



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

LAND TRUST SECURES PRISTINE SHORELINE at the South End of Skaneateles Lake

CHRIS RAY

The south end of Skaneateles Lake contains some of the most pristine, undeveloped lakeshore in the Finger Lakes region, set against a dramatic backdrop of rugged, forested hills. It's here that the Land Trust recently acquired 850 feet of shoreline and 15 wooded acres along the eastern shore in the town of Spafford, Onondaga County.

The property includes the southern half of Staghorn Point, 1,120 feet of streambank on Barber Gulf, and the northernmost portion of the iconic Staghorn Cliffs—the site of an ancient, fossilized coral reef. Identified as a priority for protection as part of the Land Trust's efforts to create a greenbelt around the south end of Skaneateles Lake, this acquisition extends the organization's protected shoreline to 3,000 feet in this area.

Preserving this parcel safeguards

habitat for Bald Eagles and other wildlife as well as the water quality of Skaneateles Lake—the unfiltered drinking water supply for 220,000 area residents, including people living in the city of Syracuse.

The recent acquisition is adjacent to the organization's 90-acre Staghorn Cliffs Preserve and 21-acre Cora Kampfe Dickinson Conservation Area. Due to the hazardous nature of the cliffs, the property will be accessed by water only. Visitors may arrive by canoe, kayak, or boats that

can be anchored offshore.

The property's location within this network of conserved land made its protection a top priority for the Land Trust. This growing greenbelt at the south end of Skaneateles Lake is recognized as a priority project within New York State's Open Space Plan and, because of its value for migratory birds, it has also been identified by National Audubon as one of the state's Important Bird Areas. Other nearby conservation

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The conservation projects highlighted in this issue of *The Land Steward* are significant for many reasons. These lands provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife and are important for water quality in the Finger Lakes. They are also simply beautiful, the kind of places that we seek out for reflection and inspiration.

Whether you're admiring the Staghorn Cliffs from a boat on Skaneateles Lake, taking in the view of the magnificent rolling hills bordering State Route 21 in Naples, or stopping at the lakeside cove on the south side of the Village of Aurora, each of these sites provides scenic vistas for which our region is well known.

Scenery matters, in terms of our quality of life and economically, for a region that hosts a \$4 billion tourism economy.

Fortunately, with the generous support of our members and

partners, the Land Trust was able to secure the iconic vistas highlighted here. Frequently, however, this is not the case. At one time, the entrance to many rural villages was defined by a quick transition from scenic farmland to a compact downtown. Now, all too often, these areas have been replaced by a combination of self-storage units, gas stations, and other commercial uses constructed with minimal attention to their context.

As our region grows and develops, the Land Trust will continue to pursue the

protection of scenic lands. We will also expand our work with municipalities, regional planning agencies, and non-profit partners. These efforts will support the implementation of strategies that provide for economic development that is more compatible with the protection of our watersheds and maintain the character of our rural communities.

Andrew Zepp, President

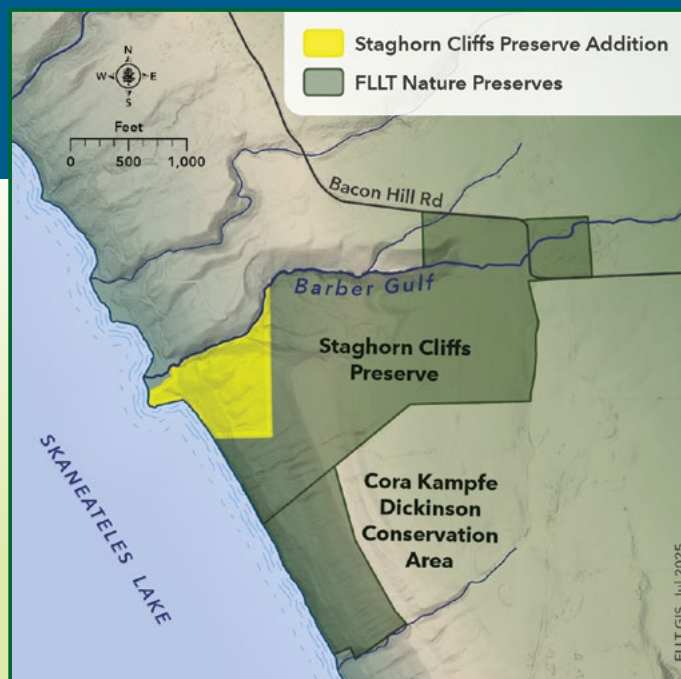
Land Trust Secures Pristine Shoreline at the South End of Skaneateles Lake

continued from cover

lands include the Land Trust's High Vista and Hinchcliff Family preserves.

"The quality of our lakes depends on the condition of the landscapes that surround them," said Land Trust President Andrew Zepp. "In addition to securing this iconic shoreline, this acquisition will secure steep slopes and sensitive shoreline areas that would lead to increased erosion and runoff if they were developed."

This acquisition was made possible by an internal loan from the Land Trust's Opportunity Fund. The organization is now launching a fundraising campaign to raise \$1.1 million to cover the cost of the purchase as well as the long-term management of the site. For additional information about this effort, please contact Karinna Browning at (607) 275-9487 or visit fllt.org/staghorn2025.





Land Trust Moves Quickly to Secure Key Parcel in Canandaigua Lake Watershed

NIGEL KENT

The Land Trust moved quickly this spring after learning that a key parcel within the Canandaigua Lake watershed was likely to be sold. The 122-acre property is well known to anyone who travels on State Route 21 on the south side of the village of Naples. Its dramatic, glacially shaped hills provide one of the Finger Lakes' most iconic vistas.

In addition to its scenic qualities, this land also provides habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife. The property is particularly important for water quality due to its frontage on Eelpot Creek—a tributary to Naples Creek and Canandaigua Lake. The site's location within the Hemlock to High Tor corridor also made it a priority for protection. Hemlock to High Tor is a proposed greenbelt that will help ensure the future of one of the most extensive wild landscapes remaining within the Finger Lakes region.

Thanks to partnerships with the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Council and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Land Trust acquired the property in June, shortly after it was listed for sale. The Watershed Council first identified funding for the purchase

and secured support for the project from the Town of Naples.

"These acres of rolling recessional moraines and the Eelpot stream

"These acres of rolling recessional moraines and the Eelpot stream system are critical to the health of Naples Creek and ultimately Canandaigua Lake," said Kevin Olvany.

system are critical to the health of Naples Creek and ultimately Canandaigua Lake," said Kevin Olvany, Watershed Manager for the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Council. "Permanently protecting the grassland and forest habitat will provide meaningful water quality and

flood resiliency benefits."

During the next two years, one or more projects to enhance water quality will be completed at the site, and its fields will be mowed after nesting season to benefit grassland birds. The Land Trust intends to transfer the property to the DEC to be managed as a satellite of the High Tor Wildlife Management Area. This will be the sixth joint acquisition that the Land Trust has completed with the DEC at High Tor.

Funding for the purchase was provided by a \$600,000 interest-free loan from a lender who prefers to remain anonymous. The Land Trust will now work with the DEC and the Watershed Council to focus on habitat and water quality projects.

Donation Secures Scenic Property and Yields Funds for Internships

CHRIS RAY

Thanks to the donation of 73 acres by longtime member Sandy Hill, the Land Trust has conserved fields and woodlands within the Cayuga Lake watershed and established a new fund to help support the organization's conservation internships.

Sandy and her late husband, Carman, made their first contribution to the Land Trust in 1995, eleven years after purchasing their property on Wilkins Road in the town of Ulysses, Tompkins County.

After Carman passed away in 2017, Sandy searched for a way to honor his life, ultimately deciding to donate the undeveloped 73-acre portion of their property to the Land Trust. Her decision was made with the understanding that the land would be sold to a private buyer subject to a conservation easement.

The donated property features scenic farmland and a mature stand of sugar maples bordering a tributary to Cayuga Lake. The easement limits development to a single home, allows for continued agricultural use, and provides for a buffer of mature woodlands along a tributary to

nearby Cayuga Lake.

Most of the proceeds from the recently completed sale will be used to create the Carman and Sandra B. Hill Fund, which the Land Trust will use to support paid internships that will provide hands-on experiences in land and water conservation. The Land Trust is grateful for this generous gift, which will provide valuable educational opportunities for students interested in the field of conservation.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that permanently limit future development in order to protect the land's conservation value. Lands subject to conservation easements remain in private ownership, on local tax rolls, and available for traditional uses such as farming, forestry, and hunting.

Shotwell Brook Conservation Area Update

Challenge Match Met and Restoration Efforts Begin

Thanks to an outpouring of support from our membership, the Land Trust recently met the \$500,000 challenge made by an anonymous donor. More than \$500,000 was raised in matching funds, which will be used to cover the cost of developing public access improvements and provide for the long-term stewardship of the Shotwell Brook Conservation Area in Skaneateles. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to this campaign.

The development of stone dust paths and a parking area at the site will commence after ecological restoration efforts are further along. Restoration efforts were recently initiated through a partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. An agricultural field was seeded with native pollinator plants, and the control of non-native invasive plant species is now underway.

During the upcoming months, site planning will be finalized. Additional invasive plant control will also take place, and native trees and shrubs will be planted. These efforts will be ongoing for at least several years. The Land Trust aims to form a Shotwell Brook Conservation Area Friends Group dedicated to ongoing stewardship needs at the site. To volunteer, contact Nature Preserve Manager Jason Gorman by calling (607) 275-9487 or emailing jasongorman@fltt.org.

CHRIS RAY

Conservation Easement Adds to Protected Lands in Skaneateles Lake Watershed

The Skaneateles Highlands at the southern end of Skaneateles Lake is a major focus area for the Land Trust. The pristine lake is the source of drinking water for Syracuse and is one of the few large system surface water sources in the country that is approved as an unfiltered water supply. The two largest streams that feed into the lake—Bear Swamp Creek and Grout Brook—run through the Skaneateles Highlands, which makes protecting this area vitally important.

Don and Anna DeWitt, who own several tracts of farmland in the Skaneateles and Owasco Lake watersheds, have a different focus—protecting farmland in the Finger Lakes from being turned into housing developments. As Don puts it: “We want farmland to stay farmland.” (The Land Trust shares an interest in that, too.)

These two priorities came together when the Land Trust secured a conservation easement on 116 acres owned by the DeWitts in the Skaneateles Highlands, which includes 3,000 feet of frontage on Bear Swamp Creek. 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.

This is not the first partnership between the Land Trust and the DeWitts. In 2020, a 1.5-acre parcel of lakefront owned by the DeWitts was added to the Land Trust’s Bahar Nature Preserve, which consists of land surrounding Bear Swamp Creek near its outlet into the lake.

The DeWitts have a long history with the land they are protecting with a conservation easement. The farm dates back more than 100 years, when it was originally a dairy

farm run by Anna’s grandparents. Today, the dairy farm is gone, but the DeWitts grow corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay.

Although the property includes a working farm, approximately half of the acreage is undeveloped forestland. The conservation easement will continue to protect it as such via a forest management zone. In addition, an environmental protection zone will serve as a buffer around the frontage on Bear Swamp Creek.

The DeWitt farm adds to a host of other protected lands on the east side of the Skaneateles Highlands. Along with the Bahar Preserve, nearby protected areas include the Carpenter Falls Unique Area and the Bear Swamp State Forest. Furthermore, the DeWitt property is adjacent to another property with a conservation easement administered by the Land Trust and is in close proximity to several other parcels protected by conservation easements.

A significant portion of the funding for this project came from the New York State Water Quality Improvement Projects (WQIP) program. The WQIP grant covers 75% of the acquisition and project costs while also providing some funds for long-term stewardship.

—Jeff Tonole

The newly conserved property, in the lower right, has frontage on Bear Swamp Creek and Route 41A.

President Andy Zepp and
2025 Conservationist of the
Year Grace Bates



CHRIS RAY

Grace Bates

RECOGNIZED AS CONSERVATIONIST OF THE YEAR

At its annual meeting, the Land Trust recognized Aurora resident Grace Bates as its Conservationist of the Year. Grace successfully negotiated the purchase of a scenic 1,100-foot stretch of Cayuga Lake shoreline from Wells College. After acquiring the four-acre parcel, she worked with the Land Trust to protect the property with a conservation easement before donating it to the village of Aurora to establish a park.

The new park borders the Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway and includes frontage on a scenic cove known for birdwatching opportunities. This cove hosts nesting Bald Eagles and frequent concentrations of waterfowl.

While owned by Wells College, Aurora residents had access to this area for many years. With the college now closed, there was concern that public access to the lakeshore would be lost.

Thanks to Grace and her commitment to the community and the environment, this cherished spot will remain accessible for public enjoyment.

—Andy Zepp

Martin van der Grinten

NAMED VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

The 2025 Volunteer of the Year Award was presented to Martin van der Grinten of Corning. Martin retired from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2016, where he managed the Big Flats Plant Materials Center. That same year, he began volunteering with the Land Trust and quickly became a regular workday attendee. Martin has traveled all over the Finger Lakes to volunteer with the Land Trust and rarely misses a workday. He brings his own tools as well as muffins or donuts! Martin also assists the Chemung Valley Audubon Society, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Forest Rangers, the US Forest Service in the Finger Lakes National Forest, and Habitat for Humanity.

Martin has stated that he enjoys volunteering with the Land Trust because of all the people involved. He is kind, welcoming to others, readily shares his knowledge and experiences, and is often the last one still working! If you have hiked a trail on a new Land Trust nature preserve, and it looks well-established, it has most likely received "The Martin Treatment," where the trail has been thoroughly raked to remove plant seedlings and other growth.

It took some persuasion to have Martin accept the Volunteer of the Year award, but it was important to let him know how significant his contributions are to the Land Trust's work. We could not do the work we do without Martin, as well as all of our volunteers!

—Jason Gorman

Volunteer of the Year Martin
van der Grinten and Land
Trust Nature Preserve
Manager Jason Gorman



CHRIS RAY

Hemlock to High Tor Initiative

RECEIVES SUPPORT FROM NEW YORK STATE

In May, the Land Trust received a \$100,000 grant through the New York State Conservation Partnership Program to help fund the organization's *Hemlock to High Tor Initiative*. The initiative was recently created to accelerate land protection and stewardship efforts to address increasing development pressure in the western Finger Lakes.

The grant will help ensure the future of a largely forested landscape that extends across 114,000 acres, extending from Hemlock Lake in the west to the High Tor Wildlife Management Area at the south end of Canandaigua Lake. This area hosts one of the most extensive contiguous forests remaining in the Finger Lakes region. These forests play a vital role in stabilizing steep slopes and providing clean water for our lakes. They also harbor a diversity of wildlife, including wide-ranging mammals such as the black bear, bobcat, and fisher.

The Land Trust is focused on engaging landowners and local communities to develop consensus around long-term strategies for land and water conservation while enhancing both quality of life and the region's outdoor recreation-based tourism economy. The *Hemlock to High Tor Initiative* is built on existing conservation accomplishments and

partnerships. Thus far, the Land Trust has secured more than 2,300 acres in this area by establishing five nature preserves, two public parks, 13 conservation easements, and eight cooperative acquisitions with New York State.

The Land Trust recently welcomed Lindsay McMillan of Hemlock, NY, to lead this effort. From 2019 to 2024, Lindsay served as the Director of the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Association and is a founding member of the Lake Friendly Living Coalition of the Finger Lakes.

The New York State Conservation Partnership Program is funded through the state's Environmental Protection Fund and administered by the Land Trust Alliance, in coordination with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The \$100,000 awarded to the Land Trust will be matched by private contributions.

BILL HECHT

The view from High Tor Wildlife Management Area looking southwest

Land Trust Welcomes New Board Members

The Land Trust recently welcomed three new board members and announced a new role for current member Karen Meriwether as Chair of the Board. Our board plays a vital role in developing the organization's long-term conservation strategies and provides crucial financial oversight.



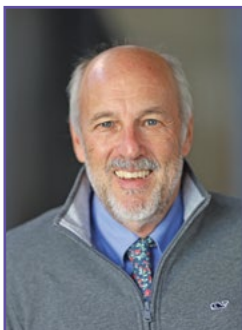
Karen Meriwether—Now in her 3rd three-year term, Karen is Senior Vice President for the wealth management firm of John G. Ullman & Associates,

Inc. She has also served on the investment committee of the Diocese of Rochester, the board of directors of the Steuben ARC Foundation, and the board of the Community Foundation of Elmira-Corning and the Finger Lakes. She and her husband, Tom Snow, live on Keuka Lake.



Daniel J. Fisher—Dan held the position of Executive Vice President for HR at Welch Allyn for 35 years before the company was acquired in 2015. He

helped launch the executive master's program at the Cornell University Industrial & Labor Relations School and served as executive advisor for seven years. Dan served on numerous not-for-profit boards and as board chair of the William H. Seward Museum, Auburn Hospital, and, most recently, the Central New York Community Foundation. He is the board chair of Nixon Medical and lives in Skaneateles with his wife, Lori Ruhlman.



Charles T. Driscoll—Charley is a University Professor of Environmental Systems and Distinguished Professor of Civil & Environmental Engineering

in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Syracuse University. He is a member of the National Academy of Engineering, a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and a Clarke Prize Laureate. His current research is focused on the recovery of eastern forest watersheds. Charley lives in Skaneateles with his wife, Kim.



Suzanne Hunt—Suzanne is co-owner of her family's seventh-generation farm and certified sustainable vineyards, Hunt Country

Vineyards. She is also Vice President for Public Policy for Generate Upcycle, a sustainable infrastructure owner/operator in the US, Canada, and the UK. She currently serves on the Boards of the Seneca Park Zoo Society, the Mobility Futures Alliance, Energy Vision, and the Center for Earth Ethics at the Union Divinity School. She lives in Branchport near Keuka Lake with her husband, Matt Kelly.

Special thanks go to Fred Van Sickle for his service as Chairman of the Land Trust's board for the last three years. During Fred's tenure, the organization continued to expand its conservation programs while maintaining a sound financial position.

Land Trust Acquires Key Addition to Harriet Hollister Spencer Recreation Area

In June, the Land Trust acquired 116 acres of forested hillsides in Canadice, Ontario County, in the heart of the Hemlock to High Tor corridor—one of the most extensive contiguous forests remaining in the Finger Lakes region.

Located just west of the vast wetlands at the south end of Honeoye Lake, the property contains a rugged gorge that provides water to the wetlands and beyond.

This noteworthy property serves as a link between the Harriet Hollister Spencer Recreation Area and the Honeoye Inlet Wildlife Management Area, allowing for the continued movement of wide-ranging mammals such as black bear, bobcat, and fisher. Forests in this area also play a vital role in stabilizing steep slopes and providing clean water for our lakes.

The Land Trust intends to transfer the property to New York State as an addition to the Harriet Hollister Spencer Recreation Area, a popular destination for hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing.

This noteworthy property serves as a link between the Harriet Hollister Spencer Recreation Area and the Honeoye Inlet Wildlife Management Area.

This acquisition adds to a growing network of conserved lands at Honeoye Lake's south end including the Land Trust's Wesley Hill Nature Preserve, the Cumming Nature Center, and Muller Field Station, an educational facility owned and managed by Finger Lakes Community College.

Our appreciation for gifts in honor of

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FROM
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Our deepest gratitude for thoughtful gifts in memory of

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Summer Internship Program Connects Students with Conservation Work



Giovanni Carrero



Rosario Savash-Acuna

The Land Trust is pleased to host two interns for the summer of 2025. The internship program is designed to provide a complete introduction to all aspects of the organization's daily operations. Interns work with staff on various projects to learn about land protection, stewardship, communications, fundraising, and operations activities.

Giovanni Carrero is a senior at Binghamton University; he is pursuing a degree in Environmental Science with a focus on Ecosystems. Rosario Savash-Acuna is a junior at SUNY Geneseo; she is pursuing a double major in Geography and Sustainability Studies with a microcredential in GIS. Welcome, Giovanni and Rosario!

New Electric Vehicles

Thanks to the generosity of Myra Shulman and James Morin, Charles W. and Kristin A. Swain, and an anonymous donor, the Land Trust recently purchased a Chevy Silverado EV truck and a Chevy Equinox—the first electric vehicles for the organization. The transition from gas-powered to electric vehicles is part of the Land Trust's strategic plan and ongoing efforts to reduce its fossil fuel use. Electric chargers have been installed at the Land Trust's downtown Ithaca location, where plans are also underway to install heat pumps and electric appliances. Many thanks to our donors for providing the support needed for these upgrades!

The transition from gas-powered to electric vehicles is part of the Land Trust's strategic plan and ongoing efforts to reduce its fossil fuel use.



Director of Stewardship Chris Olney and Nature Preserve Manager Jason Gorman with the Land Trust's new electric vehicles

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A CLOSER LOOK

Louisiana Waterthrush: *What's in a Name?*



ANDY REAGO AND CHRIS MCCLARREN, CC BY 2.0

Don't be fooled by names: the Louisiana Waterthrush (*Parkesia motacilla*) isn't a thrush at all. Thrushes—members of the family Turdidae—are, in general, bright-eyed, sturdy-bodied leaf-litter-scratchers, and there are many of them in the Finger Lakes. The Hermit and Wood breed here; the Swainson's passes through in spring and fall.

A waterthrush looks like a thrush but is actually a member of the family Parulidae, the New World warblers. (It should be noted that "warbler" is more of a poetic than a scientific designation: to this untrained listener's ear, at least, warblers' often short, frizzy songs tend to sound endearing rather than particularly melodious.) Many warblers are bright-colored or strikingly patterned branch-clingers. Waterthrushes, on the other hand, are clad in a muted palette of ivory, olive, and brown, and they are quite comfortable hopping around on the forest floor.

To add to the confusion, the Louisiana Waterthrush has nothing in particular to do with Louisiana, except that some early specimens were collected there. Like many warblers, it winters in the tropics and migrates long distances to its summer breeding grounds, which cover most of the continental U. S. east of the Mississippi. The Finger Lakes are at the northern edge of its range.

There's one part of this bird's name that can be trusted: it is indeed a bird of the water. This species is only found where pristine streams run through large tracts of mature forest, and although its numbers are currently stable, it is very sensitive to changes in the environment. The Finger Lakes Land Trust is playing a critical role in keeping this species healthy. John Confer, Retired Associate Professor of Biology at Ithaca College, estimates that Land Trust nature preserves shelter at least 0.02% of all the breeding Louisiana Waterthrushes in the world—and that's not even counting the lands protected by the Land Trust that are outside of preserves.

Look for this bird along the steep-sided rivulets that run swiftly and secretly through mature forests. You'll have to look carefully, though. Its back is colored like the forest floor and its belly is streaked so that it's harder

for predators to see it from below. If you manage to catch a glimpse of one of these industrious hoppers, it will probably be poking around for little insects, grubs, crustaceans, and molluscs at the edge of the water.

The old scientific name of the Louisiana Waterthrush (before the genus was renamed after the ornithologist Kenneth Carroll Parkes) was *Seiurus motacilla*: *tail-shaker little-mover*. Particularly when walking, waterthrushes constantly bend and extend their "knees" (which are really their ankle joints), causing their tails to shake—or, more accurately, causing them to bob or spring up and down. In fact, many birds move their tails in a similar way: certain kinds of shorebirds, Eastern Phoebe, and American Pipits, along with a whole genus of birds named *Motacilla*—the wagtails—do the same thing. On the other side of the world, in Australia, the "Willie wagtail" moves its tail not up-and-down but side-to-side. I grew up in Southern California, watching Spotted Sandpipers that teetered like little spring-loaded toys as they dug for sand crabs.

Many birds bob, teeter, or nervously twitch their tails, probably for different reasons, but why does the waterthrush do it? There are varying theories, many of them contradictory. The constant motion might let predators know that these birds are alert: go after someone duller and slower! On the other hand, it might actually make them less visible to predators, as their rhythmically moving bodies mimic detritus caught in wind or water. Perhaps the bobbing helps them sneak up on their prey, or, alternatively, perhaps it startles their prey into motion. Maybe it helps them see food more easily under flowing water, or maybe it helps them keep their balance on uncertain ground. Whatever the reason, it's got to be something good: they expend a lot of energy doing their little knee-bends.

The waterthrush is a bird of many names, some of them evocative and some of them confounding. But the most charming of all is surely the Spanish one: *reinita charquera*, "little queen of puddles."

—Jacqueline Stuhmiller

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Upcoming Event

Fall Foliage Hike at the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve

Saturday, October 18, 2025 • 10:00 am-12:00 pm

Join Senior Land Steward Eric Mastroberti for a guided hike at the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve in West Danby, Tompkins County. Eric will discuss the history and ecology of this scenic 554-acre preserve, home to a diverse variety of flora and fauna.

Registration is required. Visit fllt.org/events to learn more.

FLLT