



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

working to protect the natural integrity of the Finger Lakes region Vol. 34, No. 1 • Winter 2021-22



Agreement Reached to Purchase Largest Privately Owned Shoreline Parcel Remaining in Finger Lakes Region

Once destined to host a nuclear power plant, the future of the 470-acre Bell Station property on Cayuga Lake now promises shoreline conservation, outdoor recreation, and solar energy.

After years of effort, the Land Trust has successfully negotiated a contract to purchase this land from NYS Electric & Gas (NYSEG). A closing is planned for sometime during the first half of 2022.

Bell Station is recognized as a priority project within New York State's Open Space Plan. The property features 3,400 feet of pristine shoreline, mature forested hillsides overlooking the lake, several streams with waterfalls, and extensive open fields. A former rail line provides an attractive lakeshore hiking path that extends the length of the shoreline.

Negotiations for the property were not without elements of drama. NYSEG made plans to sell the property through an

open, online auction in October. While the Land Trust was prepared to pay fair market value to acquire the land, it was feared that this unique property would be lost to a higher bidder through the auction process.

The community and elected officials rallied, calling for NYSEG to cancel the auction and asking Governor Kathy Hochul to intervene. Shortly before the scheduled auction, the governor announced that NYSEG had voluntarily agreed to enter into direct negotiations with the Land Trust. The two parties quickly settled on a contract and the Land Trust is now moving forward with its partners to acquire the property.

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PERSPECTIVES

BILL HECHT

Given a very hot real estate market and aggressive marketing of a scheduled online auction, I became dubious about our prospects for securing Bell Station. After pursuing this pristine stretch of shoreline for a decade, I was used to twists and turns but I thought this might be the end of our hope for conserving the site and making it accessible to the public.

Fortunately, my doubts were misplaced, and both the local community and lovers of the Finger Lakes from far and wide made their voices heard. From organized conservation and civic groups to the 4,471 individuals who signed an online petition, all raised their voices to call for the conservation of this magnificent property. And our elected officials responded—from local municipal and county officials to our state representatives and Governor Kathy Hochul.

This powerful demonstration of support for conservation convinced officials at NYSEG to cancel the auction and work with the Land Trust to achieve a conservation outcome. The

result is a win for the Finger Lakes and every citizen of New York State.

All too often, people throw up their hands and express frustration when a poorly planned development is approved or a cherished parcel of open space is lost. Bell Station is a prime example of citizens taking action and government responding to their needs. It illustrates the old maxim, “the game is won by those who show up.”

Everyone should celebrate this conservation victory and think about the difference “showing up” can make when it comes to saving more of our lands and waters.



Andrew Zepp, Executive Director



Agreement Reached to Purchase Largest Privately Owned Shoreline Parcel Remaining in Finger Lakes Region *continued from cover*

“This is a tremendous win for the Finger Lakes,” says Land Trust Executive Director Andy Zepp. “We are particularly grateful for the strong leadership of Governor Hochul, DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos, Senator Pam Helming, Assemblymember Anna Kelles, and our local elected officials who all stepped up to make their voices heard.”

The lakeshore portion of the property will be conveyed to the state’s Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to establish a new public wildlife management area. In response to interest from the Town of Lansing, the Land Trust is exploring the use of the easternmost portion of the property for solar energy production.

The Land Trust needs to raise \$500,000 to complete the purchase and fundraising for the project is underway. Additional support for the purchase is coming from an internal loan from the organization’s Opportunity Fund and a generous, low-interest loan from the Park Foundation. At the conclusion of the project, any remaining funds will be added to the Opportunity Fund to support future, time-sensitive land and water conservation projects.

To learn more about the effort to save Bell Station and how you can help, please visit fltt.org/savebellstation.

A Family Farm Conserved in the Skaneateles Lake Watershed

In November, the Land Trust worked with Joan and Mike Franklin to conserve their 508-acre farm located in both Cortland and Onondaga counties. Joan and Mike are third-generation farmers who operate Valley View Farm, which has been in Mike's family since 1930.

In addition to various cash crops that are sold throughout the Finger Lakes region, the farm operates an on-site farm stand and also sells other produce, specializing in potatoes, at the Cortland City Farmers Market and the Central New York Regional Market in Syracuse. Joan and Mike have received several farming awards through the years, including the Empire State Farmer and the "County Farm Family of the Year".

Valley View Farm features road frontage on both State Route 41 and Ripley Hill Road, providing travelers with scenic views of a mosaic of forests and farmlands at the south end of Skaneateles Lake. The farm property also contains a portion of Grout Brook, a key tributary of

Skaneateles Lake and one of the largest perennial streams in the watershed. Skaneateles Lake is the unfiltered drinking water source for more than 220,000 households including residents in the city of Syracuse.

Joan and Mike have received several farming awards through the years, including the Empire State Farmer and the "County Farm Family of the Year".

The Land Trust completed two conservation easement agreements that permanently protect the farm and create a 40-acre forested buffer area to help filter stormwater and protect the water quality of Grout Brook. The easements will also protect the property's high-quality agricultural soils, as 450 acres of the farm are classified as either prime soils or soils of statewide significance.

"We wanted to protect the farm because it is in the Skaneateles watershed," said the Franklin family.

"Our family is very appreciative of the opportunity to protect our farm."

Funding for this conservation project was provided by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets' Farmland Protection Implementation Grants (FPIG) program.

Valley View Farm is the third farmland protection project completed by the Land Trust in this area. The organization recently worked with the Birdsall family to conserve over 900 acres on two farms in Cortland and Onondaga counties. The organization also acquired nearby woodlands which link the organization's High Vista and Hinchcliff Family preserves, creating a 2.25 mile-long corridor of conservation land overlooking the eastern shore of Skaneateles Lake.

—Max Heitner



New Canandaigua Vista Nature Preserve Officially Open to the Public



Canandaigua Town Manager Doug Finch, FLLT board president Dave Birchenough, State Senator Pam Helming, volunteer Marty Dodge, landowners Duannah Barnum and Suzie Underhill, and FLLT Executive Director Andy Zepp at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new preserve



HEIDI SPITZIG

KELLY MAKOSCH

ON a sunny Friday afternoon in early October, Land Trust staff and volunteers were joined by New York State Senator Pamela Helming, Canandaigua Town Manager Doug Finch, other local officials, and friends for a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the opening of the 90-acre Canandaigua Vista Nature Preserve in Ontario County.

Just a short drive from downtown Canandaigua, the preserve features a one-mile loop trail that traverses fields, oak-hickory forests, and past the head of Barnes Gully—a deep gorge that flows to nearby Onanda Park. Multiple vista points, each with a handmade bench carved from locally harvested timber, offer glimpses of Canandaigua Lake.

These scenic hillsides were owned by two sisters, Duannah Barnum and Suzie Underhill, whose family once managed the land as a dairy farm. For many years, an existing trail network was maintained by neighbor Marty Dodge—a retired Finger Lakes Community College conservation professor who has been a strong advocate for conserving the property. After securing the land in 2020, Land Trust staff worked with volunteers and contractors to refine the trail system and install an interpretive kiosk and parking area.

Many supporters contributed generously to this project. The Land Trust wishes to thank the Town of Canandaigua, whose important, early support made it possible for the

organization to purchase this mix of woods and fields. The Land Trust is also very grateful for lead gifts from William Eggers and Deborah McLean, Meg and Glenn Reed, the Terwilliger Family, the Robert F. Schumann Foundation, Scott Conking and Thomas Wall, The Marilyn Lichtman Foundation, Wade and Joscelyne Sarkis, Marty and Cathy Gardner, an anonymous donor, and a gift made in memory of Mac Hargrave.

Enjoy the preserve during daylight hours for quiet nature observation and low-impact recreation such as walking, hiking, and snowshoeing. A map, directions, and additional information about the new preserve can be found at fllt.org/vista.

The Land Trust continues to raise the necessary funds to steward this land forever. To make a gift in support of the Canandaigua Vista Nature Preserve, please contact Senior Director Kelly Makosch at (607) 275-9487 or kellymakosch@fllt.org.

Conservation Easement Protects Land Bordering Hammond Hill State Forest

Susan Compton and John Saylor own 64 acres nestled in a small valley on the southern side of Hammond Hill State Forest, a popular destination for mountain bikers and cross-country skiers. It's a peaceful landscape of rolling hills set in the eastern portion of Tompkins County, in the town of Dryden.

In November 2021, Sue and John permanently protected their property by donating a conservation easement to the Land Trust. Costs associated with the easement were covered by the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Grant Program for Riparian Buffer Protection and Restoration, funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and administered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Sue and John have lived on the property for over forty years, increasing their holdings over time to 64 acres. The property includes woodlands bordering the state forest, fields mown for wildlife habitat, and the headwaters of the West Branch of Owego Creek, a high-quality brook trout stream.


Wanting to restore their section of the creek, Sue and John worked with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2019 to restore creek habitat, and with the Upper Susquehanna Coalition to plant trees on 3.7 acres in 2020. The conservation easement will protect the property against subdivision and safeguard the restored stream corridor, protecting water quality in Owego Creek and further downstream in the Susquehanna River and Chesapeake Bay watersheds.

In addition to Hammond Hill State Forest, this newly

conserved property joins a large complex of protected lands including Robinson Hollow State Forest, Cornell University's Slaterville 600 Natural Area, and the Land Trust's Goetchius Wetland and Roy H. Park preserves. This area lies within the Emerald Necklace, an effort to link 50,000 acres of existing public open space that extends in an arc around Ithaca—from Finger Lakes National Forest in the west to Hammond Hill and Yellow Barn State Forests in the east. These lands host 78 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail, two Audubon-designated Important Bird Areas, and several dozen Tompkins County-designated Unique Natural Areas. Protection of these lands secures wildlife habitat, enhances habitat connectivity, and provides an important buffer from development.

"We both strongly support the mission of the Finger Lakes Land Trust and are placing our land in a conservation easement for several reasons," said Sue and John. "Our property is a visual extension of the Hammond Hill State Forest, is home to two streams that feed the Susquehanna River and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay, is a habitat for a variety of wildlife and plants, and contains woodlands that would have been vulnerable to logging. We are grateful the Land Trust enables us to protect all of the above for future generations."

The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Dan Hoffman of Ithaca, NY, for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.



Susan Compton and John Saylor with their dog, Apollo

Expansion of Hinchcliff Family Preserve Adds to Protection of Skaneateles Lake

The Land Trust's Hinchcliff Family Preserve was created in 2013 with the purchase of 196 acres that were once part of a farm. Today, visitors to the preserve can see remnants of the foundation of an old dairy barn, sweeping views of Skaneateles Lake, several streams and waterfalls, and a grand stone fireplace and chimney that once served as the centerpiece of a family cottage.

In November, the organization purchased 28 acres in the town of Spafford, Onondaga County, directly adjacent to the preserve. A mix of fields and hardwood forest, the property is located near the south end of Skaneateles Lake and features 640 feet of frontage on Vincent Hill Road, just west of State Route 41.

The property will be added to the Hinchcliff Preserve, expanding it to over 300 acres. This new addition secures steep slopes susceptible to erosion, prevents runoff to the lake, and buffers a new hiking trail on a 75-acre property the Land Trust added to the preserve in June of 2020.

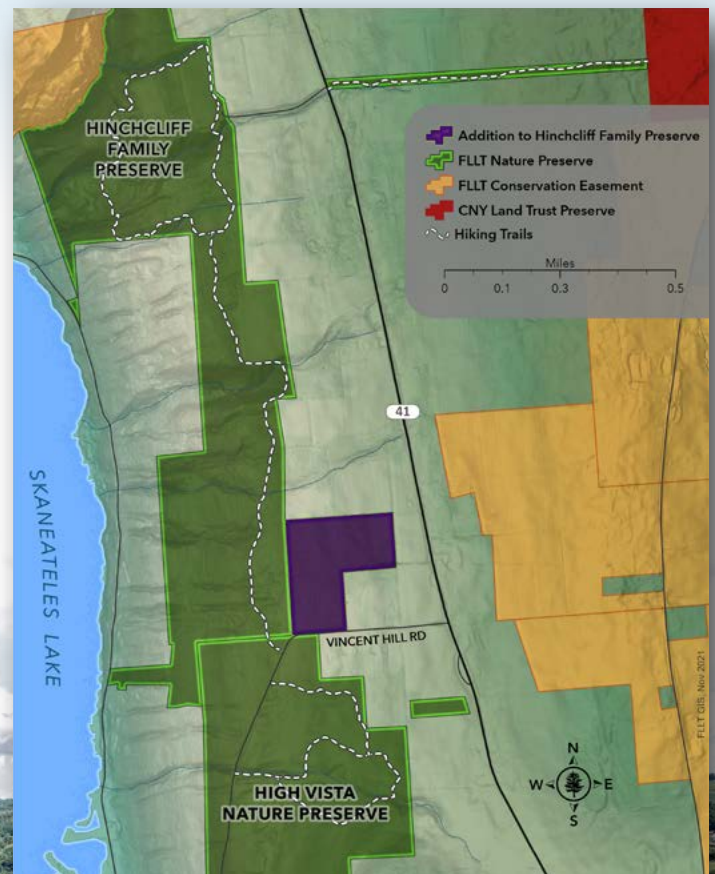
This project is part of a larger effort to create a greenbelt around the southern half of Skaneateles Lake. The 75-acre addition links the organization's Hinchcliff Preserve with its High Vista Preserve, creating a 2.25-mile-long corridor of conserved lands overlooking the eastern shore of Skaneateles Lake. Other recent projects include acquiring woodlands and wetlands adjacent to Bear Swamp State Forest and protecting Valley View Farm in Cortland and Onondaga counties with a conservation easement.

Land protection within this greenbelt and throughout the Skaneateles Lake watershed is vitally important, as the lake serves as the source of drinking water for the city of Syracuse.

"This is another step in the Land Trust's efforts to protect the steep slopes around Skaneateles Lake that are so important to water quality," said Dave Birchenough, President of the Land Trust's Board of Directors and Skaneateles resident. "The importance of minimizing erosion can't be overstated."

"Preserving undeveloped land in the watershed is such a key component in the overall effort to maintain or improve water quality in the lake," said Skaneateles Lake Association (SLA) President Paul Torrisi.

Other publicly accessible conservation lands in the area include Carpenter Falls State Unique Area and the Land Trust's Bahar Nature Preserve and Cora Kampfe Dickinson Conservation Area.



Securing a Landowner's Vision for Sustainable Land Management



In September, the Land Trust gratefully accepted the donation of a conservation easement from Rochester resident Jim Minor on a 208-acre mosaic of fields and woods in the town of Hector, Schuyler County, between the Finger Lakes National Forest and Connecticut Hill Wildlife Management Area.

BILL HECHT

Perched on the watershed divide between the Chesapeake Bay and Cayuga Lake, the land drains primarily to the lake by way of Taughannock Creek and provides a scenic backdrop to travelers heading south on NYS Route 228 from Mecklenburg. Soils underlying the property are severely erodible, so appropriate management of the property is important to maintaining water quality in Taughannock Creek.

Jim and his late wife Barbara bought the property in 1994 to pursue their dream of rural land ownership. A position at Kodak brought them to the Rochester area years earlier, after Jim earned a doctorate in engineering. They soon fell in love with the Finger Lakes region and were delighted when an opportunity arose to purchase property in Schuyler County. As new owners, they started making plans to manage the land and even dreamed of someday living there.

Having little direct experience with landownership, they sought advice from many sources and soon became familiar with the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA), a not-for-profit created for people who care about trees and forests and who are interested in the thoughtful management of private forests for the benefit of current and future generations. Jim found NYFOA to be a great resource and soon became very active in his local chapter and eventually served as a board member, vice president, and president.

Working with a local forester, Jim and Barbara developed

a plan to improve the quality of their woodlands through timber stand improvement cuts, and enhance wildlife habitat by establishing hedgerows between more than a dozen fields. They also set out to lease the best fields to a local farmer for hay and corn production. They were pleased to see bobcat, fox, deer, and Wild Turkey appearing in photos taken by trail cameras set up on the property. "When we first saw this property over a quarter-century ago, my wife and I appreciated it as it was in the beautiful Finger Lakes region which we loved," said Jim. "We want to preserve what we experienced so that future generations will benefit from what the property has to offer."

Jim and Barbara had to defer their dream to live on their pastoral hillside but they remained steadfast in their goal to responsibly steward the land and to make sure its beauty would remain for future generations. The conservation easement Jim donated will allow someone else the opportunity to pursue their own dreams to establish a homestead in the beautiful rural countryside and sustainably manage some woodlands and fields in the hills above Cayuga Lake.

—Kris West

The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Richard Ruswick and the law firm Levene, Gouldin & Thompson, LLP in Ithaca, NY, for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.

Conservation Easement Protects Over 60 Acres in Canandaigua Lake Watershed



The Decker conservation easement adds to a growing network of conserved lands at the south end of Canandaigua Lake

BILL HECHT

The Land Trust permanently protected 63 wooded acres in the town of Middlesex, Yates County with a conservation easement. The property, owned by Stephen and Jeanette Decker, is wholly situated within the Canandaigua Lake watershed and shares 3,751 feet of boundary with New York State's High Tor Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Containing a small meadow and mixed hardwood forest interspersed with hiking trails, the property is directly adjacent to the 6,800-acre WMA which spans portions of Ontario and Yates counties. A popular destination for outdoor recreation, the WMA is comprised of extensive and largely unfragmented forests that cover the hills and gullies long ago carved by glaciers. Conserving lands in this area helps maintain the integrity of Canandaigua Lake's watershed by securing steep slopes that are highly susceptible to erosion.

"The water that starts out on our land eventually reaches the West River and Canandaigua Lake," said Jeanette Decker. "Who better than us and the Finger Lakes Land Trust to help protect the watershed?"

The conservation easement prohibits subdivision of the property while allowing for agricultural use and the selective harvest of timber. The Deckers generously donated a portion of project costs, and the remaining expenses were covered by a gift from an anonymous donor.

This is the 14th conservation project completed by the FLLT in the vicinity of High Tor WMA. Other protected lands in the area include the organization's West River Preserve, Great Hill Preserve (Nundawao), Canandaigua Highlands Overlook, and four parcels transferred to New York State as additions to the WMA, including the northern half of Conklin Gully.

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! Together, we quickly 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.



MELISSA GROO

Key Acquisition Secures Popular Ithaca Trailhead

The Land Trust acquired a scenic 7-acre parcel that protects a popular recreational gateway near Ithaca's south end. The property features 600 feet of frontage on State Route 13 and includes a heavily trafficked, but informal, parking area and trailhead for the Finger Lakes Trail.

The organization acquired this land after learning it was zoned for

industrial use. The property serves as a major gateway to Ithaca's extensive trail system, and the Land Trust was concerned that public access would be lost and the scenic meadow replaced with a warehouse or other incompatible use, if not secured.

Primarily a meadow with areas of young forest, the property is adjacent to Robert H. Treman State Park and

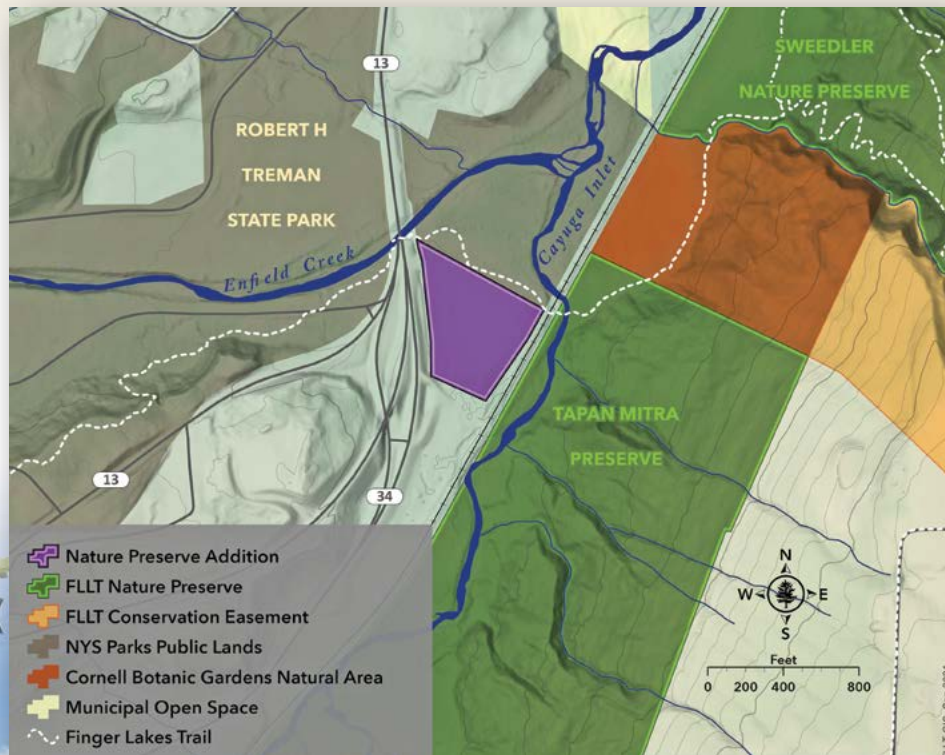
in close proximity to the Land Trust's Sweedler and Thayer nature preserves at Lick Brook Gorge. Conserving the land ensures it will remain a natural buffer to the Finger Lakes Trail and nearby Cayuga Inlet and Enfield Creek.

The new acquisition will be added to the Land Trust's adjacent Tapan Mitra Preserve, formerly known as the Cayuga Inlet Conservation Area. The preserve, which also protects a segment of the Finger Lakes Trail, was renamed in 2019 in honor of the late Tapan Mitra, a leading economic theorist and long-serving Cornell University professor.

Future public improvements to the site are planned, including a more permanent parking area and the installation of an interpretive kiosk that will provide visitors with information on the area's trails and conservation lands.

The Land Trust has launched a fundraising campaign to cover the cost of acquiring this land and providing for its long-term stewardship. For additional information, contact Senior Director Kelly Makosch at (607)-275-9487 or kellymakosch@fltl.org.

—Max Heitner



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A CLOSER LOOK

Staghorn Sumac

*Winter in the Finger Lakes is a season of cool colors. The sky, lakes, and snow are a palimpsest of azure, white, steel-blue, and gray. Sometimes, the only warm-colored brushstrokes in this austere landscape are the maroon berry clusters of the staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*).*

The bobs, as they are sometimes known, remain on bare stems throughout the winter, like paintbrushes or frozen candle flames. The berries have little flesh and their very large central seeds contain little fat; as a result, they do not go rancid and make an excellent emergency food source for many animals. Deep in mid-winter, when food is hard to find, these muted red beacons attract many species of birds. Squirrels, rabbits, and deer ignore bitter alkaloids to browse on any parts of the plant that they can access. By late winter, any remaining bobs have shriveled to a deep brown.

The staghorn sumac is at once striking and utterly forgettable. Its large fronds of pinnately compound leaves make it seem curiously out of place, like an escaped hothouse plant. Although it can propagate from seed, it tends to form luxuriant clumps that are created when parent plants send out multiple shoots from underground rhizomes. Appropriately enough, the staghorn sumac belongs to a mostly tropical botanical family, the Anacardiaceae or cashew family, which also includes mangoes and pistachios. A few other members of this lineage are found in North America, including the similarly named but distantly related poison sumac, a small and toxic tree of bogs and swamps.

The poison sumac's name is something of a misnomer: its berries are white, but the word "sumac" in fact comes from the Arabic word for "red." It is the distinctive color and shape of the berries and twigs that have inspired most of the plant's monikers. The staghorn sumac's scientific name, *Rhus typhina*, refers to both the redness of its bob and its resemblance to the cattail, another plant whose seedheads make striking shapes against the winter sky. It gets its picturesque common name from the fact that its young twigs, like its berries, are covered with wine-colored hairs, like the velvet-covered horns of stags in spring.

Despite its unusual features, the staghorn sumac is so common that it usually escapes notice. It is an in-between plant, a large shrub or a small tree or an amorphous thicket. It thrives in unshaded, poor soil and is ubiquitous on roadsides and forest edges, in old fields and empty lots. It has a habit of suckering that annoys gardeners and tends to disappear into the vegetation – except in fall, when its leaves are the first to turn bright red, and in winter, when its bobs are outlined in sculptural splendor against the horizon.

Although it has no commercial uses today, this plant has been long used by humans. The berries and shoots are edible, and archaeological evidence shows that the former have been eaten for thousands of years. They can be soaked in water to make a pink beverage known as

sumacade or Cherokee *quallah*, and the liquid can also be jellied. When the berries are toasted and ground, they become the tart crimson spice known as sumac, which is used in Middle Eastern cuisine. (The sumac found in spice shops is technically Tanner's sumac (*Rhus coriaria*), a Eurasian species. It was used by the Romans long before they had lemons.) Various parts of the plant can be used to produce dyes from black to yellow to red, and the



leaves and fruits make a black ink. The branches can be woven into baskets; candles can be made from the oil in the seed; beekeepers burn the bobs to make a cool smoke to calm angry hives; the sap can even be used as glue. It is a veritable pharmacopeia, too: all of its parts have medicinal value.

Though we tend to have little affection for it in New York, staghorn sumac was once prized not only for its practical uses but for its exotic beauty. It was brought to Europe in the early seventeenth century as an ornamental and was cultivated in botanical gardens for centuries. Unfortunately, its easygoing but tenacious personality, as well as the fact that it can thrive in a very wide range of environments (it is native from Quebec to Georgia) means that when it finally escaped, it became one of North America's most successful exports. It now spreads its hardy tropical fronds in forest clearings and along railroad tracks almost everywhere in Europe.

—*Jacqueline Stuhmiller*

Finger Lakes Land Trust

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Ph: 607-275-9487 • email: info@flt.org



Finger Lakes Land Trust

202 E. Court Street
Ithaca, NY 14850

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Upcoming Events

Six Mile Creek at the Roy H. Park Preserve in Dryden, Tompkins County

Wildlife Tracking & Signs

Saturday, February 5 at 9:00 a.m.
Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve—West Danby, Tompkins County

With over 20 years of experience in environmental education, tracker and naturalist Linda Spielman will lead a trip to discover what's been visiting the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve. This trip will focus on interpreting animal behavior by identifying various tracks and other signs. Registration is required and space is limited. Visit flt.org/events to learn more.

JASON GORMAN