



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

working to protect the natural integrity of the Finger Lakes region Vol. 32, No. 4 • Winter 2020-21

Land Donation Establishes New Nature Preserve in Tompkins County



BILL HECHT

The Land Trust recently acquired 143 acres along Coddington Road in the town of Caroline, just south of Ithaca near the border between Tompkins and Tioga counties. The property was a gift from Anatol and Carolyn Eberhard, former Ithaca residents and retired professors. The Land Trust plans to turn this generous donation into a publicly accessible nature preserve.

The Eberhards have a long history with the land. The couple originally purchased 40 acres, which included a house, when they moved to the area in 1972. Although they both had full-time academic jobs and spent their summers teaching at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, they put a great deal of time into the land. “Almost right away, we started planting trees in the area around the house,” said Carolyn. “Evergreens at first, and then deciduous varieties.”

They expanded the property to its current size by purchasing an adjacent parcel to the north, in part to prevent a potential trailer park development that was being planned for the site. Despite being away most summers, they enjoyed camping on their property, as well as snowshoeing in the winter. “It was nice

to walk up our own trails and appreciate the peace and quiet of the woods,” said Carolyn.

After building a house on the eastern side of Cayuga Lake in the 1990s, the Eberhards moved there and used the Coddington Road property as a nature retreat. In partnership with the Land Trust, they protected the property with a conservation easement in 2009. “We wanted the land, especially the forest, to remain as natural as possible,” said Carolyn.

Over the intervening years, the upstate New York winters wore on the Eberhards, and they eventually decided to retire to their old summer stomping grounds on Cape Cod. After attempting to sell the entire property, they decided instead to just sell the house and an acre of land, and donate the rest to the Land Trust.

“We are grateful to Anatol and Carolyn for this wonderful gift,” said Land Trust Executive Director Andy Zepp. “This is a beautiful property and the fact that it is part of a network of conservation land adds to its value.”

Most of the property is located on the top and eastern slope of Eastman Hill, which has been designated as a Unique Natural Area by Tompkins County. This portion of the property consists entirely of mature forest featuring towering oaks, maples, and hemlocks. The lower part of the property is former agricultural land in the Willseyville Creek valley that now consists of open meadow, brush, and forest, including the trees planted by the Eberhards.

The property donation is an important addition to the Emerald Necklace, the Land Trust’s effort to create a 50,000-

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For many reasons, we could all use a little hope right now. I was reminded this year how much the act of planting a tree is an act of hope for the future.

With the three goals of enhancing water quality, restoring wildlife habitat, and sequestering carbon in mind, the Land Trust has embarked upon a region-wide effort to plant native trees and shrubs in areas where they can have a significant impact.

In late 2019, we partnered with the Upper Susquehanna Coalition to plant 1,000 trees and shrubs along the banks of Owego Creek in a first step to buffer the stream that runs through our Goetchius Nature Preserve, just east of Ithaca. This project was followed by work at our new Owasco Bluffs Nature Preserve in Cayuga County where we planted a small grove of native trees and shrubs among a large area of invasive buckthorn and locust.

As you'll read about in this issue of *The Land Steward*, our latest effort involved a partnership with the Onondaga Earth Corps to plant 700 trees on a recently acquired property on the shore of Otisco Lake. The very dry summer of 2020 reminded me that for each of these projects, tree planting only marks the beginning of our

commitment to restoration. Ongoing stewardship efforts are required to meet our goals.

At the Owasco Bluffs Preserve, our humble saplings would not have made it through the dry summer if not for supplemental water provided by Land Trust staff. The planting area would already be overrun by vigorous locust sprouts if not for their constant removal. And, a high fence at the site provides much needed protection from our overabundant deer population.

During 2021, we will continue to plant trees and tend to the ones that have already taken root. I hope that you will consider joining me in this act of hope for our future. Please visit our web site for information about upcoming spring workdays that will provide opportunities to get involved.



Andrew Zepp
Executive Director, Finger Lakes Land Trust

Land Donation Establishes New Nature Preserve in Tompkins County

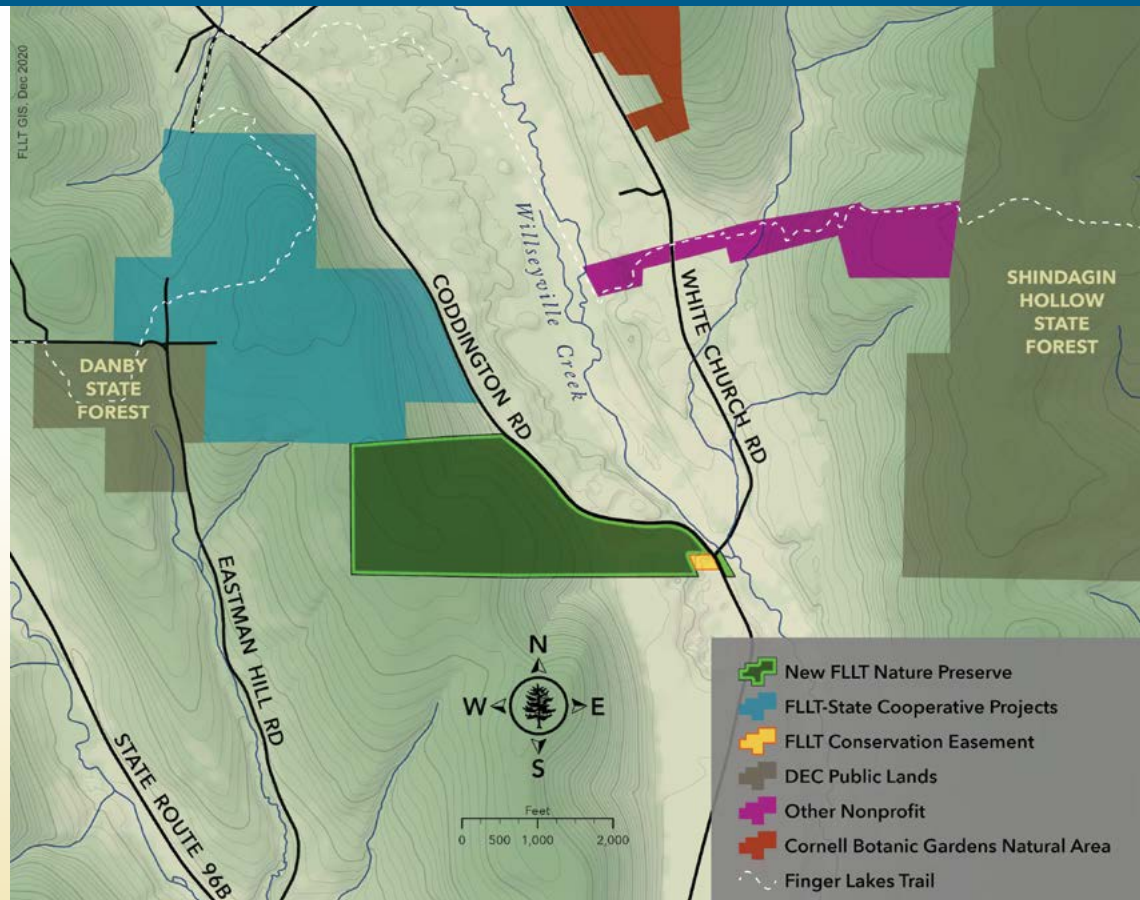
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acre greenbelt in an arc around Ithaca, from the Finger Lakes National Forest in the west to the Hammond Hill and Yellow Barn state forests in the east.

In particular, this property helps further bridge the gap of unprotected land between the Danby and Shindagin Hollow state forests. It is adjacent to several parcels acquired by the Land Trust in the recent past that have been or will be transferred to the state as additions to the Danby State Forest. In addition, the Shindagin Hollow State Forest is just a half-mile from the property's eastern border.

The Land Trust is working on a management plan for the nature preserve, with the goal of opening the property to the public sometime in 2022. Part of this plan may include the possibility of rerouting the Finger Lakes Trail, which traverses some of the nearby protected land, through the Eberhard property.

—Jeff Tonole



Conservation Easement Protects Farmland and Wetlands in Fall Creek Watershed

Farmland in New York remains under steady pressure from residential and commercial development. Despite the state government's successful farmland protection programs, which have preserved more than 75,000 acres of farmland across the state, the American Farmland Trust ranks New York in the top 20 most threatened states in terms of losing farmland to development.

Cheryl Prince Brotherton understands the need to protect and preserve farmland, and she is also uniquely positioned to do something about it. Cheryl is the most recent farmland owner in the Finger Lakes area to partner with the Land Trust to protect her land with a conservation easement.

The 324-acre Prince Farm is in a prime location for commercial and residential development—right along State Route 13 in the town of Dryden, Tompkins County. Route 13 splits the property in two, so there is significant frontage along the state highway, with additional frontage on nearby Ringwood Road. This kind of road access is especially attractive to developers.

Cheryl's family has a long history of farming in the area. Her great-grandparents emigrated from the Netherlands around the turn of the 20th century and operated a potato farm on Mount Pleasant. Her grandfather, Henry Prince, saved up the money he'd earned threshing grain and hauling milk to purchase 139 acres on the north side of Route 13 in 1933.

Henry started a dairy farm and was eventually joined by his son (and Cheryl's father), Russell, who acquired the 185 acres south of Route 13 in 1958. Russell operated the dairy until the early 1990s, and with no heirs interested in taking it over, he sold the operation and retired.

Today, much of the land is leased to Jerry Dell Farms, a local dairy farm that has been growing organic hay on the property for more than two decades.

In addition to its agricultural importance, the land has significant ecological and scenic value. The northern section of the farm contains approximately two-thirds of the Etna Swamp,

a wetland that has been designated by Tompkins County as a Unique Natural Area. Etna Swamp drains into Fall Creek and is a critical part of the watershed. On the other side of Route 13, the property rises gradually up a hill that provides spectacular views of the surrounding countryside.

The Land Trust has secured two conservation easements for the property—one on each

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Russell Prince, Cheryl Prince Brotherton's father, was born in 1931 and ran a dairy operation on the farm until the early 1990s.



BILL HECHT

Land Trust Responds Quickly To Protect Skaneateles Lake Watershed

Land Trust staff moved quickly this past fall to protect a 68-acre woodland overlooking Skaneateles Lake that was under foreclosure by Cayuga County for unpaid taxes. The property plays a key role in lake watershed protection since it contains more than two miles of streambank on nine tributaries! It also features very steep hillsides overlooking the lake and 4,300 feet of frontage on Glen Haven Road in Niles.

Due to the pressing timeline, a special board meeting was called to approve the project and acquire the land. The Land Trust subsequently purchased the property from the county for total unpaid taxes due. Now, it is assessing long-term options for managing the property, including possibly transferring it to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation as an addition to Bear Swamp State Forest or simply retaining the property.

"We really appreciate the willingness of the Cayuga County legislature to work with us to conserve this special property," said Land Trust Executive Director Andrew Zepp.

This latest acquisition is located within a Land Trust focus area known as the Skaneateles Highlands, an arc of high hills extending from Carpenter Falls on the lake's western shore to

the Staghorn Cliffs in the east. The highlands are recognized as a priority project in New York State's Open Space Plan and play an important role in ensuring water quality within the lake, which serves as the unfiltered drinking water supply for the city of Syracuse. The forests near the south end of the lake are also recognized by National Audubon as one of the state's "Important Bird Areas" owing to the diversity of birds that can be found nesting there.

This purchase was made possible by an internal loan from the Land Trust's Opportunity Fund, a revolving fund reserved for key time-sensitive acquisitions. A fundraising campaign is now underway to replenish the fund. For more information, please contact Senior Director Kelly Makosch at (607) 275-9487 or kellymakosch@llt.org.

Conservation Easement Protects Farmland and Wetlands in Fall Creek Watershed

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side of Route 13. Both easements restrict development while allowing agricultural uses and limited timber harvesting.

The easement on the north side provides for a 60-acre environmental protection zone that includes Etna Swamp and an upland buffer that will encompass 10 acres of former agricultural land. The only activities allowed in the environmental protection zone are those that improve

habitat or conservation values, such as invasive species management.

The Land Trust has secured grants from both the Town of Dryden and Tompkins County to help cover the transactional costs of the conservation easements and provide for long-term stewardship.

Cheryl has a trove of memories growing up on the farm and gets emotional when talking about the inspiration for protecting it in

perpetuity. "My father and grandfather put so much hard work in and dedicated their lives to this farm," she said. "I want to honor that."

—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.

Land Trust and Partners Complete Restoration Project on Otisco Lake

Last summer, the Land Trust acquired 35 acres with 2,300 feet of shoreline on the east side of Otisco Lake in partnership with Onondaga County and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

This past fall, the partnership completed a restoration project on the site, including planting approximately 650 native trees and shrubs, many of which were planted by the Onondaga Earth Corps—a local nonprofit created “to empower youth to be active participants in creating positive change for their communities and the environment.”

Tree saplings and shrubs were planted with decomposable weed mats and either wire cage protection or deer-repellent granules. All trees and shrubs planted were documented as native to Onondaga County. The plantings create a buffer around the existing wetlands and lakeshore on the property, increase native plant diversity, and enhance water quality protection.

“Planting at Otisco Lake was different because we were out of the city of Syracuse but I enjoyed it,” said Nesha Walker, Onondaga Earth Corp crew member. “It was a good experience to be on the vast property next to the lake. I would love to do it again and I hope our shrubs grow well!”

“This protection and restoration project on the shore of Otisco Lake is a great example of what can be achieved when partners come together to achieve a common conservation goal,” said Land Trust Director of Conservation Max Heitner. In the future, the organization will convey the property to Onondaga County to manage as a public conservation area subject to a perpetual conservation easement held by the Land Trust.

Funding for this project came from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation’s Water Quality Improvement Projects program and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service’s Natural Resource Damage Assessment, Restoration and Implementation Program.



MAX HEITNER



Members of the Onondaga Earth Corp with FLLT Land Protection Specialist Becky Sibner after a morning of planting

Land Trust Opens Botsford Nature Preserve in Keuka Lake Watershed

The Land Trust celebrated the opening of the Botsford Nature Preserve on Big Gully in the town of Jerusalem this summer with donors Kay and Art Wilder and several members of their family. The preserve, named for Art's maternal grandmother's side of the family, can be accessed from Hemlock Road just northwest of Branchport.

After parking in the lot on Hemlock Road, visitors can follow a path through an open meadow to the rim of the gorge. The first segment of the hike traverses an area formerly mined for gravel. It is an ideal place to listen



Art Wilder and his niece Beth at the opening of the preserve in September 2020

for Woodcock on a spring evening. As hikers follow the trail along the rim of the gorge to the left, they may notice the forest type changes from oak, white pine, and hemlock on the rim to a floodplain forest of sycamore and maple as they enter the gorge. The trail continues through the floodplain to a bench at the edge of Big Gully Creek.

During warm weather and when water levels are low, visitors can hike along the creek's north bank to observe how nature exerts its power both slowly over eons and quickly in the flash of a downpour. Carving interesting patterns in the flat shale bedrock, water has peeled back time—sometimes exposing fossils of creatures trapped in sediment millions of years ago. Boulders, some glinting with garnet chips, smoothed and rounded from their travel under vast glaciers, occupy the streambed like features in a Zen garden. Locally intense storms of recent summers washed trees, gravel, and soil into the gully creating pileups that will take years to break down.

In time, the Land Trust hopes to conserve additional land at Big Gully by working in partnership with our neighbors. We request visitors observe boundary postings, respect the rights of our neighbors, stay on the preserve, and leave no trace of their visit.

Carving interesting patterns in the flat shale bedrock, water has peeled back time—sometimes exposing fossils of creatures trapped in sediment millions of years ago.

Matching Gift Challenge Raises \$100,000 For Conservation



A generous family offered the Finger Lakes Land Trust a \$100,000 matching gift challenge this past fall.

The challenge was designed to encourage new members to join the Land Trust, and existing members to increase their giving, by matching these new gifts dollar-for-dollar.

The challenge was a terrific success! More than 230 new members supported the Land Trust for the first time and even more loyal supporters increased their annual giving. Together, we raised an additional \$100,000 that will go to work right away protecting lands and waters across the region. Our biggest thanks to the generous family who provided the challenge and to you for helping us advance conservation in the Finger Lakes.



Land Trust Opens Owasco Bluffs Nature Preserve

The Land Trust is thrilled to announce it opened a new nature preserve this fall that protects wildlife habitat and water quality.

Overlooking Owasco Lake from the east, the 74-acre Owasco Bluffs Nature Preserve in Cayuga County protects over 1,100 feet of pristine shoreline. It is the first Land Trust preserve in the Owasco Lake watershed, and only the third publicly accessible conservation area on the lake itself.

The preserve features forested bluffs above the shore as well as wetlands, meadows, and a rugged gorge. A one-mile trail begins off of Sam Adams Lane and brings visitors through fields and forests, ending at a wooded hillside with spectacular lake views.

Before the official preserve opening, the Land Trust partnered with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to create



seasonal wetlands. These new ephemeral wetlands improve wildlife habitat and also further protect the lake's water quality by filtering runoff. Additional wildlife habitat improvements were made by staff and volunteers, including removing invasive plants, planting native trees and shrubs, and maintaining open meadows important for grassland birds.

The preserve is open during daylight hours for quiet nature observation and low impact recreation such as hiking and snowshoeing. While at the preserve, please stay on marked trails, keep your dog leashed, and follow social distancing guidelines. Please be aware that the preserve parking area is not plowed in winter, and there is no roadside parking. A map, directions, and additional information about the new preserve can be found at flt.org/owascobluffs.



Gift of Property Supports Conservation

In 1994, Cliff and Jane DeMayo donated a conservation easement to the Land Trust to ensure the future of their property. The DeMayos lived in a home on East Miller Road, just outside Ithaca, surrounded by more than 60 acres of mature woods.

After Jane passed away and as Cliff reached his 90s, he made plans through his will to leave the property and home to the Land Trust with the clear understanding that the Land Trust would sell it to a private buyer subject to the easement.

Cliff passed away earlier this year and will be greatly missed by his friends and neighbors. In addition to being a passionate conservationist, Cliff served as a teacher at Ithaca's Belle Sherman Elementary School and also was a photographer for Cornell University.

Founding board member Betsy Darlington said, "He was a dedicated and passionate environmentalist and naturalist, and believed strongly in the Land Trust's mission." Betsy's daughter Jean Darlington said, "Mr. DeMayo taught his students a deep appreciation of nature, he taught us to square dance, and he taught us to appreciate each other and get along with each other even if we weren't friends."

The Land Trust is looking for a buyer who will appreciate this land as much as the DeMayos did. All proceeds from the property sale will be used to advance the Land Trust's conservation efforts across the region. Specifics about the sale will be shared on the Land Trust's web site sometime during the first few months of 2021. Anyone who is interested in learning more now can email info@fllt.org to request a fact sheet about the property and the associated conservation easement.

Steege Hill Nature Preserve Receives Much Needed Improvements

For almost 20 years, the Steege Hill Nature Preserve has been the Land Trust's most popular conservation area in the Southern Tier.

However, the organization has long recognized the need to improve its small, awkward parking lot. Expansion of the existing space was considered to be a poor option due to the site's steep slopes. With the help of the Town of Big Flats Highway Department, who installed a culvert and driveway, a new parking area was created on Steege Hill Road, 2,000 feet uphill from the original.

The organization also had help from retired NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Forester John Gibbs and a class from Greater Southern Tier BOCES, who assisted the Land Trust by clearing trees for the new, safer parking area. And, a grant from the Land Trust Alliance provided for a new interpretive kiosk and packed stone surface for the parking lot. To finalize these improvements, Land Trust staff and volunteers installed a connector trail from the new lot to meet the existing trail system. We hope that these enhancements make for a more enjoyable visit to the Steege Hill Preserve, our largest conservation area!



Partnership Expands High Tor Wildlife Management Area

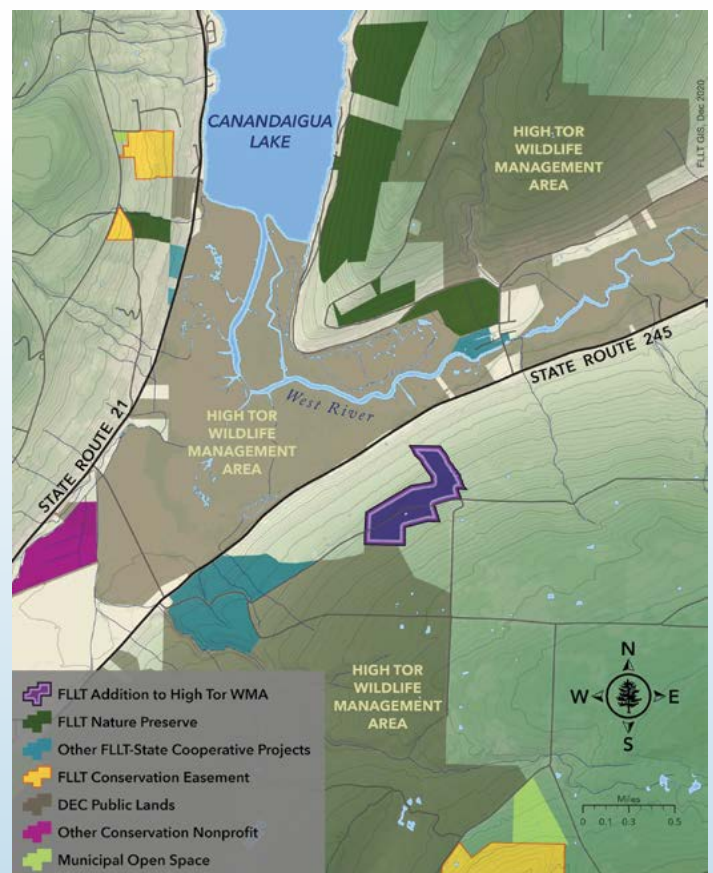
Sprawling across 6,800 acres of forests, gorges, waterfalls, wetlands, and rivers, High Tor Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Ontario and Yates counties is a popular destination for outdoor recreation. Offering magnificent views of the south end of Canandaigua Lake, the WMA provides exceptional outdoor recreational opportunities.

The Land Trust and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) recently completed the addition of 86 forested acres to the WMA. Located on Parrish Hill Road in the town of Italy, the property was originally purchased by the organization from the estate of Martha Parker in 2016, and subsequently transferred to the state in October 2020.

Once farmed, the property is now entirely forested and includes frontage on both sides of Parrish Hill Road. It is located within an Audubon-designated Important Bird Area and encompasses steeply sloping hillsides with several ravines above the West River Valley.

"New York State is committed to enhancing recreational opportunities and connecting New Yorkers with nature, protecting Finger Lakes region water quality, and improving habitat for wildlife," DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said. "In partnership with the Finger Lakes Land Trust, this property is a great addition to the High Tor Wildlife Management Area."

This is the Land Trust's 14th land protection project completed in the vicinity of the WMA, where the organization also owns and manages the Great Hill and West River nature preserves. More information on the High Tor WMA can be found by visiting gofingerlakes.org/hightor.



Our appreciation for gifts in honor of...

Betsy Darlington
FROM
Robert and Mary
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Patricia Paine

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FROM
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Logan Shire
FROM
Sandy Wold

Myra Shulman
FROM
Leo Tohill and
Irene Komor

Jill Vaughan
FROM
James DeKay

Team Stewardship is growing, and we need a truck!

The Land Trust is hoping for a donation of a pickup truck in good working condition with a reasonable number of miles. A mid-size truck is preferred, but a full-size truck is welcome. Extended cab and 4-wheel drive are also preferred, but not essential. If you have a truck to donate, please contact Director of Stewardship Chris Olney at chrisolney@fllt.org or (607) 275-9487.

Our deepest gratitude for thoughtful gifts in memory of...

Molly Adams
FROM
Barry Adams

**Raymond and Treva
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FROM
Sharon Anderson and
Susan Powell

John Antonelli
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Matt Wilkinson
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Art Woldt
FROM
Gerhart and Merrily
Heyer

A CLOSER LOOK

River Otters: Neither Fish nor Flesh

*Izaak Walton's treatise, *The Compleat Angler* (1653), is a meditation on the practice and poetry of sport fishing. Walton has little affection for river otters, which he believes must be exterminated because they take the fish that sportsmen want to keep for themselves. Yet, he explains, their predatory nature can also be handily exploited by human fishermen.*

Otters captured as pups can be trained to bring back fish or to drive them into waiting nets. Otter fishing is surprisingly ancient and widespread: Marco Polo reported seeing Chinese fishermen using trained otters, and the practice is known to have existed on every continent where river otters are found.

Our local otter species—which European settlers were still using as a fishing companion as late as the nineteenth century—is the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*). It inhabits the same inland wetlands as beavers and muskrats. These three brown furbearers might at first glance be confused with each other, but they are from very different families. Beavers and muskrats are rotund, frumpy rodents, whereas the river otter is a mustelid, a fierce and sleek carnivore related to weasels and fishers. His flat head, which is topped by tiny ears, big eyes, and a wide nose, do not merely help him catch fish in murky water but also give him the cutest face in the Finger Lakes. The word *otter* is related to the Greek word *hydra*, or water-serpent. He does indeed look a bit like a furred eel or a small seal: as Izaak Walton says, he seems to be neither fish nor flesh. On land, his lithe, liquid leap-bounds are unmistakable, even from a distance. He slides on mud or snow whenever he can to save energy, leaving fluid tracks behind. And in the water, he is pure mermaid.

However, the long, streamlined shape that makes the otter such an agile aquatic hunter is also a serious liability. The large surface-to-volume ratio of his body plan loses heat very quickly in cold water, a particular problem because otters do not hibernate and must feed themselves constantly. Massive marine carnivores such as whales are protected by thick layers of blubber. But the otter is small and must remain supple in order to loop and harrow after fish; he cannot accumulate fat that might slow him down or render him too buoyant.

In place of fat, he has a luxurious, oily pelt. His underfur is almost unimaginably dense and velvety, and is further protected and insulated by long, hollow guard hairs. Under an electron microscope, individual hairs look a bit like the segmented stems of Christmas cactus; the fins that project from each hair interlock when the

fur is mussed. Through a variety of adorable grooming behaviors, the otter knits his fur into a glossy wetsuit that keeps his skin perfectly dry.

For all the river otter's resilience, he is also quite delicate and quickly disappears from polluted wetlands. As an apex predator, otters were never as numerous



LONG CREEK PHOTOGRAPHY

as other furbearers, and overhunting decimated their numbers. By the early 1990s, they were gone from western New York and rare in the rest of the state. There is, of course, little interest in reintroducing extirpated predators that might pose threats to humans, such as cougars and wolves. However, almost everyone agreed that the charismatic otter deserved to return. (Otters, it should be said, are shy but can be fierce: do not approach them.) Thus the New York River Otter Project was formed, a joint effort involving the NYS DEC, veterinarians from Cornell, numerous non-profit organizations, trappers, wildlife rehabilitators, and a group of enthusiastic citizens led by Dennis Money. Over several years, otters were trapped in the Adirondacks and released into the Finger Lakes and Genesee River. Now, twenty years later, the otters seem to have recovered and the project has set the standard for river otter reintroductions in both the U. S. and worldwide. It is a task made more urgent by the fact that most river otter species are in steep decline. Otters have assisted humans for thousands of years; it is now time for us to return the favor.

—Jacqueline Stuhmiller

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Winter 2020-21 Calendar

Please visit fllt.org/events
for future event announcements.

*The Roy H. Park
Preserve in Dryden,
Tompkins County*

2020 Vision, A Black Walden Pond & Other Musings

A Free Virtual Lecture by Carolyn Finney, author of "Black Faces, White Spaces"

Wednesday, February 24th at 6:00pm

Registration and information at fllt.org/events

Program is sponsored by the Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cornell Botanic Gardens, Ithaca Children's Garden, The Learning Farm, and USFWS

BILL HECHT