



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

Twenty Years of Conserving Lands in Ithaca's Emerald Necklace

DEBORAH LITTLEJOHN

What began as a strategy for prioritizing conservation projects 20 years ago has grown into a successful tool for protecting the ecological integrity of lands at the south end of Cayuga Lake. Ithaca's "Emerald Necklace" turns 20 this year, and there are many reasons to celebrate and reflect on all that has been accomplished since 2006, including the protection of over 5,000 acres by the Land Trust.

The Emerald Necklace aims to link more than 50,000 acres of existing conservation land in an arc around Ithaca, from the Finger Lakes National Forest in the west to the Hammond Hill State Forest in the east. Together, these lands host 78 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail, two National Audubon Society-designated Important Bird Areas, numerous Finger Lakes Land Trust preserves and conservation easements, several state forests and parks, and dozens of Tompkins County-designated Unique Natural Areas. The Emerald Necklace is also recognized as a priority project within New York State's Open Space Plan.

Through the use of land acquisitions, cooperative

projects with government conservation agencies, and conservation easements, the Land Trust has steadily expanded this greenbelt, resulting in increased water quality protection for streams that enter Cayuga Lake; more outdoor recreational opportunities for residents and visitors to the area; and a less fragmented landscape, allowing for the continued movement of wildlife.

Over the last twenty years, the Land Trust has created or expanded eleven nature preserves within the Emerald Necklace that are free and open to the public. Notably, the popular Roy H. Park Preserve in Dryden, Tompkins County,

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The Emerald Necklace is a lot of things. It's the rugged waterfalls and gorges of Buttermilk, Lick Brook, and Treman.

It's the sometimes seemingly endless hilltop woodlands, punctuated by the remains of old farmsteads, whose occupants left long ago. It's the many babbling brooks that emanate from these forests, joining together to become sizable tributaries that provide clean water to Cayuga Lake.

The Emerald Necklace is a bounty of public lands available to all for recreation and inspiration—from the cross-country ski trails at Hammond Hill, the mountain biking trails at Shindagin Hollow, and the Abbott Loop in Danby to the vast expanse of Connecticut Hill, Texas Hollow's bog, and the sweeping vistas of New York's only national forest. And through it all, 78 miles of the Finger Lakes Trail provide access to these special places.

To me, what makes the Emerald Necklace so special is the river otter I observed with my daughter in West Danby. It's the bobcat I stumbled across on a sunny Saturday hike. It's the Bald Eagle flying low over the Cayuga Inlet while on the hunt. And it's the black bear I

still haven't seen that I've been tracking in the woods.

The Emerald Necklace is much more than the sum of its parts. It's the hope that by working together, we can create something even greater—a dynamic and connected landscape that provides for both people and wildlife in a way that can be sustained far beyond our lifetimes.

We've got a long way to go to achieve our vision, but we're making great progress. We'll also be applying the lessons we've learned to the western Finger Lakes, where our Hemlock to High Tor Initiative is tackling conservation on a similar landscape scale. These projects take time, persistence, and ongoing commitment. Neither of these projects are easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

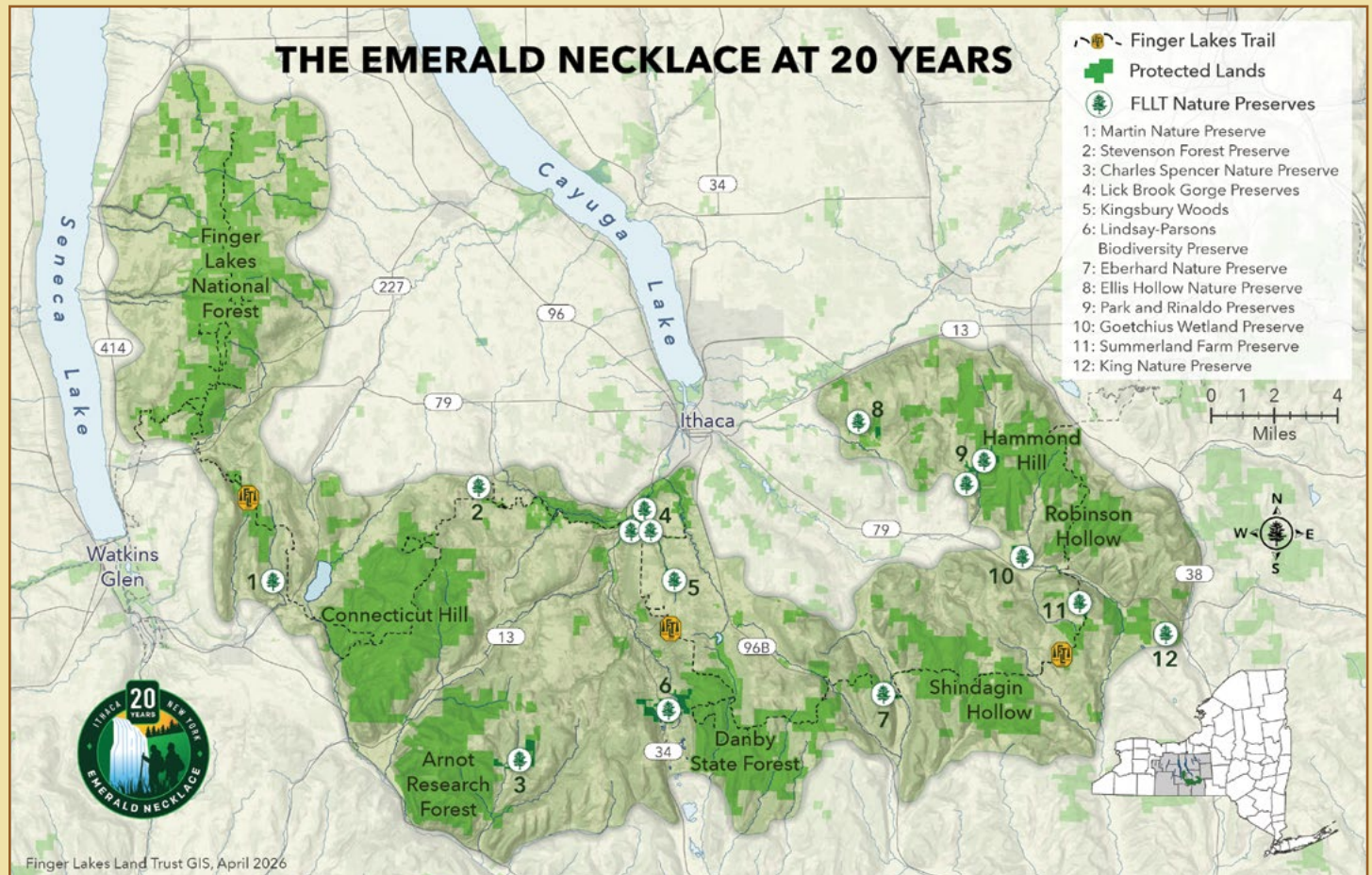


Andrew Zepp, President

Twenty Years of Conserving Lands in Ithaca's Emerald Necklace *continued from cover*

was opened in 2007 after the organization acquired land bordering Six Mile Creek, the source of drinking water for the city of Ithaca. The preserve contains diverse natural habitats, including meadows, woodlands, and wetlands,

and is adjacent to Hammond Hill and Yellow Barn state forests and a Cornell Botanic Gardens Natural Area. Other newly created nature preserves in Tompkins County include *continued on page 7*



Land Trust Takes Action to Secure Emerald Necklace Woodland

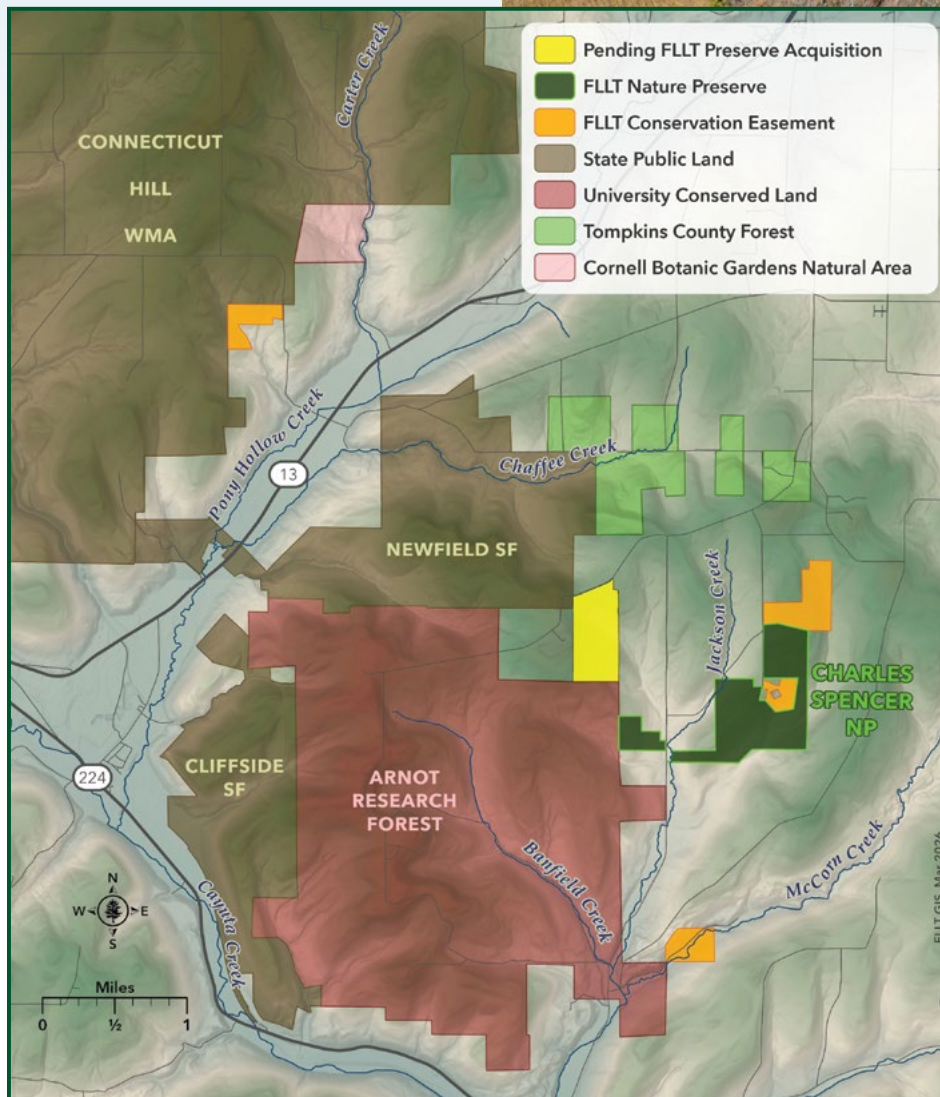
When woodlands in the heart of Ithaca's Emerald Necklace came on the market recently, the Land Trust moved quickly to negotiate a purchase contract.

These aren't just any woodlands; they are 130 acres of towering oaks, maple, hemlock, and beech that are located on Newfield's Irish Hill, in the heart of a 6,000-acre block of conservation land.

The property comprises the eastern boundary of the Greensprings Natural Cemetery and also borders Cornell's Arnot Forest and Newfield State Forest. The land is also



CHRIS RAY



separated by just one parcel from the Land Trust's nearby Charles Spencer Nature Preserve. A scenic lane traverses the length of the property, and a remnant field adds some diversity to the site.

The Land Trust has launched a \$500,000 fundraising campaign to acquire this property and establish a nature preserve with hiking trails that will connect two miles of existing paths on the adjacent Greensprings Cemetery. The campaign includes the funds needed to demolish two abandoned structures that are located on the property, as well as a contribution to the organization's Stewardship Fund to provide for long-term management.

This acquisition is being undertaken as part of a broader effort to expand this large block of conserved land. The Land Trust is also exploring the possibility of developing additional trails in this area to expand opportunities for outdoor recreation.

A closing on the property is expected sometime this summer. To make a contribution in support of this project, or to learn more, please visit fllt.org/irishhill or contact the Land Trust at (607) 275-9487.

EMERALD NECKLACE HIKING CHALLENGE!

The Finger Lakes Trail (FLT) system runs from Allegany State Park on the Pennsylvania border to the Catskill Forest Preserve, with branch trails to Niagara Falls, the Genesee River valley, the Great Eastern Trail, the central Finger Lakes, and the Syracuse region. The trail is overseen and managed by the Finger Lakes Trail Conference.

The Emerald Necklace hosts 78 miles of the FLT, passing through some of the most scenic lands in the region, including state forests, state parks, Finger Lakes Land Trust nature preserves, and New York's only national forest. This stretch of the FLT is maintained by the Cayuga Trails Club.

In celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Emerald Necklace, Finger Lakes Land Trust President Andy Zepp will be repeating a trek he completed 20 years ago, hiking all 78 miles of the trail this spring. Along some sections of the trail, Andy will be accompanied by friends, supporters, and conservation partners, and these hikes will be documented in an upcoming video this year.

The Land Trust invites you to explore the Emerald Necklace by also hiking these 78 miles along the FLT! **This hiking challenge can be done in sections, at your own pace, and over the course of 2026. Anyone who completes the challenge receives a hiking patch commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Emerald Necklace.**

Please refer to the map for information on the entire route, including starting and ending points. The route starts at the trailhead on Satterly Hill Rd. in the Finger Lakes National Forest (Hector, NY) and ends at the intersection of Star Stanton and Canaan Roads in Hammond Hill State Forest (Dryden, NY).

The map highlights five 15-mile sections, but the hiking challenge can be completed in any way you choose. Note that this challenge does not include any spur trails. You can also visit the Finger Lakes Trail Conference's web site

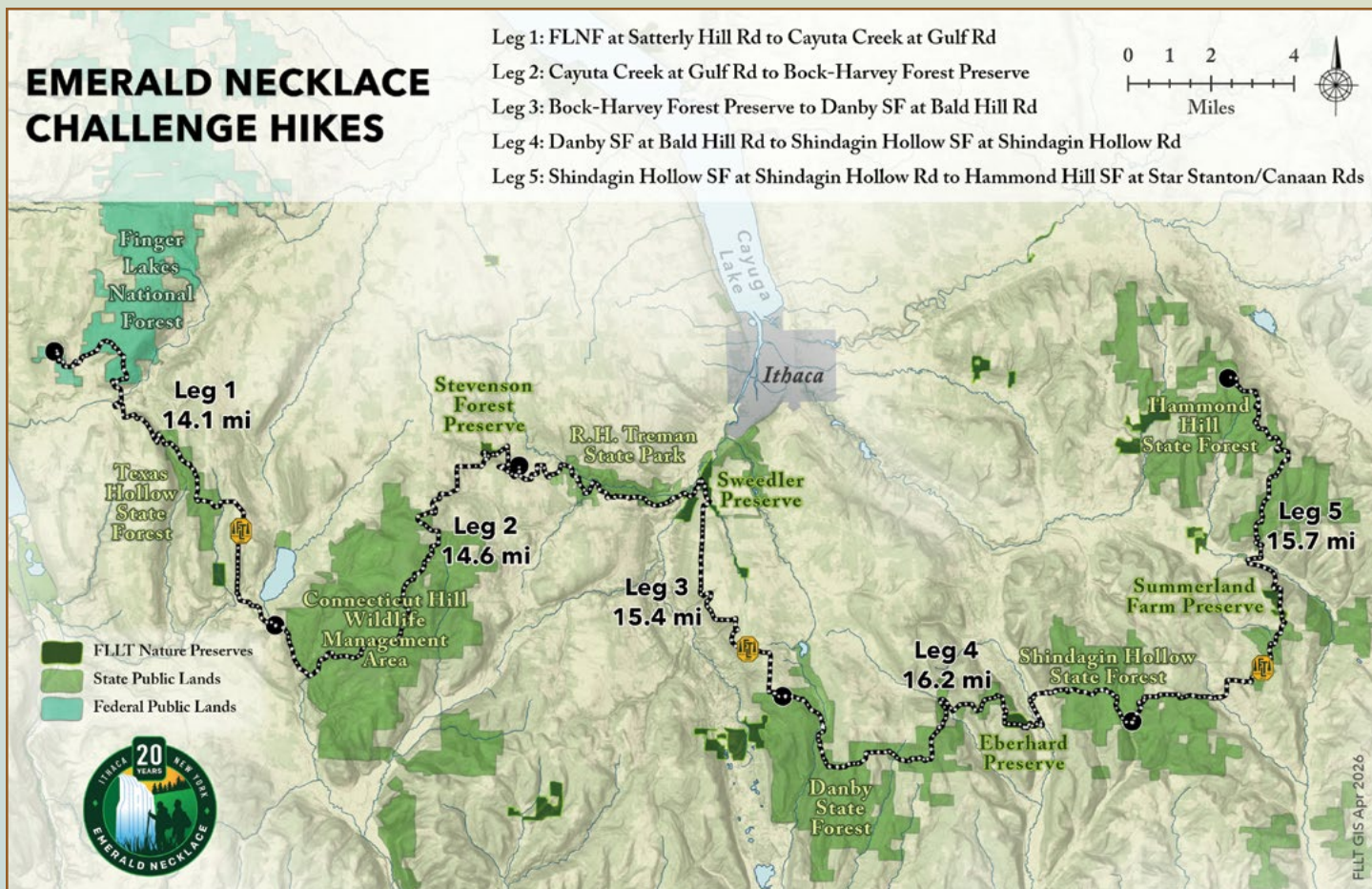


RECK LIGHTBODY



for more information, including an interactive map, at fingerlakestrail.org.

Please document your hiking dates and distances, then email the Finger Lakes Land Trust at info@fltl.org, call (607) 275-9487, or stop by 202 E. Court St. in downtown Ithaca, NY to receive your patch. Happy trails!



ENHANCING Aquatic Habitat Along Eelpot Creek in the Town of Naples



CHRIS RAY

CHRIS RAY

The Land Trust is advancing stewardship of a recently protected 122-acre property near the south end of Naples through a new habitat enhancement project in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

Recognized by many traveling along Route 21, the property's dramatic, glacially shaped hills are one of Naples' most iconic landscapes. Beyond the view, the land supports valuable grassland habitat and frontage along Eelpot Creek—an important tributary to Naples Creek and home to one of the only naturally reproducing rainbow trout populations in the Finger Lakes.

Building on this acquisition, the Land Trust is working with DEC Fisheries staff to restore in-stream habitat along the creek. By strategically placing felled trees into the stream channel, DEC crews are mimicking natural processes that create deeper pools, improve feeding and spawning habitat, and reconnect the stream to its floodplain. To date, 13 wood structures have been installed, with one final site awaiting completion. Early results are already visible, with the structures creating riffles and pools, increasing cover, and capturing sediment.

"Woody debris provides excellent fish habitat and allows streams to function naturally," said NYS DEC Aquatic Biologist Pete Austerman. "The relatively undeveloped nature of the upper Naples Creek watershed provides opportunities to enhance the stream by strategically adding large trees to the stream channel. This project has been a great partnership and will benefit the trout fishery and improve the overall health of the watershed."

This work builds on a strong foundation of partnership. The property was protected in the spring of 2025 through a collaboration between the Land Trust, the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Council, and the NYS DEC, with support from the Town of Naples and an anonymous donor. Creek restoration and grassland bird habitat improvements will continue through this shared commitment as the property transitions into a DEC Wildlife Management Area as a satellite of the High Tor Wildlife Management Area. —Lindsay McMillan

Neighbors Protect Adjacent Properties Upstream from Taughannock Falls

CHRIS RAY

Scott Sutcliffe is no stranger to land conservation. He spent a portion of his career as the director of the Nature Conservancy's Long Island chapter. "I loved my years at the Nature Conservancy," said Scott.

Scott also has a long familiarity with the Land Trust. When Scott began working at Cornell's Lab of Ornithology in the 1980s, he and his wife, Sally, bought a farm on Waterburg Road in the Town of Ulysses. Not long thereafter, they purchased a 60-acre parcel on the opposite side of the road that was owned by the Land Trust. The previous owner had placed a conservation easement on the property and then donated it to the Land Trust so that it could be sold to raise funds for land conservation.

Scott is an avid birder—he hosts bird walks on his property, often in conjunction with the Cayuga Bird Club, and mows the meadows on the property to maintain grassland bird habitat. He also holds other events for friends during the warmer months of the year, from hayrides around the property to concerts and movie nights in his barn. "I get a lot of personal enrichment from sharing my love of the outdoors," said Scott.

During a recent monitoring visit at the parcel across Waterburg Road, Scott approached Land Trust staff and expressed interest in placing a conservation easement on a portion of his property that abuts Taughannock Creek, about four miles upstream from Taughannock Falls. The Land Trust enthusiastically agreed.

In addition to providing a protective buffer along the creek, the easement covers 23 acres of mature woods, meadows, and former fields that are being reclaimed by nature into newly wooded areas.

But if you read the headline, you'll know that's not the whole story. Scott told his neighbors, Don and Eilene Guy, about the Land Trust and his plans for a conservation easement. The Guys' property, a former farm that straddles Waterburg Road southwest of Scott's land, was originally purchased by Eilene's parents in the late 1950s.

Eilene's mother was a naturalist who took an active role in returning the agricultural land back to its natural state. In partnership with 4-H, the family planted more than 15,000 trees on the property throughout the 1960s, and as a result, most of the property is now forest land.

After discussing the idea, Eilene and Don agreed to donate a conservation easement on the portion of their property that is adjacent to the land that comprises Scott's easement. Together, the two neighboring conservation easements protect 46 acres and 3,200 feet of frontage on Taughannock Creek.

"We wanted to pass it forward by protecting the property for future generations," said Eilene. "I think my mother would approve."
—Jeff Tonole

Twenty Years of Conserving Lands in Ithaca's Emerald Necklace

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the Tapan Mitra Preserve and the William and Marjory Thayer Preserve at Lick Brook in Ithaca, the Kingsbury Woods Conservation Area in Danby, and the Summerland Farm Preserve and Eberhard Nature Preserve in Caroline.

The 554-acre Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve in West Danby grew with the addition of four unique parcels, including nine acres of wetlands that are home to river otters, Great Blue Herons, Kingfishers, and many other creatures. Due to the size and diversity of this preserve, students and scientists at Cornell University have used it to research biodiversity and chemical ecology. A network of nearly four miles of trails offer excellent hiking, cross-country skiing, and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Also within the Emerald Necklace, the Land Trust has implemented 32 conservation easements, securing land that remains in private ownership and on local tax rolls. These properties are often buffered by state forests or other existing conservation land, and their protection ensures a more connected natural landscape. Easements are voluntary legal agreements that permanently limit future development in order to protect the land's conservation value but remain available for traditional uses such as forestry and hunting.

Conservation easements also maintain the rural hiking experience as the Finger Lakes Trail (FLT) passes through many of these private properties. Other lands protected by the Land Trust that host segments of the FLT in Tompkins County include the contiguous Tapan Mitra, Sweedler, and Thayer Preserves, the Stevenson Forest Preserve, the

Summerland Farm Preserve, and the Eberhard Preserve.

These achievements are possible thanks to the support of the Land Trust's members, partners, and volunteers. Collaborations with the Finger Lakes Trail Conference, the Cayuga Trails Club, and partnerships with local governments, Tompkins County, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation play a crucial role in securing time-sensitive land acquisitions.

Thanks to these partnerships, the Land Trust also completed 19 cooperative acquisition projects in the Emerald Necklace since 2006. These lands are acquired by the Land Trust and then eventually sold to New York State as additions to state forests and state parks, and in some cases, the Finger Lakes National Forest. The proceeds are then placed in the organization's Opportunity Fund for securing future land purchases.

These partnerships have resulted in the expansion of Danby, Shindagin Hollow, and Yellow Barn state forests, as well as Robert H. Treman State Park in Tompkins County, Connecticut Hill Wildlife Management Area in Schuyler County, and Robinson Hollow State Forest in Tioga County.

As we look back on all we've accomplished together and imagine the next twenty years, the Land Trust has created a hiking challenge to last throughout 2026. Learn more in this issue of *The Land Steward*. You can also visit fllt.org/emerald20 for more information and suggestions for exploring the Emerald Necklace!

EARTH DAY 2026

VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF celebrated Earth Day 2026 by planting native trees and shrubs at the Shotwell Brook Conservation Area in Skaneateles. Recent work at this site includes the reclamation of one mile of overgrown trails soon to be improved through surface drainage and stabilization. Control of invasive plants is also underway, and a much larger planting of trees and shrubs is planned for later this year. More information on the Shotwell Brook Conservation Area is available at fllt.org/shotwellbrook.

CHRIS OLNEY



Water Quality Projects Help Protect Ithaca's Drinking Water Supplies

IN April, the Land Trust completed two projects in the Cayuga Lake watershed on lands that contain sections of Fall Creek and a tributary of Six Mile Creek.

The Thomas Road Wetlands in Caroline, locally recognized as important for breeding amphibians and bird habitat, occupy a through-valley divide between Cascadilla Creek and Six Mile Creek—the source of Ithaca's public drinking water. The Land Trust purchased 18 acres at the southern end of these wetlands, identified as a Tompkins County Unique Natural Area. The property was immediately transferred to the Wetland Trust, a non-profit organization based in New York State, to be protected and managed as wildlife habitat. This is the second cooperative project completed between the two organizations.

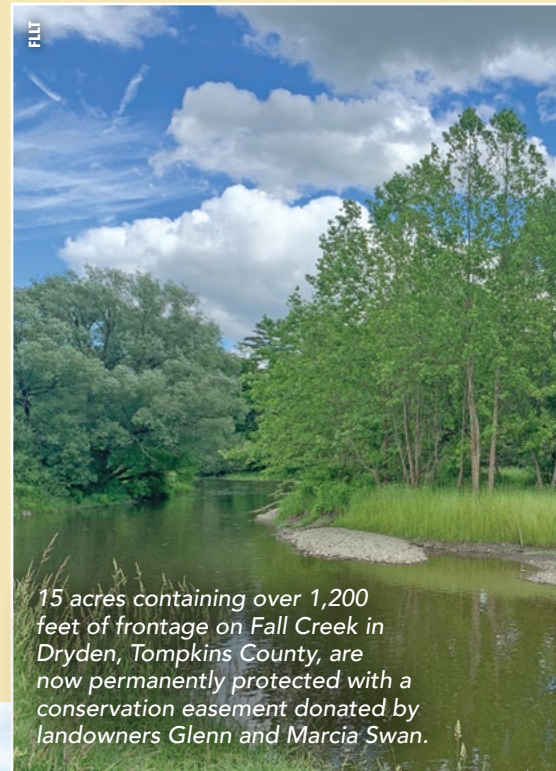
The Thomas Road Wetlands provide important habitat for amphibians, including the spotted salamander, the less common Jefferson salamander, Eastern newts, spring peepers, and four species of native frogs (wood, green, pickerel, and northern leopard). In addition, these wetlands benefit the overall water quality of Ithaca's drinking water supply by filtering sediment, recharging groundwater, and acting as a retention basin during major storm events.

In Dryden, the Land Trust protected 15 acres with a conservation easement donated by landowners Glenn and Marcia Swan. Located off Pinckney Road, the property has over 1,200 feet of frontage on Fall Creek, the source of Cornell University's drinking water supply and the largest tributary to Cayuga Lake. This easement will protect a significant natural vegetated buffer along the creek, benefitting water quality as well as wildlife habitat.

The property is adjacent to the Town of Dryden's Beth and Gordon Campbell Natural Area, a public park that the Land Trust helped protect in 2009. Other conservation lands nearby include a Cornell University Natural Area and the Etna Nature

Preserve. The Swans also own land off Mt. Pleasant Road in Dryden that is protected through a conservation easement held by the Land Trust.

These projects were funded in part by New York State's Water Quality Improvement Project (WQIP) Program. The WQIP program funds projects that directly address documented water quality impairments or protect a drinking water source. Additional funds for the Thomas Road Wetlands project came from the Tompkins County Natural Infrastructure Grant Fund.



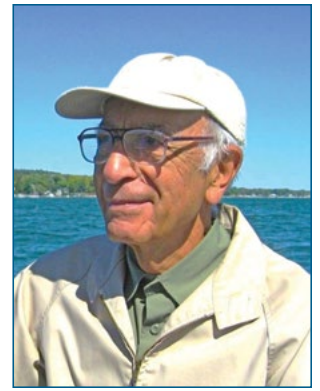
15 acres containing over 1,200 feet of frontage on Fall Creek in Dryden, Tompkins County, are now permanently protected with a conservation easement donated by landowners Glenn and Marcia Swan.





The Thomas Road Wetlands in Caroline, Tompkins County, where the Land Trust recently purchased 18 acres for protection.

Planned Gift Fuels Land Protection Efforts



Doctor Robert Smallman had a passion for the Finger Lakes, particularly Canandaigua Lake where he spent his retirement years. Dr. Smallman grew up in western New York and became a practicing ophthalmologist after first attending Cornell University and the New York Medical College.

He maintained a practice in the Buffalo area and then retired to a home on the western shore of Canandaigua Lake. An avid sailor as well as a pilot, Dr. Smallman was committed to conservation and was concerned about the future of the region's lands and waters.

Through his will, Dr. Smallman provided resources to address his concern. When he passed away last year at the age of 94, his will stipulated that his home would be donated to the Land Trust with the understanding that it would be sold, and the proceeds used to support land protection projects.

"This is a tremendous gift," said Land Trust President Andy Zepp. "We're grateful to Dr. Smallman for providing us with the resources we need to secure those lands that are vital to the future of our region."

The Land Trust accepted Dr. Smallman's gift several months ago and the property is being prepared for sale. To learn more, please call the Land Trust's Ithaca office at (607) 275-9487.

For additional information on the different ways that you can make a planned gift, visit fllt.org/plannedgiving.

A big thank you to Pittsford Farms Dairy & Bakery for supporting conservation in the Finger Lakes!

Land Trust President Andy Zepp recently met with business owner Charles Corby to receive a \$1,280 check—funds raised through the sales of a new ice cream flavor named Lake My Day! For every cone or dish of Lake My Day ice cream sold, Pittsford Farms Dairy donated \$1 to the Land Trust.

Pittsford Farms Dairy will be raising funds again this year for the Land Trust. Visit our web site at fllt.org/events for upcoming details on an Ice Cream Social this summer! Land Trust staff will be at the Pittsford location, located at 44 N. Main St., to enjoy some ice cream and meet with friends and supporters.



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Canandaigua
Lake

A CLOSER LOOK

Living Color in Clean, Cold Water

The natural history and conservation of native brook trout

In the shady highlands above the Finger Lakes, March snowmelt and April rains have charged our headwaters, filling the streams that lace the woods. If you pause on a sunny day and peer into these currents down to the gravel beds, you might spy a swirl of resistance against the flow, then a flare of motion and reflected light, then maybe even glints of brilliant orange, red, and blue. This is a brook trout—sleek and shimmering, vital and spectacular.

From a strict taxonomic standpoint, brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) are not actually trout at all, but rather char, which, like true trout, are in the family Salmonidae. Brook trout, along with lake trout (*S. namaycush*), are the only two native char of the Finger Lakes, and also the only native “trout” species in the colloquial sense.

Enthusiasts love brook trout for their distinctive beauty. Along their sides, they have vivid red or orange spots often surrounded by blue rings. Their bellies are pale in the spring, deepening to an intense red during fall spawning (especially among males), with lower fins like pennants with bold swaths of white, black, and orange. All this bright color stands in contrast against their dark olive-brown backs. Here, a close look reveals a maze of irregular yet tidy lines called vermiculations. It doesn't take too much imagination to discern a likeness between these markings and a map of their waterways, etched into a green landscape.

Brook trout live from the southern Appalachians to eastern Canada, with the Finger Lakes near the heart of this range. They require cold, clean water to thrive, ideally at temperatures holding between 52° and 60°F. The species lives primarily in upland headwater streams with clean, relatively silt-free gravel beds for spawning, as well as submerged boulders, fallen timber, and undercut banks for shelter and concealment. Under suitable water conditions, brook trout also live in secluded ponds and lakes. They wait out the winter in deeper, quiet pools in a state of reduced metabolic activity. Then in spring, they move to sun-warmed waters nearer the surface in search of prey. Brook trout have a broad diet—mostly aquatic insects and their larvae, as well as smaller fish, crustaceans, and even sometimes frogs and small rodents.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) lists brook trout as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need. They face many threats. Brook trout are sensitive to ecosystem changes resulting from deforestation, agriculture, and the reduction of connectivity of aquatic habitats. Introduced non-native fish, especially brown trout and rainbow trout, can outcompete brook trout for food and space, thus forcing them to move into poorer or more confined habitats.

Meanwhile, climate change can prompt a perilous rise in water temperature, leading to declining dissolved

oxygen and, in turn, to metabolic stress, reduced feeding and growth, organ damage, and even death. Furthermore, insofar as climate change can trigger episodes of heavier rainfall and runoff, it can accelerate “browning” of streams (dissolution of organic matter), which traps more heat and dissipates still more dissolved oxygen, while also reducing visibility.

By the early

2000s, a study led by the U.S. Forest Service indicated that brook trout had been extirpated from 28 percent of native subwatersheds in the eastern United States, with populations reduced by half in an additional 35 percent. Thanks at least in part to conservation and restoration efforts, brook trout populations have apparently stabilized in New York in the past two decades, according to the DEC. Throughout this time, the Finger Lakes Land Trust has been doing its part—notably, in Owego Creek, upper Fall Creek in the Cayuga Lake watershed, and tributaries of the Cohocton River—by securing and connecting headwater corridors through conservation easements, cooperative acquisitions with the state of New York, and direct land acquisitions.

As a flick and a flash, as an image of connected and broken lines, and as an indicator of ecosystem health, brook trout are a living reflection of clean, cold, life-giving water. A glimpse of these fish is surely a consummate thrill. It's also a reminder of their unguaranteed prospects. Protecting brook trout habitat is a mandate simple to state but hard to execute, requiring commitment and coordination amid a patchwork of human priorities and practices, from local to global scales.

—Mark Chao



BILL BANASZEWSKI

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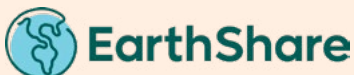
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Understanding Oak Wilt: A Free Workshop for Landowners and the Community

Thursday, June 4, 2026 • 6:30 PM
SOUTH BRISTOL TOWN HALL
6500 West Gannet Hill Road • Naples, NY 14512

Join the Land Trust for an informational workshop on oak wilt presented by Austin Shay of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Landowners and community members will learn how to identify the signs and symptoms of oak wilt, properly report suspected cases, and take steps to help prevent its spread.

Oak wilt is a serious and fast-moving fungal disease threatening oak trees across the Finger Lakes region. This workshop is part of the Land Trust's Hemlock to High Tor Initiative and is free and open to the public.

MORE INFORMATION on this workshop and additional upcoming events, including our Talks & Treks series, is available at fltl.org/events.