



The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

working to protect the natural integrity of the Finger Lakes Region

Vol. 22, No. 3 • Autumn 2010

First Link in Emerald Necklace Nearly Complete

IN 2006, the Land Trust launched the Emerald Necklace Greenbelt Project—a multi-year effort to link 50,000 acres of public land in Tompkins and Schuyler counties that will ultimately create a contiguous crescent of protected lands around Ithaca. When completed, the Necklace will extend from the Finger Lakes National Forest in the west to the Hammond Hill and Robinson Hollow State Forests in the east.

The Land Trust, which has already preserved more than 2,000 acres of greenbelt in the hills surrounding Ithaca, developed a conservation plan for the Emerald Necklace that identifies specific tracts of land designated as protection priorities. In the spring of 2010, the Land Trust negotiated a contract to purchase the first link in the Necklace—a 170-acre parcel on Irish Settlement Road, east of Ithaca in the town of Dryden.

“We moved quickly to negotiate a contract to purchase this land from Rex Berttsson and Mary Kay Millier,” said Land Trust Executive Director Andrew Zepp. “The property has long been identified as a priority for conservation due to its significance for watershed protection, as well as the fact that it serves as the link between 8,000 acres of protected open space.”



The Berttsson/Millier property includes more than 6,000 feet of frontage on Six Mile Creek, the source of Ithaca's drinking water supply.

The Berttsson/Millier tract, which is split down the middle by Irish Settlement Road, sits at the junction of several parcels of protected land. The property connects the Hammond Hill and Yellow Barn State Forests, as well as the Cornell

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Hemlock and Canadice Lakes Protected by Landmark Conservation Deal

On July 1st, New York State and the City of Rochester announced the completion of a landmark conservation deal involving the state's purchase of 6,684 acres of Rochester watershed lands for \$13.7 million.

The acquisition includes the entire shorelines of both Hemlock and Canadice—the only two undeveloped Finger Lakes.

The two lakes have served as Rochester's water supply since 1876. They are well known for their trout fishery, and surrounding natural lands provide valuable wildlife habitat. During the 1970's Hemlock Lake hosted the only pair of

nesting Bald Eagles in the state; two pairs are currently nesting there.

Over the years, Rochester has allowed access to the public for low-impact activities including bird watching, hiking and fishing. These lands will now be managed by the state as Hemlock-Canadice State Forest, and these uses will be allowed to continue. Conservation of Rochester's

Looking at Canadice Lake with its steep forested hillsides, one might think the calendars were turned back a century.

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A major victory for conservation occurred this summer, when New York State and the City of Rochester announced the completion of the sale of the city's watershed lands. The state will now own and manage the vast tract of undeveloped land as Hemlock-Canadice State Forest. The future of these two Finger Lakes and their 23 miles of undeveloped shoreline are now secure. Many environmental advocates and civil servants toiled over a period of more than 30 years to make this possible.

This landmark project was also made possible by New York's little-known Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). Established in 1993, the EPF is a multi-purpose account dedicated to support a variety of state-wide conservation programs, including recycling, open land acquisition, and a number of water quality initiatives.

This "dedicated" fund was designed to be immune from the ups and downs of the economy. More important, it was designed to withstand the temptation to play around with funding priorities in Albany. Alas, these protections have been no match for our state's elected officials.

During the past year, the legislature "swept" available funds in the EPF and re-allocated these dollars to the state's general fund to cover budget shortfalls, resulting in a cash crunch for environmental

programs. The impact on these programs has been far more severe than on those in other sectors of state government.

Today, conservation projects across the region are stalled because EPF funds were shifted away from their intended uses. Farmers await payment on the agreed upon sale of development rights, while key additions to public lands within the Emerald Necklace Greenbelt and the Canandaigua Highlands remain in limbo.

Granted, the state is indeed in a fiscal crisis. But the entire EPF represents less than one quarter of a percent of the total state budget. This year's budget, while boosting overall spending by 6.7 percent, slashes the EPF by 37 percent.

Disproportionate cutting of environmental programs threatens the "green infrastructure" upon which the state's future is based. As a state, we currently rank 49th in the nation in terms of the percentage of our budget spent on parks and natural resources. If we don't take action to change this ranking, we risk losing the qualities that make New York a desirable place to live.

—Andy Zepp

Restoration Efforts Continue at Owasco Flats

Thanks to the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 500 feet of stream habitat within the Owasco Inlet will soon be restored.

The work began this summer on property acquired by the Land Trust at the Owasco Flats in 2008. Earthmoving equipment is being used to stabilize eroding stream banks and return them to a more natural condition. At the same time, fish habitat will be created within the stream channel through the strategic placement of boulders and downed trees.

On the same property, the Fish and Wildlife Service last year created a small wetland out of former agricultural land and planted several acres of native grassland. The results of these efforts were evident during a recent visit to the site: bare corn fields bordering the Owasco Inlet have given way to lush head-high grasslands that have stabilized eroding soils. A Red Fox prowled through the grasses while a Great Blue Heron took wing from the wetland.

Located at the south end of Owasco Lake, the Flats have long been recognized for their value to fish and wildlife, as well as the role the area plays in filtering runoff into the lake. Thanks to the Land Trust's ongoing partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service, we can look forward to more projects like this one in the future.



Carl Schwartz (left) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service talks to the Land Trust's Preserve Management Committee about wetland restoration efforts in the Owasco Flats.

EDITORS' NOTE – With this issue, we bring you the first full-color edition of *The Land Steward* since its inauguration back in October of 1989, five months after the organization's founding. As a periodical dedicated to reporting on the work of protecting the natural landscape, it seems only obvious to us, that the closer we can bring our readers to actually seeing those landscapes, the more compelling our newsletter will be.

Perhaps it is timely that we begin this venture on the 21st anniversary of *The Land Steward* and commence bringing you the news of our efforts to protect the region in all its natural splendor.

Canandaigua Lake Watershed Study Released

The Land Trust recently released *A Vision for the Canandaigua Lake Watershed*, the culmination of a year-long evaluation of Canandaigua Lake watershed resources and their importance to the quality of life for local residents. Authored by Land Trust Senior Field Representative Besty Landre, the report presents a vision for how communities within the watershed can work together to guide growth while protecting precious resources against a broad range of environmental threats.

Canandaigua Lake is indeed a jewel. The lake provides drinking water to more than 60,000 residents and offers exceptional recreational opportunities to residents and visitors alike. Dotted with vibrant community centers, the 174 square-mile watershed also contains a great many farms producing dairy, vegetables, grapes and other vital products. Extensive woodlands yield timber products and, at the same time, provide important habitat for wildlife as well as diverse recreational opportunities.

The watershed has been the focus of water quality planning among grassroots organizations for more than twenty years. Local communities have made great strides in land protection. Still, an increasingly suburbanized landscape, unprecedented proposals for development of scenic hillsides, and the prospect of widespread natural gas development, all call for concerted action to ensure the future of Canandaigua Lake and its watershed.

Natural resource planning

The report recommends strengthening natural resource planning at the municipal level, encouraging cities, towns and hamlets to guide their growth, with special protections for water courses, steep slopes and scenic resources. The primary aim is to integrate land conservation tools with watershed protection goals set forth in the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Management Plan.

Conservation financing

Developing more robust local sources of conservation funding will better help communities acquire parkland and purchase development rights on sensitive watershed lands and high-quality farmland. The vanguard of local financing for conservation projects is the state's Community Preservation Act. This legislative tool enables—but does not require—municipalities to establish community preservation funds by levying a transfer tax of up to two percent on real estate sales above the median home price for the area. The funds could be used for a wide range of local preservation and conservation purposes as determined by each community involved.

Canandaigua Highlands Heritage Area

The study recommends creating a "Canandaigua Highlands Heritage Area" to promote the protection, interpretation and appropriate use of the southeastern portion of the Canandaigua Lake watershed. Including Bare Hill, South Hill, High Tor and the West River Valley, this 45 square-mile area is the legendary birthplace of the Seneca Indian Nation and now features extensive forests and wetlands as well as farmland and historic villages. Elements of this recommendation include developing an interpretive center and associated plan to enhance recreational and educational use; creating a Highlands Heritage Trail extending from Bare Hill to Naples; developing a community plan for Vine Valley that allows for change, while maintaining its unique charm and character; and supporting economic development in the area compatible with watershed goals.

Scenic preservation

Conserving scenic resources within the watershed can be a boon to local economic health. The study recommends establishing a scenic byway along the major roads around Canandaigua Lake, using conservation easements to buffer roadside overlooks and scenic vistas to maintain rural character along the byway. In addition, the creation of a Canandaigua Lake Water Trail could offer a system of rest stops, parks and picnic areas linked with existing boat launch sites and commercial establishments. This paddling trail would accommodate small boats and enhance the menu of recreational opportunities on the lake, while providing water quality benefits through the maintenance of natural shoreline.

The key to realizing this bold vision is a vigorous sense of partnership. The Land Trust urges all residents, communities and other stakeholders within the Canandaigua Lake watershed to join us in making this vision reality.

A Vision for the Canandaigua Lake Watershed was made possible through the generous support of two anonymous donors, as well as a grant from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund through the Conservation Partnership Program, a partnership of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Land Trust Alliance.

Please see Calendar Listings on Page 12 for a presentation on the findings of the report at The Bristol Harbour Resort on November 4th at 7:00 pm.

The full report can be read on our web site at www.fllt.org



Land Gift Results in Conservation Easement and State Forest Expansion

Thanks to the generosity of the Fitchen family, Shindagin Hollow State Forest is growing by 21 acres, and a conservation easement will preserve the natural character of an adjoining 80 acres. The Fitchens donated their land to the Land Trust last year with the understanding that it would be resold subject to an easement.

Located in the Town of Caroline, Tompkins County, the property is almost entirely forested. Once farmed, the land is now covered with a mixture of native hardwoods and aging conifer plantations. The most noteworthy feature of the property is a narrow neck of land that extends into Shindagin Hollow, a county-designated natural area.

After receiving the land as a gift, the Land Trust conducted a careful assessment of the site, determining that the portion of the property within Shindagin Hollow would be a desirable addition to the state forest. In addition, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to site a single home on the remaining acres.

The Land Trust recently sold these 80 acres to Robin Radcliffe and Julia Felipe. Both are veterinarians at Cornell University and have long enjoyed hiking in and around Shindagin Hollow. The conservation easement for their property allows for selective timber harvesting and includes special protections for a sizable vernal pond located on the land. The Land Trust intends to donate the remaining 21 acres to New York State and anticipates that this should be completed sometime this fall.

The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges Attorney Kim Rothman and the law firm of Miller Mayer, LLP for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.



Dale Hallings (far right) and family members, celebrating his award at the Land Trust's 21st Annual Meeting and Celebration

2010 Conservationist of the Year: Dale Hallings

In deep appreciation of the leadership he has shown in advancing farmland protection in the Finger Lakes, the Land Trust recognizes Dale Hallings of Milo, Yates County, as the 2010 Conservationist of the Year.

Dale led the way in 2009, persevering through a lengthy process to protect his family's 219-acre Hallpine Farms, located just south of Penn Yan. With the help of the Land Trust and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County, he established a conservation easement ensuring the future of his three-generation farm. Since then, he has taken time to share his experience through workshops held in neighboring counties, proving a valuable partner in the Land Trust's efforts to reach out to farmland owners throughout the region.

The experience has taught him that, deep down, when people face increasing pressure from developers, what they do with their land is their own personal choice. Protecting farmland isn't easy, Dale implies, noting that his advocacy for farmland protection isn't always popular. But in his case, the basic decision was easy: He wanted to ensure that the land his father and grandfather farmed before him stay permanently in agricultural production and never be lost to development.

"I think it's awful to take good farmland and build houses on it," Dale says, while acknowledging the right of neighbors to see their property in a completely different light. He is admittedly shy and reluctant to speak to groups—much less preach to them—yet he does so out of a sense of duty: "I get the heebie-jeebies and get nervous and tongue-tied every time I start talking, but I do it because I feel so strongly about it being a good thing."

What gives Dale the authority to talk to fellow farm owners about land conservation is his experience exploring the issue in depth. His investigations began with a personal desire to secure the precious resource of his family's farmland, and he followed up his initial research by consulting with Cornell Cooperative Extension's Peter Landre. Eventually, he sat down with Land Trust Executive Director Andy Zepp and former Director of Land Protection Rocci Aguire to hammer out the details of the easement that would fulfill his dreams.

"People around me don't have so much of an idea of the process as I do now," he says. "When I talk to these people I just tell my story, why I did what I did, and how the process went."

The process went surprisingly smoothly: "Everything that Andy and Rocci said to me has come to pass," he laughs.

—Eben McLane

2010 Volunteer of the Year: Roger Hopkins

It's difficult to imagine a more diligent, enthusiastic and committed volunteer than Roger Hopkins, and the Land Trust gratefully recognizes his many contributions by naming him the 2010 Volunteer of the Year.

Originally from Rochester, Roger now lives with his wife Ruth in their "Waterfall House" in Ithaca, a house so named because of its proximity to one of Roger's and Ruth's beloved falls on Gulf Creek, a Cayuga Lake tributary. Roger maintains a colorful website devoted entirely to their passionate hobby of "gully-whumping"—gleeful creek-sloshing and waterfall climbing.

Now retired from a 50-year career working with computers, he's busy volunteering his time and energy to the Land Trust, the Cayuga Trails Club and the Finger Lakes Trail Conference. (Among other things, he maintains the websites for the latter two organizations.)

"I like the people, and I like what they are doing to keep this a good place to live," Roger says. "There is a lot of satisfaction from doing a job as a volunteer. I do it because I like the work itself—fooling around with power tools and working in the woods—and doing it with like-minded people."

From the mundane task of uprooting garlic-mustard to the more complicated construction of preserve kiosks, entrance signs and footbridges, he seems to have done it all. Roger recalls helping to design and install the beaver baffle on the pond at Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve as perhaps his most satisfying contribution to Land Trust projects. The baffle has prevented the beavers from flooding an adjacent railroad line. For a full account of this undertaking, which Chris Olney, director of stewardship, calls Roger's *pièce de résistance*, go to the "gullywhumping" website: www.Naturalhighs.net.

In addition to the tireless help he provides in the field, Roger is also an active Land Trust member, a regular face at gatherings and a valuable contributor to the Preserve Management Committee. He is particularly pleased to live in an area where there is such a spirit of cooperation, citing the Emerald Necklace hike in 2007 as an "inspiration" to him, with people from the Land Trust, the Finger Lakes Trail Conference and the Cayuga Trails Club coming together to share their passion for the land.

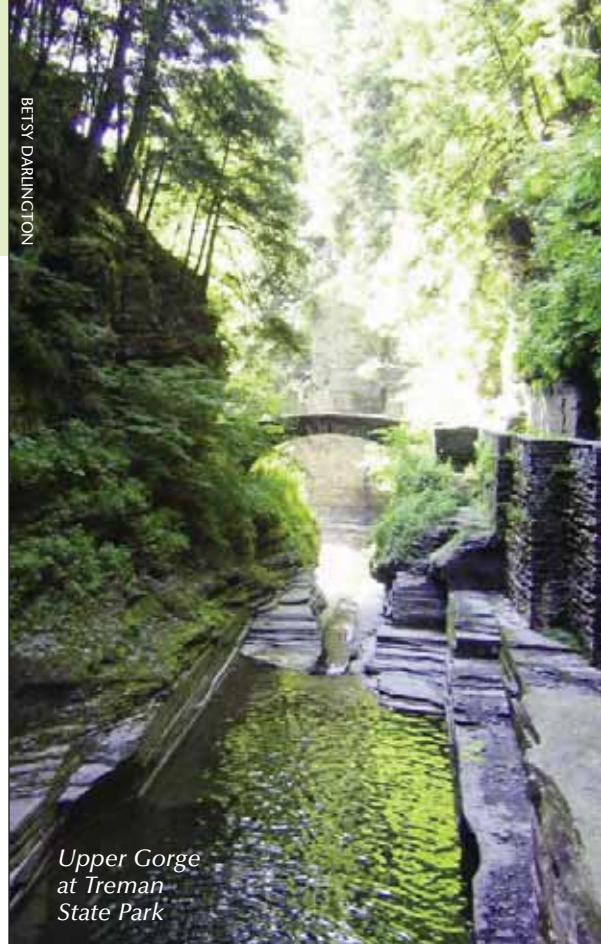
"Most inspirational," Roger says, "has been observing the extent of commitment to conservation and teaching others by people like Betsy Darlington, Tom Reimers and Carl Leopold."

With these folks, Roger is in good company indeed. —Eben McLane

Roger Hopkins (center) accepting the award for Volunteer of the Year from Land Trust Board President Chris Proulx (left) and Executive Director Andy Zepp (right)



BETSY DARLINGTON



Upper Gorge
at Treman
State Park

Land Gift Adds to Treman State Park

Thanks to a generous gift from Mrs. Ruth Moore Inman of Ithaca, Robert Treman State Park recently grew by six acres. Her donation adjoins existing parkland and protects mature woodlands as well as a small wetland area located near the park's upper entrance along Enfield Creek.

New York State Parks' regional conservation planner Sue Poelvoorde said, "We're grateful for this wonderful gift, which helps ensure the integrity of Enfield Creek's watershed while buffering the park from development." The Land Trust referred a representative of Mrs. Inman to the State Parks once it had determined that the tract would be a desirable addition to the park.

Robert Treman State Park is located just south of Ithaca and is well known for its rugged gorge and waterfalls. Located within the Emerald Necklace Greenbelt, the park and its new addition form part of a growing network of protected open space in this area.

SCENES

from Around Our Region...



JIM KESTING

The property pictured above is protected by one of the three conservation easements the Land Trust now holds within the Canadice Lake watershed.



FRANKLIN CRAWFORD

Volunteer Andrew Roe hard at work pulling up non-native invasive plants at the Sweedler Preserve at Lick Brook in Tompkins County



BETSY LANDRE

(left to right) Land Trust members Jim Terwilliger and Meg Ewing with Board Vice President Howard Harnett at a recent Land Trust reception on Canandaigua Lake



BETSY DARINGTON

Back by popular demand, Cornell Mycologist Kathie Hodge leading this year's Fabulous Fungus walk through the Land Trust's Ellis Hollow Nature Preserve in Ithaca

"I hope my home in heaven resembles this!"

—from the visitors' log, Wesley Hill Nature Preserve, Ontario County



JOHN SUTTON

Ecologist and naturalist Charlie Smith (pointing) during Birds & Butterflies at the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve, part of the 2010 Summer Talks and Treks series



TOM REMERS

(left to right) Land Trust members Ed Hart, Hope and Bob Corneau, kicking back at the Land Trust's 21st Annual Meeting & Celebration held in July at Standing Stone Vineyards on Seneca Lake



First Link in Emerald Necklace Nearly Complete *continued from cover*

Plantations' Old Six Hundred Natural Area. In addition, the property abuts the Land Trust's Roy H. Park Preserve, which features a mix of fields, mature forest, and extensive wetlands bordering Six Mile Creek.

Another attractive attribute of the Berntsson/Millier property is the more than 6,000 feet of frontage on Six Mile Creek, the source of Ithaca's drinking water supply. Numerous springs run down steep slopes and feed into the creek, which is pristine and sparklingly clear—and host to native brook trout—as it wends its way through the property. Furthermore, the property contains 20 acres of wetlands that play a crucial role in filtering nutrients and other runoff while maintaining the steady flow of the creek.

The property's wetlands also serve as host to a stunning variety of wildlife. Birds such as Wood Ducks, Virginia Rails, and Great Blue Herons can be found there. In particular, the wetlands attract a colony of herons nesting in the existing Park Preserve. The property's adjacency to other protected open space provides a wildlife corridor for wide-ranging mammals such as black bears, which have been documented on the land.

Beyond the wetlands, the landscape on the Berntsson/Millier site is dominated by mature forests. The creek runs through a canopy of hemlocks, while northern hardwood stands of beech and maple are prominent features on the remainder of the property.

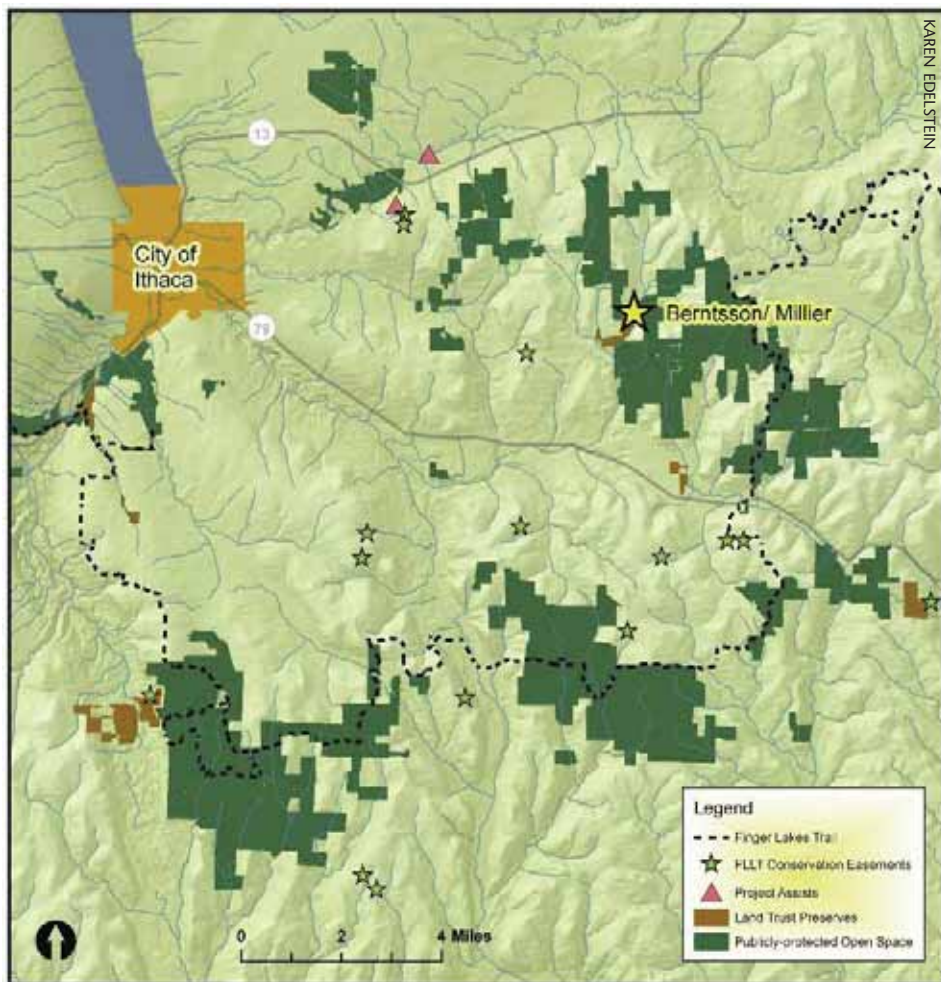
In addition to the conservation benefits, the acquisition of this uniquely situated property will allow the Land Trust to enhance public access to this beautiful natural area. The plans call for a network of hiking and skiing trails that will connect with similar trails in the two state forests, providing greater opportunity for both outdoor recreation and education. The trails will also provide views of the

property's wetlands and the diversity of wildlife found therein.

Once the acquisition is complete, 80 acres of the Berntsson/Millier property on the east side of Irish Settlement Road will be added to the Roy H. Park Preserve. When funds are available in the future, the Land Trust intends to sell the 90 acres on the west side of the road to New York State as an addition to Yellow Barn State Forest.

A fundraising drive with a goal of \$500,000 has already been launched to cover the cost of the Berntsson/Millier property acquisition and associated site improvements such as a parking area, a

kiosk and trail development. A gift from the Park Legacy Fund—established by Dorothy Park to support the Land Trust's conservation efforts within the Cayuga Lake watershed—provided a lead gift for the project, and the Land Trust has secured pledges of financial support from the City of Ithaca, Tompkins County, Cornell University, the auto parts manufacturer Borg Warner Morse TEC and several individuals. To make a contribution to support this acquisition, please contact Jan Hesbon, the Land Trust's Director of Development, at the Ithaca office or by e-mail at janhesbon@fllt.org. *—Jeff Tonole*



The Berntsson/Millier property features 20 acres of wetlands and 6,000 feet of frontage on Six Mile Creek, the source of Ithaca's drinking water.



Hemlock and Canadice Lakes Protected... *continued from cover*

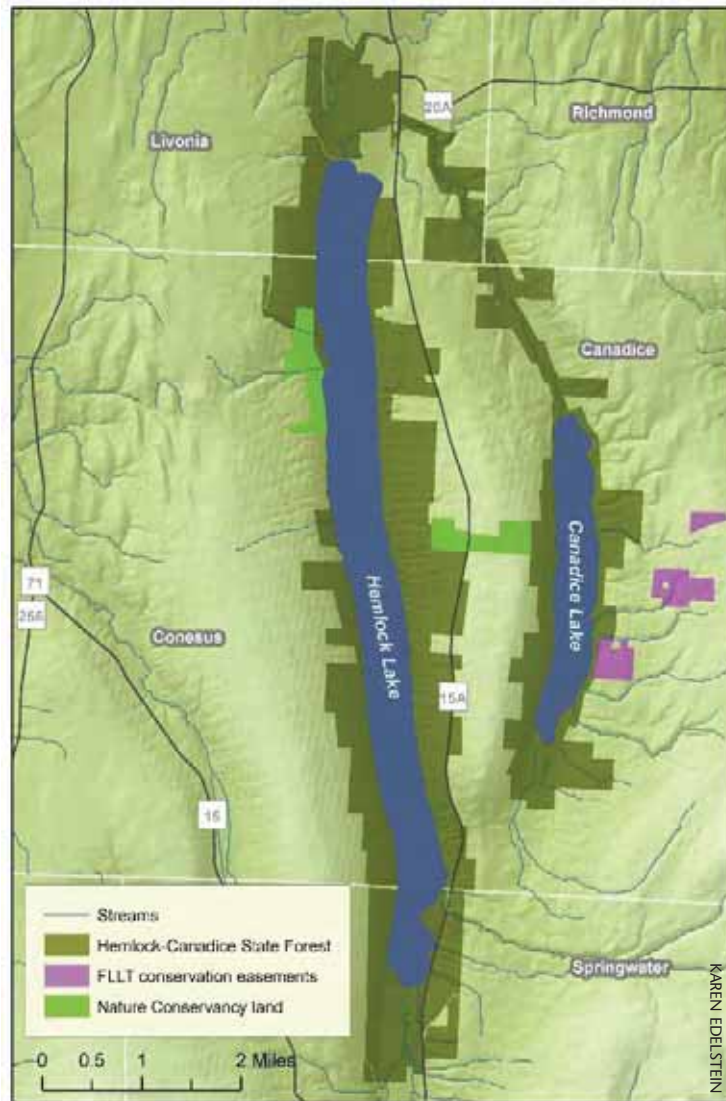
watershed lands has been in the works for many years. Retired NYSDEC biologist Dave Woodruff recalls creating a file for the project in 1972. Former Land Trust board member Steve Lewandowski led efforts to pass legislation providing for state payments to local municipalities in lieu of property taxes. The towns had expressed opposition to the state acquiring lands that would be taken off their tax rolls. Passage of the legislation came in 1989, easing the towns' worries.

Concerns over the possible sale of watershed lands were heightened when the Rochester was required by public health authorities to build a filtration plant. A water filtration plant would mean a decrease in the acreage required as a natural buffer around the water supply. It was feared that some mandated watershed buffer lands owned by the city could now be sold as surplus property and developed. Construction began in 1991, and the plant was operational in August 1993. Conservation pressures kept these buffer lands from being sold.

Discussions and negotiations regarding the future of Hemlock and Canadice continued throughout the 1990's. In recent years, the Central & Western New York Chapter of The Nature Conservancy played a key role in facilitating negotiations between the city and the state that spanned several administrations. During this period, the Conservancy also

acquired several parcels bordering watershed lands.

The Finger Lakes Land Trust has long been an advocate for the project and has also secured three conservation easements within the watershed of Canadice Lake. These efforts will continue as the Land Trust seeks to secure additional upland buffers for the lakes.



The acquisition of these two lakes for conservation is truly a historic event. The Land Trust applauds all of those who have contributed to the effort. Former Land Trust President (and Canadice resident) Jim Kersting has been actively involved with the project for many years.

"If someone were to visit any of the nine developed Finger Lakes, and then happen upon the valleys of these two undeveloped lakes with steep forested hillsides, they might think the calendars were turned back a century," Kersting reflected. "The acquisition allows us to experience the true beauty of these Finger Lakes, before they became valuable shoreline for homes."

With this recent transaction, Rochester is positioned to benefit from a superior water supply for many years to come, and all New Yorkers will benefit from this pristine natural resource, now dedicated to conservation. Kudos to all involved!

—George Dillman

Do YOU HAVE CAPITAL GAINS? DO YOU KNOW...

by making a gift of appreciated securities to the Land Trust you will not pay capital gains tax.

You will receive an immediate income tax deduction for the full fair market of the gift on the date of transfer.

You have the satisfaction of knowing that a gift of your gain will support the work of the Land Trust.

Contact Abbey Chernela at the Land Trust;
607-275-9487; abbey@fllt.org

CONSERVATION BUYER WANTED for 25-acre Rural Retreat located between Hammondsport and Watkins Glen.

Features fields and forest and borders state land. Conservation easement allows for single house on property.

Asking price is \$39,000.

Contact Dean VanSkiver at 607-569-2020.

STAFF DEVELOPMENTS

Introducing David Diaz, Director of Land Protection

We are delighted to welcome staff member David Diaz, who recently joined the Land Trust as its new Director of Land Protection.

David has ably taken over the reigns from Rocci Aguirre, who has returned to school to pursue a master's degree in resource management. Having served as Scenic Hudson's Conservation Easement Manager and later as the Senior Land Protection Manager at the Columbia Land Conservancy, David brings with him an extensive background in land conservation, landowner relations, and conservation easements. He holds a bachelor's of science degree in environmental studies from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

No stranger to the Finger Lakes region, David grew up in Liverpool and spent many summer days on Otisco Lake with his family. He enjoys fishing, birding, hiking and traveling.

"After many years away from the Finger Lakes, I am so happy to be back home in the place I love," comments David. "I look forward to shedding my sea legs and helping to make a real difference for the communities of our region!"

Welcome back David!



Director of Land Protection David Diaz standing at the lower falls of the Sweedler Preserve at Lick Brook

Our sincerest appreciation for gifts in honor of:

Frank and Blythe Baldwin
FROM
Sarah Baldwin

David and Jacqueline Johnson
FROM
David S. and Linda M. Marsh

Jared Jones and Liz Walker
FROM
Nancy Emerson and Roy Luft

Elizabeth McMahon
FROM
David Winkler and Amy McCune

Cay Wagner
FROM
Ruth Windmuller

Our deepest gratitude for thoughtful gifts in memory of:

Helen Lyon Avery
FROM
Mr. and Mrs. John C. Bartlett, Jr.
Stefanie and Richard Foster
Donald and Debra Gries
Frank Holman
Damian Murray
Ocean County Board of Chosen
Freeholders
Barbara Steele

Jonathan Bishop
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David Hamlin
FROM
Bonnie Hamlin
Hugh and Mary Clare Hamlin

Elisabeth Pitman Keiper and
Catharine Lee Sherman
FROM
Thomas Fairchild Sherman

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Steve and Laura Gaglio
Frances and James Hartman
Douglas and Geraldine Kocher
Terry and Ginny O'Connell
Domenica and Vincent Pizzo
Jo Ann Rivero-Beck
Martha Boerschlein Tracy

Edward Spedding
FROM
Beverly Laforse

A CLOSER LOOK

Allegheny Mound Ants: Colonists of a Different Nature

Though the Steege Hill Preserve still bears the scars of human activity—logging roads, stone foundations, and the occasional junked car—it is easy, under those trees, to feel a bit of what the earliest European settlers must have felt when they first ventured into the primal and indifferent forests of upstate New York. The woods are dark and dense, and many of the creatures that make their homes there are appropriately cantankerous: Black Bears, Timber Rattlesnakes and Allegheny Mound Ants (*Formica exsectoides*). The last are by far the most aggressive. Bob Corneau, the steward of Steege Hill, has been on the receiving end of their attentions more than once. “When they bite you, you know it. It’s like stinging nettle.”

Their common name would seem to suggest a special affinity with Pennsylvania, but the species is widespread in eastern North America from Nova Scotia to Georgia. (The ants can be found at the Land Trust’s Plymouth Woods Nature Preserve and a conservation easement in Big Flats, as well as on Steege Hill.) Their

striking coloration—the head and thorax a glossy red-orange, the abdomen black—helps to differentiate these ants from other, all-black, mound builders in the Finger Lakes. Their nest building is also distinctive. *Formica exsectoides* are tireless builders, constructing large thatched mounds that can be up to fifteen feet in diameter and four feet high, and which may be continuously inhabited for decades. The mound rises as the ants excavate the earth below, and the whole structure is honeycombed with tunnels that are as perfectly arched as the naves of tiny Gothic cathedrals.

Allegheny mound ants are aggressive colonists. A newly mated queen may enter the nest of a rival ant species, decapitate the reigning queen, and take over the colony. Established colonies often split into many “daughter” colonies (a phenomenon known as “budding”); under favorable conditions, a hundred or more mounds can coexist in close proximity to each other. Sometimes, these insect civilizations decline and collapse as quickly as they rose. No one really knows why.

These tough little insects are not just assiduous builders; they are also constant gardeners, shaping the vegetation around their mounds into several concentric circles. The ants dump detritus a few feet from the mound, creating a nutrient-rich ring of earth in which grasses flourish. Apart from this lush circle, however, the ants keep the ground clear of plant matter for about fifty feet around the nest by cutting vegetation near the entrance and injecting woody

plants with formic acid in order to kill them. (It’s this same acid that gives them such a nasty sting: when they bite, they add insult to injury by secreting a bit of acid into the wound.) This careful housekeeping is for the sake of the children: in order to keep the eggs and larvae comfortably warm, workers remove anything that might cast a shadow on the mound.

Outside this ring of blighted earth, the ants’ activities are pastoral rather than horticultural. In the outlying vegetation, they pasture their “flocks” of aphids and leafhoppers. They protect these sap-sucking insects from predators

and, in return, gather the sugary secretions (“honeydew”) that they produce; they sometimes also cull the aphid flock. In order to keep their livestock from moving on, the ants release pheromones that keep the aphids immobile and prevent them from developing wings.

The mounds of the Allegheny ant are Lilliputian Meccas, attracting many animals. Some guests are unwelcome: syrphid fly larvae, thief ants and certain beetles prey on the ant brood. Others, such as Histerid beetles, which “beg” and are fed by the ants, seem to be freeloaders. However, scientists know little about most of the animals (various insects, arachnids and springtails) that are regularly found inside the nests.

Black Bears, attracted by the ants’ tasty eggs and larvae, are surely the most conspicuous and ungracious visitors to the mounds. Bob has never caught a bear at work, but, he reports, “Eighty-five percent of the ant hills on Steege Hill will look like small volcanoes by mid-September. There will be a million ants doing repairs. Not a good place to stand for very long.”

—Jacqueline Stuhmiller



As their common name would imply, *Formica exsectoides* build large thatched mounds that can be up to fifteen feet in diameter and four feet high. The mound pictured above at the Steege Hill Nature Preserve shows evidence of a recent Black Bear visit.

Finger Lakes Land Trust

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Autumn 2010 Calendar

Thursday, November 4, 7:00 PM, *A Vision for the Canandaigua Lake Watershed, Bristol Harbour Resort (main dining room), 5410 Seneca Point Road in Canandaigua.* Learn about the findings of a year-long watershed study and hear ideas for working to preserve the beauty, character, and vital resources of Canandaigua Lake. Speakers will include Land Trust Executive Director Andy Zepp and Senior Field Representative Betsy Landre. Light refreshments will be served. All are welcome. *RSVP's appreciated (in the affirmative only) by November 2nd to 585-880-9934.*

SCHEDULE OF LATE FALL TRAIL WORK

Saturday, November 6, 9:30 AM, Work Day at Great Hill Preserve, South Hill Rd., Town of Italy and Middlesex, Yates County – This will be the first of probably a few volunteer work days to help stabilize and improve a hill-side footpath at the Great Hill Preserve. Participants can expect this to be somewhat strenuous work. Meet at 9:30am at the preserve entrance on South Hill Road, and will work until approximately 3:00pm. ***Please contact Chris Olney to sign up prior to this work day:*** chrisolney@fllt.org or (607)275-9487 (M-F, 9-5 or leave message).

See our web site for maps and photos of the preserves.

WALKS GO RAIN, SUN OR SNOW. PLEASE BRING SNACKS AND WATER, AND WEAR STURDY SHOES. CALL THE LAND TRUST AT (607) 275-9487 FOR DETAILS.