



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

Finger Lakes Forever CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

*The Finger Lakes Land Trust is thrilled to announce that thousands of individual donors and dozens of organizational partners have helped us raise over **\$22,400,000 for conservation** in our beautiful region! This incredible result demonstrates a deep commitment to conservation, one that is inspiring us to work even harder to save critical lands and waters.*



CHRIS RAY

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this monumental and collective effort to protect land and water permanently. Together we have completed the “Finger Lakes Forever” campaign successfully.

During the campaign, the Finger Lakes Land Trust advanced 79 conservation projects, resulting in the protection of 5,937 acres of land, 33.5 miles of streambank, and 14,124

feet of lakeshore.

The Land Trust opened nature preserves in the Canandaigua, Keuka, Seneca, Cayuga, Owasco, Skaneateles, and Otisco lake watersheds and along the Susquehanna and Chemung rivers. The preserves provide new opportunities for outdoor recreation and ecological education for our communities, secure critical wildlife habitat, and protect water quality.

Conservation easements on private lands were used strategically across the region to protect our drinking water, preserve the scenic character of our communities, and secure our best farmland. These projects were completed in partnership with landowners who care deeply about the future of their land.

Staff, volunteers, and organizational partners planted trees, created vernal
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Great Hill, on the
eastern shore of
Canandaigua Lake

PERSPECTIVES

BILL HECHT

IT IS QUITE A LIST: Bare Hill, Bear Swamp, Bell Station, Big Gully, Canandaigua Vista, Cayuga Cliffs, Cayuga Inlet, Chemung River, Connecticut Hill, Fall Creek, Great Hill, Grout Brook, High Vista, Otisco Shores, Owasco Bluffs, Owasco Inlet, Owego Creek, Queen Catharine Marsh, Reynolds Gully, Seneca Shoreline, Six Mile Creek, Staghorn Cliffs, Summerland Farm, and Tuffs Island.

Each of these sites and more benefited from *Finger Lakes Forever*—our successful capital campaign to support the conservation of our cherished lands and waters. The campaign allowed the Land Trust to accelerate its land protection efforts, strengthen its land stewardship program, and complete restoration projects that will enhance both water quality and wildlife habitat.

And there is more to come—funds raised through the campaign will support the protection of many more sites and we look forward to reporting on our progress in future editions of *The Land Steward*.

We are grateful for your generous support. Your contributions are creating a legacy of conserved landscapes

that will provide our children and grandchildren with clean water, healthy foods, inspiring vistas, and the opportunity to connect with nature close to home.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!



Andrew Zepp
Executive Director

Third-Generation Farm in Yates County Conserved Forever



BILL HECHT

Sparkling lakes, rugged gorges, and stunning waterfalls are often cited as the most cherished natural features of the Finger Lakes region, and rightfully so. These dramatic landscapes are revered for their scenic value, recreational opportunities, and ecological benefits. But further to the north, the wide-open agricultural spaces between the lakes also play an important role.

It's here in Yates County that the Land Trust permanently protected 421 acres of farmland at Christiansen Farms, in the towns of Benton and Torrey, utilizing the Farmland Protection Implementation Grants Program (FPIG) administered by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. FPIG funds were used to purchase three agricultural conservation easements protecting five non-contiguous farm parcels.

Christiansen Farms is a third-generation, NOFA-NY-certified organic dairy and crop farm. In addition to raising dairy cows, the Christiansen family grows soft red wheat and soft white wheat which they sell to Wegmans Food Markets for their artisan bakery products. The farm has grown this

partnership over the years and now devotes a large portion of its land to producing high-quality, locally-grown wheat specifically for this agreement.

The farm is approximately two miles northeast of Penn Yan and within commuting distance of several other Finger Lakes communities, and is thus subject to increased development pressure. The conservation easements will limit residential development to designated farmstead zones on the property.

The Christiansen Farm is the seventh Yates County farm protected by the Land Trust through the FPIG program. Ownership of the operation is currently transitioning from Guy Christiansen to his sons Tim and Ryan. Presently, they are farmer-owners in the Upstate Niagara Cooperative, where they ship their milk.

"Every day there is ever-increasing development pressure," said Tim Christiansen. "It's very important that we keep land in agricultural production so people know where their food comes from. Without farmland, there is no food."



Finger Lakes Forever Campaign Success

continued from cover

pools, repaired and buffered streams, and expanded grasslands to further benefit water quality and wildlife habitat. We remain committed to restoring and stewarding our lands.

And campaign dollars were invested in our Stewardship Fund so we can ensure our promise of forever. The Land Trust has already hit major milestones including **5 miles of lakeshore saved** and **53 miles of trails open to the public**, and intends to **surpass 30,000 acres conserved**

this year. This amazing achievement presents a huge challenge for the future, one where staff will need to work together with volunteers and partners to care for protected lands. Building the Stewardship Fund will help the Land Trust continue saving lands and waters with confidence that it has the resources needed to protect them forever.

"Although there is far more work to be done, we know that with your continued support, we will be able to

increase the pace of our work," said Executive Director Andy Zepp. "We couldn't be more grateful!"

Please take a moment to celebrate this wonderful achievement, one that benefits everyone who lives or visits the Finger Lakes.

Learn more about the success of the campaign, including a map, videos, conservation projects information, and more, at flt.org/forever.

Farm with Sweeping Views of Owasco Lake Protected in Cayuga County

The Land Trust recently received the donation of a conservation easement on 160 acres of farmland in the town of Scipio, Cayuga County that will help limit residential development in the area and protect water quality in Owasco Lake.

The farm is owned by Barbara Post and her five siblings—Roger, Marilyn, Ken, Nancy, and Linda. The property was originally purchased by their grandfather and has been in the Post family for more than a century. Both their grandfather and father farmed the land, primarily raising Angus beef cattle and a variety of crops.

Ken farmed the property with his father for 10 years and continued on his own for an additional two decades, while at the same time working his own farm. While Ken continues to farm his own land, he stopped work on the Post farm several years ago, and like many farms in recent years, the next generation has chosen not to sustain the family's agricultural operations.

As a result, the siblings are planning to sell the property. However, they wanted to ensure the land was protected from development before any sale took place. "It would be sad to see this farm turned into a suburban development," said Barbara.

The property is less than a mile west of Owasco Lake, and it has expansive views of the lake and surrounding area, including the Land Trust's Owasco Bluffs Nature Preserve on the opposite shore. A stream winds its way along the southern and eastern borders of the property, emptying

into the lake just 4,000 feet downstream. The Post farm sits in close proximity to other protected lands, including several farms with conservation easements held by the New York Agricultural Land Trust.

A conservation easement is a permanent legal agreement between a landowner and an organization, such as the Land Trust, that limits or prohibits development on a property while maintaining private ownership.

Because the farmhouse and outbuildings will remain in the Post family, the conservation easement includes a five-acre residential use zone that allows a single dwelling to be built. There are also two forest management zones, primarily associated with the wooded area surrounding the stream. As an additional water-quality buffer, five acres of agricultural land will be taken out of production and added to the forest management areas. A restoration planting of native trees and shrubs is planned for this area.


The six Post siblings are thankful for the opportunity to protect their longtime family farm from development in perpetuity. "It's the best thing we can do," said Barbara.

—Jeff Tonole

The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Virginia F. Calvert, Esq. of Melvin & Calvert Law Firm PC in Syracuse, NY, for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.



Six Mile Creek WATERSHED LANDS PROTECTED

A photograph of an elderly woman with short, curly white hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark blue dress with a vibrant floral pattern in pink, yellow, and white. She stands in a lush garden filled with various plants, including tall green stalks with small blue flowers and clusters of bright pink flowers. The background is a dense thicket of green foliage and trees.

The way that Ellen Harrison describes the first time she and her late husband, Rick, walked the property that they eventually purchased sounds magical. There were the croaks of wood frogs coming from one of the property's vernal ponds, birds chirping, and the overwhelming presence of spring beauty.

After purchasing the initial 32 acres, the Harrisons built a house on the property and set to work. They put in a pond, as well as perennial and vegetable gardens. Nine years ago, they purchased additional adjacent acreage, growing their property to 51 acres. That addition connects to the Thomas Road Wetlands, a Tompkins County Unique Natural Area, and includes 1,300 feet of wetland frontage in the headwaters of Six Mile Creek.

"I've been an environmental scientist and activist all my life," said Ellen. And her passion for land protection is evident. [As a landowner], "you are a temporary steward," she noted. She believes that land use decisions should be forward-thinking and take into account what we want the land to look like 100 years from now. Knowing this, it's not surprising that Ellen has been a member of the Finger Lakes Land Trust "forever" (and her late husband joined her in this support).

Ellen considers herself fortunate to be able to place an easement on her property in a way that ensures it will retain its environmental value and still be a "phenomenal place to live." The easement includes an 18-acre environmental protection zone (EPZ), with the strongest easement

designation that exists. The EPZ protects the wetland, providing critical protection for Six Mile Creek, a drinking water source for the city of Ithaca.

There is also a designated forestry management zone for sustainable timber harvest, an agricultural zone, and a 5-acre residential zone. The forest management zone allows for the conservation and management of stands of mature hardwoods and hemlocks.

The property is visited by many bird species including the American Woodcock, several species of warblers, and Great Blue and Green herons. Spotted salamanders and many other amphibians also inhabit the property. Perhaps the most unique wildlife sighting happened when Ellen witnessed a mink eating a garter snake, so close to her that she could hear the mink chewing.

This conservation easement adds to the Land Trust's accomplishments within the Six Mile Creek watershed, a priority area for the organization. The Harrison easement is close to three other easements with similar conservation and water quality values, all of which add collective benefits for humans and wildlife. "I travel a lot and when I get home, I realize there's no place as nice as this," Ellen said.

—Alli Sribarra

Land Purchase Buffers Wetlands & Biological Field Station

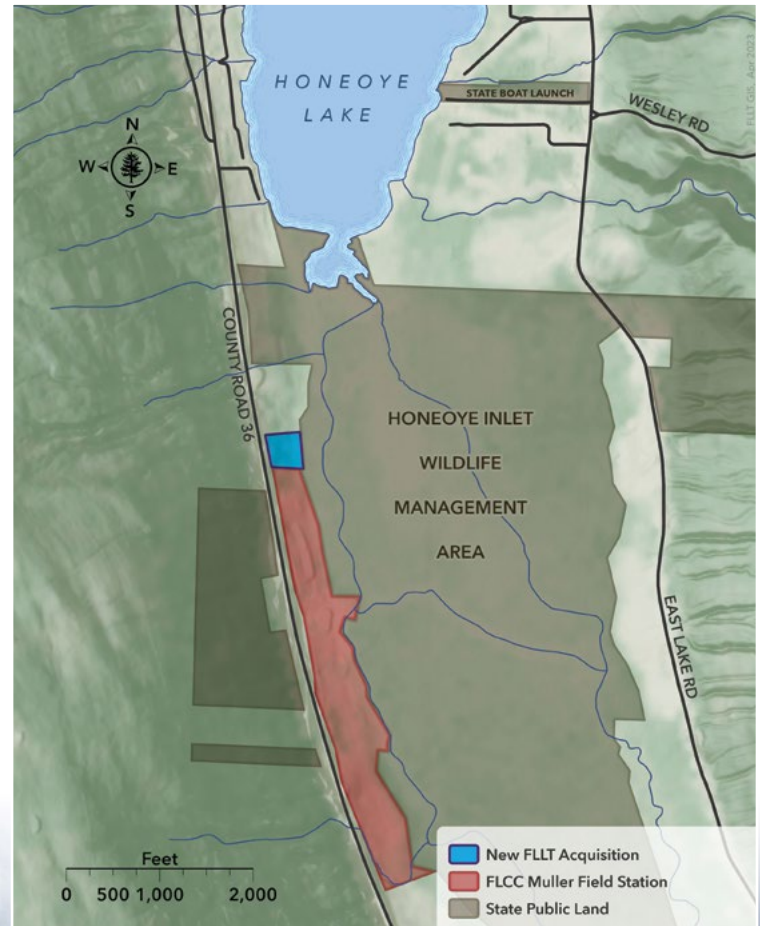
At the request of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Land Trust moved quickly to purchase three wooded acres bordering extensive state-owned wetlands at the south end of Honeoye Lake. The parcel provides a buffer to the adjacent Muller Field Station, an educational facility owned and managed by Finger Lakes Community College.

Though modest in size, the acquisition is significant in terms of impact due to its location. Permanent protection prevents development of a sensitive area and adds to a growing network of conservation lands that encompass more than 5,000 acres of woodlands, fields, and wetlands.

Conserved lands in this area include the sprawling Honeoye Inlet Wildlife Management Area, Harriet Hollister Spencer Recreation Area, the Cumming Nature Center, and the Land Trust's Wesley Hill Nature Preserve. Black bear and bobcat roam these woods and the high ridgelines provide a scenic backdrop to wetlands that host Wood Ducks, herons, and the occasional river otter.

The purchase was made possible by the Land Trust's Opportunity Fund—an internal revolving loan fund that is utilized for time-sensitive acquisitions and then replenished either through fundraising or sale of the land to a public conservation agency.

This will be the Land Trust's fourth addition to Honeoye Inlet Wildlife Management Area. During the coming year, the organization intends to expand outreach to landowners in this area to complement these acquisitions with conservation easements that will secure adjacent lands which will remain in private ownership.



The south end of Honeoye Lake



Conservation Easement Protects “Wren’s Nest” on Skaneateles Lake

In 1973, Robert and Helaine Renner bought a house on several acres of land along the western shore of Skaneateles Lake, surrounded in part by a neighboring farm. When their neighbor retired from farming a few years later, they purchased his property, which consisted of more than 23 acres of agricultural and forest land. As licensed wildlife rehabilitators, the Renners made it a point to keep the property wild and undeveloped.

Fifty years later, Robert and Helaine’s four children are making sure that their parents’ wildlife habitat remains protected from development in perpetuity by donating a conservation easement on the land. A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and an organization, such as the Land Trust, that limits or prohibits development on a property while maintaining private ownership.

“We really wanted to honor our parents by protecting the land that they spent so much of their lives caring for,” said daughter Tami Renner, who owns the property along with her brother Reid and sisters Tara and Debra.

The Renner siblings are keenly aware of the significant development pressure on the west side of Skaneateles Lake as housing developments swallow up an increasing amount of former agricultural land. This reality served as another motivating factor to protect the land with an easement.

The Wren’s Nest, as the Renners call the property (an ornithological play on their last name), features successional brushland and a young forest dominated by birch, which not only provide habitat for a diversity of birds and wildlife, but also serve as erosion protection on the slopes that lead down to the lake. In addition, the property is in close proximity to Brook Farm, which is also protected by a Land Trust conservation easement. The connection between the

protected properties provides a critical corridor for wildlife. A public boat launch managed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation also borders the Wren’s Nest property.

The conservation easement prohibits subdivision of the property and apportions it into two zones: a seven-acre agricultural use zone that allows for farming and includes a century-old barn, and 16 acres of wildlife habitat which includes nearly 80 feet of undeveloped lakeshore. This last area was particularly important to the Renner siblings, who were insistent that a significant portion of the property be left in its current state.

Robert and Helaine both passed away within the last decade, and none of their four children currently live on the property, so they are currently considering a sale of the Wren’s Nest. But they all agreed that a conservation easement was an important prerequisite, ensuring that the land will remain wild and undeveloped—just as their parents wanted.

—Jeff Tonole

The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Virginia F. Calvert, Esq. of Melvin & Calvert Law Firm PC in Syracuse, NY, for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.

thank you

You helped us make a difference this year! Thanks to your tremendous support, we have conserved over 29,000 acres, ensuring scenic vistas, local foods, clean water, and wild places for everyone.

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 2022. Please accept our heartfelt thanks!*

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Talks & Treks

For detailed directions and registration information, visit flt.org/events.

Spring Migrant Bird Walk

Saturday, June 3 at 8:00 AM

Canandaigua Vista Nature Preserve,
Ontario County

Laura Kammermeier of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and co-leader Kyle Gage will lead a walk to discover the variety of birds that migrate through the Finger Lakes region in spring. We will listen for and observe these visitors to the 90-acre Canandaigua Vista Preserve—home to a variety of habitats including mature forests and open meadows. Bring binoculars if you have them. Beginning birders welcome.

Guided Hike with Executive Director Andy Zepp

Friday, June 9 at 3:00 PM

Hinchcliff Family Preserve, Onondaga County

Join Finger Lakes Land Trust Executive Director Andy Zepp for a guided hike on the scenic Hinchcliff Family Preserve and its mile-long connector trail to the adjacent High Vista Nature Preserve. Over the course of this 3.5-mile hike, Andy will discuss the history of the preserve, the conservation significance of the Skaneateles Highlands, and information on the site's natural history. The hike should last about two hours. Be sure to wear sturdy shoes and bring binoculars if you have them.

Tree Identification Walk

Saturday, June 10 at 10:00 AM

Wesley Hill Nature Preserve, Ontario County

Learn how to identify some of our native tree species and what makes them ecologically unique with Cody Wilkes, forester in the Conservation Department at Finger Lakes Community College. The Wesley Hill Preserve is home to diverse stands of mature forest and is one of the Finger Lakes Land Trust's largest conservation areas.

Snail Walk

Saturday, June 17 at 10:00 AM

Bell Station, Tompkins County

Come explore the fascinating world of land snails and slugs with malacologist and naturalist Marla Coppolino. This will be an appropriately slow walk to discover the secretive and hidden microhabitats of land snails and slugs. The humble snails are among the least-studied and most under-appreciated organisms, yet they serve as a cleanup crew for the ecosystem as well as vital food for many insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Bring a magnifier and some insect repellent, if you have them.

Plants and Pollinators

Saturday, July 15 at 10:00 AM

Roy H. Park Preserve (south entrance),
Tompkins County

Max McCune, a horticulturist at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, will lead a walk to discover some of our local wildflowers and the vast network of pollinators and other wildlife they support. We will learn about the different life cycles of wildflowers and how they align with our native insects to form mutually beneficial partnerships.

Except in the case of extreme weather, walks go rain or shine—check our web site for updates. All events are free and open to the public thanks to support from the M&T Charitable Foundation.

M&T Bank

Get Outside with the Land Trust!

A CLOSER LOOK

Shades of Black and Gray

*The bewildering systematics and semantics of Black Ratsnakes**

"SO Mark..." wrote Edie, the newsletter editor. "Could you write about Black Ratsnakes for the next issue?"

I remembered seeing this species, years ago, at the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve—a shiny black six-foot beauty wrapped around a beam of an abandoned outbuilding.

"Heck, yeah!" I replied. I went to two libraries and dug into Google Scholar in search of cool facts.

Black Ratsnakes occupy various habitats, wherever they can find both underground hibernacula and sunny spots for basking. Most often, they winter alone, but sometimes several share the same den. They even occasionally share dens with rattlesnakes or copperheads, sometimes in large numbers. When threatened, they sometimes coil and shake their tails, somewhat like rattlesnakes. Adult Black Ratsnakes can climb straight up rough-trunked trees and, with more difficulty, can ascend smooth trees too. They feed primarily on rodents, but also on birds and their eggs.

Cool facts indeed, widely and deservedly celebrated. But the recent technical literature reveals a deeper story, a tangled hidden tale that shook up my understanding of systematics, semantics, and what it means to be a Black Ratsnake.

It's complicated, but I think it's worth trying to explain.

The Black Ratsnake is a cauldron of bubbling taxonomic dispute. So far in this millennium, it's already been reclassified and renamed at least four times, and split from one to three species. Controversy has continued to burn hot among leading herpetologists about nomenclature and the validity of the split, leading to confusion and even vitriol spilling over into the scientific literature.

The Black Ratsnake, formerly known as *Elaphe obsoleta*, was reassigned in 2005 to the genus *Pantherophis*. In 2008, some

scientists placed it in the genus *Scotophis*, but since then the consensus has consolidated again around *Pantherophis*.

Since 2001, Dr. Frank Burbrink and colleagues have argued based on mitochondrial gene sequencing that the Black Ratsnake is actually three species. Using the new genus name, we have:

- *Pantherophis quadrivittatus* (Eastern Ratsnake) in the Atlantic coastal plain;
- *P. alleghaniensis* (Gray Ratsnake) roughly between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River; and
- *P. obsoletus* (Western Ratsnake) west of the Mississippi to Oklahoma and most of Texas.

(After the split, the present-day *quadrivittatus* was first known as *alleghaniensis*, and the present-day *alleghaniensis* first known as *spiloides*. The current, corrected renaming as of 2021 is no longer controversial among scientists, though it did lead to unseemly snippiness in the scientific journals as it was being resolved. The species names can still be very confusing if you're a curious layperson like me, as many otherwise credible online sources still haven't caught up.)

The ratsnake of our Finger Lakes region is *P. alleghaniensis*. We call it the Gray Ratsnake because in most of its range, adults are gray. The only problem is that in our area and throughout the northern part of its range, *P. alleghaniensis* turns black as an adult.

So with the split, our ratsnakes are Gray Ratsnakes—but aren't actually gray.

Our ratsnakes are black—but are no longer formally called Black Ratsnakes.

Indeed, after the split, the name Black Ratsnake doesn't apply to anyone anymore, except in casual conversation, where it is still arguably the clearest, most accessible term—

Gray Ratsnake (In the Finger Lakes region, adult Gray Ratsnakes are usually almost black in color.)



as long as the snakes are actually black. (What's more, *P. quadrivittatus* are yellow or even bright orange as adults. They are informally called Yellow Ratsnakes.)

Opponents of the split point out that there is extensive gene flow and intergradation among the three ostensible species across broad areas. Given this mixing, as well as the absence of geographic barriers creating isolation, these scientists argue that we should recognize the ratsnake taxa as subspecies rather than species. Following this reasoning returns us to the pre-2001 consensus of one ratsnake species from the Atlantic to east-central Texas. The most proper scientific name would be *Pantherophis obsoletus*, and the best common name, given the color variation, would arguably be Eastern Ratsnake or Common Ratsnake, though surely Black Ratsnake would work too, if applicable colorwise.

Got all that? Me neither. My mind is still spinning, even after hours trying to make sense of it all.

So what is a Black Ratsnake?

Well, it's a snake, or multiple snakes, or a phrase that applies to all or none of them. It's a cool snake that eats rats. Except when it eats birds. It's a cool, rat-eating, bird-eating, tree-climbing, den-sharing, controversy-stoking black snake. Unless it's gray. Or orange.

—Mark Chao

*Or Black Rat Snakes, if you like. Here I follow the naming convention proposed in the dazzling 1997 book *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, by Cornell professor Harry Greene. For groups of snake species, Greene concatenates short descriptors with the word "snake"—thus "ratsnake" and "coralsnake," as with "rattlesnake."

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34th Annual Meeting

Wednesday, June 21st
at 7:30 p.m.

The 34th Annual Meeting will be hosted online. Visit flt.org/2023annualmeeting for more information on board candidates, voting, and registration.

