include more than 1,300 feet of shared boundary with the FLNF in the town of Hector, Schuyler County. Protection of this parcel, which also contains approximately 1,000 feet of frontage on Vesa Road, prevents future subdivision that would fragment wildlife habitat connectivity and disrupt recreational opportunities.

The acquisition was made possible by the organization's "Opportunity Fund," a dedicated account created by the Land Trust to make time-sensitive acquisitions possible. The fund will be replenished when the property is sold to the U.S. Forest Service in the future.

This latest project is the Land Trust's fourth land acquisition within the national forest, where the organization also holds three conservation easements conserving private property.



“Though modest in size, this property is important to the integrity of the forest because of its road frontage and associated development potential,” said Land Trust Executive Director Andrew Zepp. “Throughout the region,

the Land Trust is working with our partners in the public sector to secure properties like this to protect their ecological value while also enhancing access for outdoor recreation.”



# Land Purchase Expands Logan Hill Nature Preserve

*Among the Land Trust's 35 publicly accessible nature preserves, the Logan Hill Nature Preserve may be one of the most diverse.*

The hill itself rises 400 feet above the village of Candor in Tioga County, and the land encompassed by the preserve includes mixed hardwood forest, grassland habitat, vernal pools, an elevated wetland, and hilltop meadows that provide splendid views of the surrounding landscape. The preserve also extends down the hill with frontage on Catatonk Creek, a tributary that feeds into the Susquehanna River.

A recent acquisition by the Land Trust has increased the footprint of the Logan Hill Preserve. The Land Trust purchased an adjacent, undeveloped 63-acre parcel of forest at the northern end of the hill that will be added to the existing preserve, expanding it to 348 acres.

The land that comprised the original Logan Hill Preserve was a donation from Betsy Darlington, a founding board member of the Land Trust, and her husband Dick. The Ithaca residents bought the property in 1972 as a family retreat—a place to get away with their children and experience nature. In 1990, the Darlington family placed a conservation easement on the land (the first-ever easement received by the Land Trust), and then donated all but a small parcel to the Land Trust in 2015.

The Logan Hill Preserve is at once accessible and isolated. Despite its proximity to the village—the trailhead is less than a mile from the center of town—the preserve embodies the peaceful solitude of a remote wilderness. A 2.5-mile hiking trail provides access to the varied landscape of the preserve.

Over the years, the Darlingtons created a series of vernal pools and ponds on the property that host an abundance of native wildlife, from ducks and geese to wood frogs and salamanders. Bobolinks nest in the grassland and meadow habitat, while brushier areas are home to birds such as the Prairie Warbler and American Woodcock.

Woodlands on the preserve host oak, pine, hemlock, and maple, along with uncommon tree varieties such as tupelo and cucumber magnolia. The forests house a wide variety of songbirds and other wildlife.

The new addition to the Logan Hill Preserve consists almost entirely of woodlands, very similar to the existing

preserve in terms of tree varieties. The Land Trust hopes to extend a trail loop through the addition, connecting to the preserve's existing trails.

The previous owner was skilled at observing and identifying mushrooms and indicated there were many species on the property, as well as bioluminescent fungi. The diversity of flora and fauna here is just one more reason

to come out and explore this wonderfully varied nature preserve.

—Jeff Tonole

*The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Jim Miller of the law firm Miller Mayer LLP in Ithaca, NY, for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.*





# Getting outdoors...

can be a great way to de-stress and stay healthy during these challenging times. The Land Trust has 35 publicly accessible nature preserves including 43 miles of hiking trails. Enjoy these photos of our preserves in the region and check out our map — [fllt.org/map](http://fllt.org/map)— to visit a location near you. Please remember to stay close to home.

JOHN SUTTON



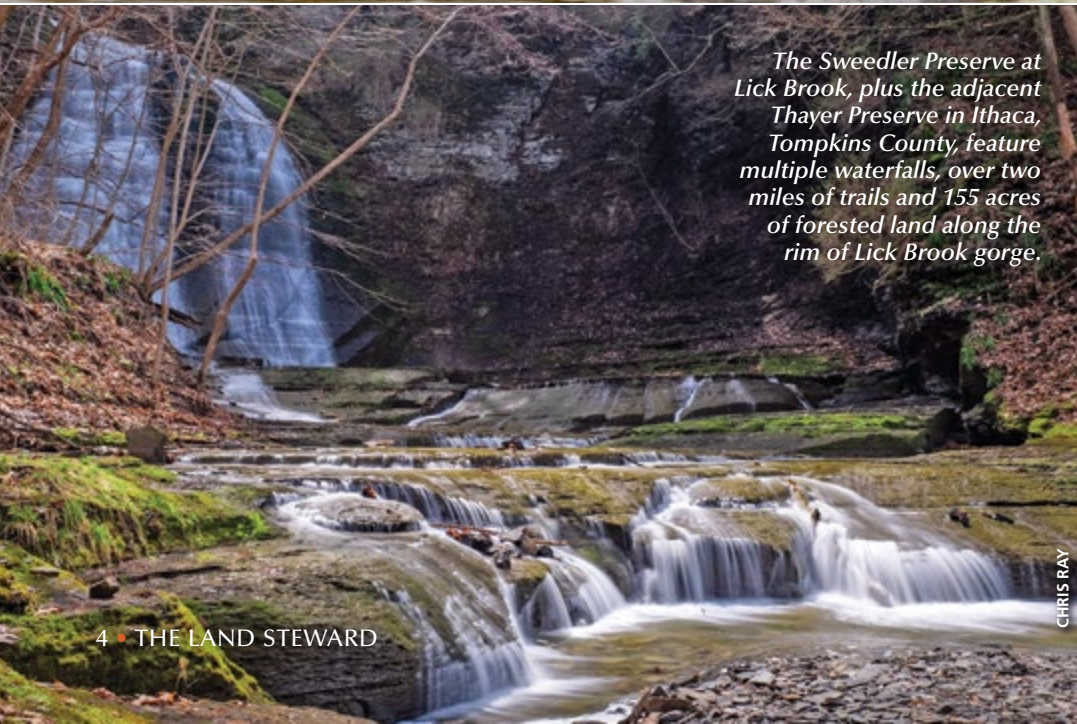
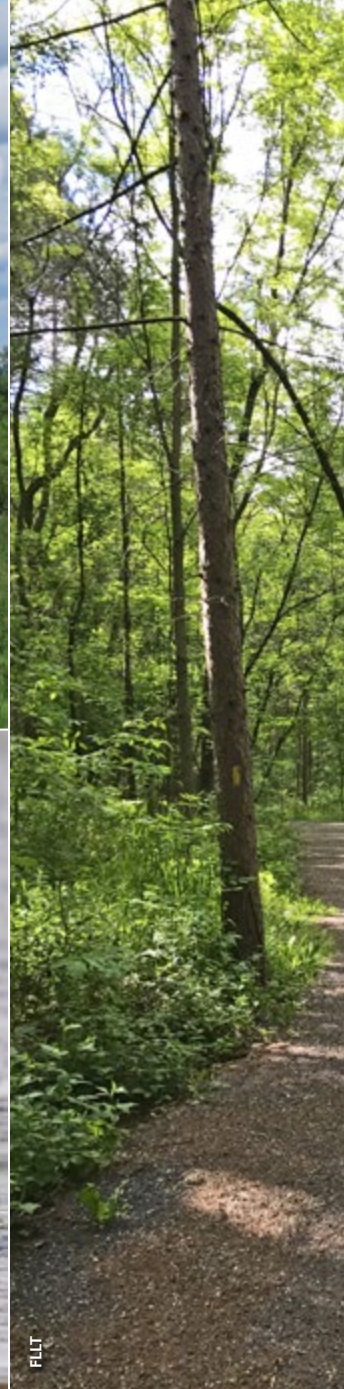
*The 206-acre Hinchcliff Family Preserve in Spafford, Onondaga County, peers over the eastern shore of Skaneateles Lake. A total of 2.4 miles of hiking trails pass through diverse habitats and offer sweeping views of the lake.*



*Otters have recently been observed at the 537-acre Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve in West Danby, Tompkins County. There are several trails at the preserve, totaling 3.8 miles.*

SCOTT LEVINE

FLLT



*The Sweedler Preserve at Lick Brook, plus the adjacent Thayer Preserve in Ithaca, Tompkins County, feature multiple waterfalls, over two miles of trails and 155 acres of forested land along the rim of Lick Brook gorge.*

CHRIS RAY

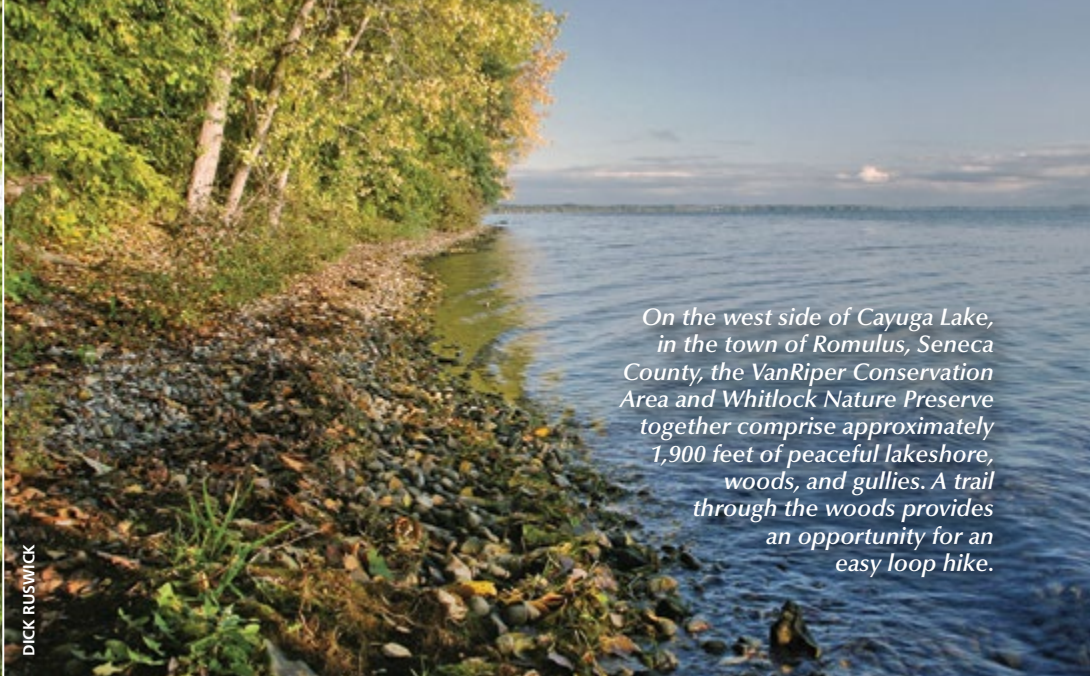


FLLT





*The Bishop Preserve in Fayette, Seneca County, has a rich mosaic of brushland, forest, and wetland, and connects to the Cayuga-Seneca Canal Trail which runs for several miles along the canal that connects Cayuga and Seneca lakes.*



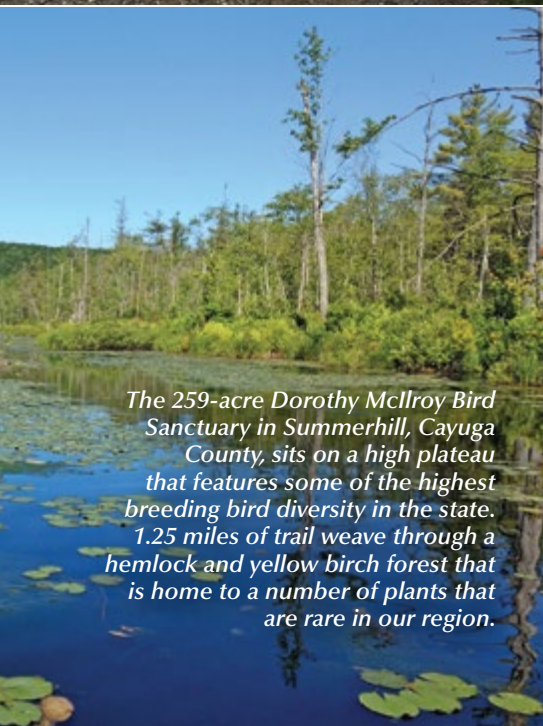
DICK RUSWICK

*On the west side of Cayuga Lake, in the town of Romulus, Seneca County, the VanRiper Conservation Area and Whitlock Nature Preserve together comprise approximately 1,900 feet of peaceful lakeshore, woods, and gullies. A trail through the woods provides an opportunity for an easy loop hike.*

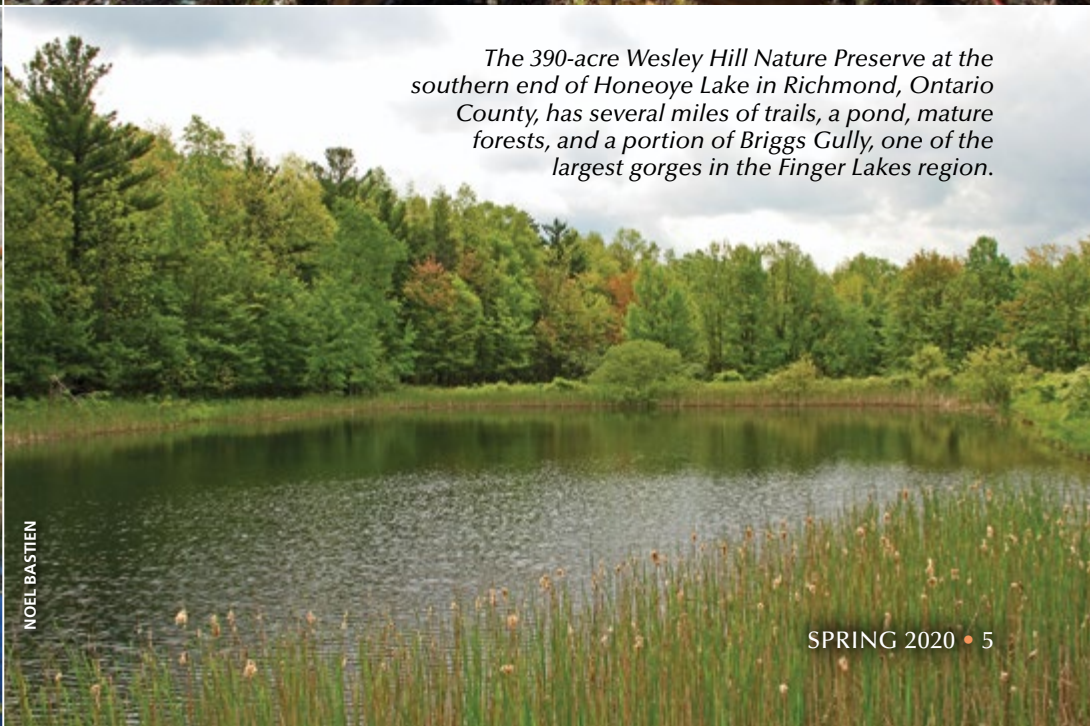


CHRIS RAY

*Just minutes from downtown Corning, Steuben County, the Houghton Land Preserve features mature hardwood forests, 2 miles of hiking trails, and scenic meadows with sweeping views of the surrounding hills.*



*The 259-acre Dorothy McIlroy Bird Sanctuary in Summerhill, Cayuga County, sits on a high plateau that features some of the highest breeding bird diversity in the state. 1.25 miles of trail weave through a hemlock and yellow birch forest that is home to a number of plants that are rare in our region.*



NOEL BASTIEN

*The 390-acre Wesley Hill Nature Preserve at the southern end of Honeoye Lake in Richmond, Ontario County, has several miles of trails, a pond, mature forests, and a portion of Briggs Gully, one of the largest gorges in the Finger Lakes region.*



# thank you

**You helped make 2019 a wonderful year for the FLLT!** We celebrated our 30th Anniversary with more than 3,000 members, donors and volunteers—together reaching milestones of 24,000 acres protected forever and nearly 43 miles of trails opened to the public.

*We are very grateful for gifts of all sizes and use them wisely to protect land and water across the region. In particular, we wish to acknowledge everyone who generously gave \$100 or more in 2019.\* Please accept our heartfelt thanks!*

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# A CLOSER LOOK

## Splendor in the Grass

### *The life history and conservation of Bobolinks*

**I**n spite of everything we're all trying to endure and overcome, still the days are getting longer and nature is showing familiar signs of renewal. Even a brief moment outside can deliver restorative distractions—an unfurling leaf, a bee on a blooming flower, or even just the sun shining higher in the sky and warmer on our faces with each passing week.

And if you're lucky, you might even get out to a greening meadow to watch and listen, and be rewarded with one of the spirit-lifting shows of the season, starring one of our most distinctive songbird species, the Bobolink.

Bobolinks arrive in our Finger Lakes region in the first half of May. Male Bobolinks fill our grasslands with their ebullient clanking song, conspicuously fighting over territories and vying for the attention of females. Adult males are quite distinctive in breeding plumage, with black faces, chests, and bellies contrasting with a white back and a straw-colored cap at the rear of the head. Roger Tory Peterson famously noted that they look as if they are wearing tuxedos backward. Females, on the other hand, are subtly brown, with cryptic black stripes that help them disappear into the grass.

Bobolinks are both polygynous and polyandrous—that is, both males and females can have multiple mates within a breeding season. They nest on the ground against tall grasses or forbs, with clutches of three to seven eggs. Young hatch in June or July and are generally able to fly by late July.

By early September, Bobolinks stage in flocks in preparation for travel to wintering grounds in South America—a trip of over 6,000 miles, among the longest migrations of any North American songbird. During this epic journey, Bobolinks navigate by sensing the earth's magnetic field, using iron oxide in bristles in their nasal cavities. They also orient themselves by stars in the night sky.

Before European settlement of North America, when most of our region was forested, Bobolinks likely had relatively modest populations confined to scattered floodplains and native prairie. Their populations expanded with the widespread clearing of land for agriculture, and probably peaked in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Since that heyday, however, Bobolinks have been in steady decline. Widespread hunting of the birds for food and agricultural control took a heavy toll up until the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. Furthermore, for more than a century, agricultural land

cover has been shrinking and becoming fragmented by suburban development and reversion to forest. According to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, the population of Bobolinks in the United States declined by 65 percent between 1966 and 2015. Long-term surveys have documented similar declines for other grassland birds of our region, including Upland Sandpipers, Short-eared Owls, Sedge Wrens, and Henslow's Sparrows.

Bobolinks' main remaining habitat in our region is in hayfields. Here too, they have faced persistent challenges.

Farmers have been cutting their fields earlier and more frequently, because young hay has higher protein content, digestibility, and overall nutritional value. The longer the farmer waits to harvest, the coarser and thicker-stemmed the grasses will be. Late-harvested hay is considered acceptable feed only for horses, sheep, and beef cattle—but notably, not for dairy cows. Heavier grasses are also more difficult to dry and rake before baling. Meanwhile, for Bobolinks and other grassland-breeding birds, early mowing means the catastrophic loss of nests, eggs, and young birds not yet able to fly.

Thus the main regional focus for grassland bird conservation over the past two decades has been in providing farmers with incentives and guidance to delay mowing and to rotate fields so as to leave some acreage as grassland all summer. Most notably, the Landowner Incentive Program, developed by Audubon New York and implemented by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, has brought over 4,300 acres under conservation management for grassland birds since 2008.

The Land Trust too is doing its part to protect Bobolinks. At several of its properties—from the Houghton Land Preserve in Corning, to the new Summerland Farm Preserve in Caroline, to new lands recently acquired above Owasco Lake, and more—the Land Trust is sustaining grassland habitat through annual mowing, while ensuring that the timing is consistent with the needs of the breeding birds.

The travails of a Bobolink's life might seem hardly relevant to our own lives in these times. But like other gifts of nature, the life of the Bobolink enriches us with perspective, and somehow maybe even moments of joy and hope. It affirms that each individual life, entwining with others to form life on the whole, is something wonderful and precious, something worth fighting for, and something never to take for granted.

—Mark Chao





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# Spring 2020

*To keep our families safe,  
all our spring nature education  
events have been cancelled.  
Please visit [fllt.org/events](http://fllt.org/events) for  
future event announcements.*

*Be well!*

BRIAN MALEY

*The Sweedler  
Preserve at Lick Brook  
in Tompkins County*