

accessed at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/boone/documents/resources/vernal.pdf>. This great resource explains the step by step process of various construction methods used to create vernal pools, as well as rough cost estimates based on 2002 material and labor prices. With guidance from either the USC or Biebighauser's manual, installing vernal pools on your property will not only provide much needed habitat for the organisms that depend on them for reproduction and reduce runoff to our streams and creeks; it will also enhance your overall enjoyment of your land as you get the increased opportunity to observe the richness of life found in ephemeral wetlands. Just ask Tom, Betsy, or Dick!

The Upper Susquehanna Coalition is a coalition of representatives from 19 County Soil and Water Conservation Districts in New York and Pennsylvania. The three focal areas of the USC are stream corridor rehabilitation, wetland restoration, and environmentally and economically sustainable agriculture. The wetland program started in 2002 and has conducted wetland restoration workshops and created over 530 acres of wetlands.

For more information, contact USC Wetlands Coordinator Melissa Yearick at [melissa@u-s-c.org](mailto:melissa@u-s-c.org) or (607) 734-1915.

*The Finger Lakes Land Trust is a membership-supported, not for profit land conservation organization dedicated to protecting the lands that define the character of the Finger Lakes region. Since its founding in 1989, the Land Trust has protected over 11,000 acres of the area's forests, farms, lakeshore, and gorges. This is accomplished through acquisition of public conservation areas owned and managed by the Land Trust and the use of conservation easement agreements on private lands. The Land Trust also educates for responsible stewardship of land and provides technical assistance to local governments and landowners as needed.*

*For more information about the Finger Lakes Land Trust and its conservation programs visit [www.fllt.org](http://www.fllt.org) or call our Ithaca office at 607-275-9487.*



# Afoot in the Field:

## A Resource for Conservation Landowners in the Finger Lakes Region

Winter 2009-2010

Vol.1 Issue 1



Hello conservation landowners! The Finger Lakes Land Trust (FLLT) is pleased to send you this first issue of *Afoot in the Field*, a newsletter and resource for landowners in the Finger Lakes region who own properties that are permanently protected with a conservation easement, or who are otherwise committed to, or interested in, land conservation and wildlife habitat protection and improvement.

The FLLT is now a conservation partner with more than 75 landowners who own more than 5,500 acres with conservation easements or deed restrictions held by the Land Trust.

Each of these properties has ecological, scenic, and natural resource values that are now protected in perpetuity. These numbers will continue to grow significantly in coming years, with several additional landowners now working with the Land Trust on prospective easements, and many others contemplating such a lasting commitment to land protection. The conservation easement documents recorded in the county records provide permanent legal protection for these important properties, but it is the ongoing interest in conservation and dedication of the landowners that results in enhanced benefits for wildlife and native plant communities.

The purpose of this newsletter is to help connect conservation landowners with FLLT, with each other, and with the numerous agencies, organizations, and resources throughout the region that may be helpful in assisting landowners who want to learn more about their lands and engage in hands-on natural resource management activities. This newsletter will offer land management stories from fellow conservationists; information about programs available to landowners; habitat improvement tips; updates on invasive plants, insects, and other threats to native communities; and more. In many cases we will simply be passing along information, helping to make landowners in our region aware of some of the abundant knowledge and resources that are out there.

In this inaugural issue, Will Holets, an intern with FLLT from Ithaca College, introduces us to easement landowners who have had great success creating vernal pools on their properties, establishing new habitat for amphibians.

We are also pleased to be able to provide you with a complimentary issue of Northern Woodlands magazine, which is a fantastic resource that we are confident you will enjoy. As a subscriber myself, I can tell you that each issue is full of great articles and information (you'll love the nature calendar!). If you choose to subscribe, you can look forward to a special issue specifically for landowners in New York State, due out sometime in 2010. FLLT is grateful to the committed people at the non-profit Northern Woodlands magazine for partnering with us to help provide such a great forest management publication to conservation landowners in the Finger Lakes region.

We hope you find *Afoot in the Field* informative and helpful. Please feel free to offer any feedback or suggestions for future issues. Thanks for your continued dedication to land conservation, and interest in providing valuable habitat for the native flora and fauna of our region.



Chris Olney, Director of Stewardship

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### Did you know the Land Trust has new conservation easement boundary signs?

If you're interested in posting these signs on your conservation easement property, please contact the Land Trust at 607-275-9487.



## More interesting information on vernal pools...

*Obligate Vernal Pool Species* require vernal pools for the survival of the species. These species include Spotted Salamander, Jefferson Salamander, Blue Spotted Salamander, Wood Frog, Fairy Shrimp.



Spotted Salamander



Gray Tree Frog

*Facultative Species* are commonly found around vernal pools. These species include Red Spotted Newt, Northern Redback Salamander, Northern Spring Salamander, Four-toed Salamander, Northern Spring Peeper, Gray Tree Frog, American Toad, Green Frog, Leopard Frog, Pickerel Frog.

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### A Wetland Site with High Restoration Potential should have:

- an interested landowner who appreciates the ecological and watershed benefits of wetlands.
- physical properties of the site including:
  - low slopes
  - "heavy" soils with little sand and gravel content
- access for heavy equipment

Candidate sites should *not* include high quality streams or existing wetlands without obvious degradation.

Financial assistance for vernal pool construction and/or wetland restoration may be available through the Upper Susquehanna Coalition or through federal programs such as the **Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)** or **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)** - Contact County Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) representatives for more information. **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)** - Contact County Farm Service Agency (FSA) representatives for more information.

# Conservation Landowner Profile: Betsy and Dick Darlington

*Betsy and Dick Darlington were the very first people to donate a conservation easement to the Land Trust in January 1990. It is only fitting that the Conservation Landowner Profile in this inaugural issue be about them and their commitment to land conservation.*

**Q: Given that you were the first people to grant a conservation easement to the Finger Lakes Land Trust, and doing it at a time when the use of conservation easements was still a relatively new concept, did you feel that you were "trend-setters"? Did being the first in this region make it difficult for you to come to the decision to extinguish development rights on your land forever?**



A: In 1988, when Andy Zepp first proposed the idea of starting a land trust here, one of our first reactions was that, finally, we might have a way to permanently protect our land in Candor, land we acquired in 1972. Rather than being a difficult decision, it was an answer to our prayers. We did not think of ourselves as trend-setters. However, as the Finger Lakes Land Trust got underway and Betsy became involved with easement negotiations with other landowners, she realized that our own negotiations were very useful in alerting her to the many issues that landowners must think about before signing an easement.

**Q: What were the goals of your conservation easement? What values of your property did you want to protect? Did you see your property as unique, or as typical in the region?**

A: To the casual observer, our land is fairly typical of this region's rural areas, with a mix of fields, young woods, brush, and mature forests. However, it does have some unique features. Some were immediately obvious, like the deep, steep-sided ravine in the northern part of the property and the magnificent views to the south overlooking the Catatonk Creek valley. In addition, it turned out that we had several unusual plants and plant communities on the property, such as tupelo trees, royal fern, spicebush, broad beech fern, poke milkweed, wavy-leaved aster, narrow-leaved mountain mint, and cucumber magnolias. One of Betsy's favorite spots is a beautiful wetland (possibly a fen) hidden deep in the mature forest in the northern part of the property. And, of course, birds, "herps," and other wildlife abound, since the habitat is diverse and there is little human disturbance. A single-lane seasonal road runs through our property. The only structure along its entire length is our little one-room cabin, so it is quite wild up there, and *quiet*. The goal of our easement was to protect the richness, beauty and diversity of the property; to safeguard the water quality of Catatonk Creek; and to protect views of the land from down in the valley, especially Rt. 96.

**Q: Was it difficult to draft your easement so as to strike a balance between your inclination to ensure maximum protection for undisturbed wildlife habitat with some flexibility for the possibility of more active hands-on management, or even full-time residential use, in the future?**

A: The hardest part of drafting many easements is striking a balance between "forever wild" and some human uses. We felt that it was reasonable to permit agricultural uses of the fields, and we decided that some timber harvesting should be permitted, but with restrictions spelled out in the easement. We also decided that one year-round home should be permitted, along with the existing cabin. (Our children, however, thought one cabin was plenty.) We now think that a permanent home up there would not be a good idea, and we probably would leave that out if we were drafting the easement today.

Our easement also permits construction of ponds and wetlands. In addition to the three ponds we put in during the 1970's and '80's, the Upper Susquehanna Coalition constructed a large wetland and 32 vernal pools. These immediately started attracting all sorts of wildlife, and are tremendous enhancements to the property, in addition to benefitting larger regional water quality.

**Q: How important to you is this property and this conservation easement?**

A: A piece of land grows on you, as you get to know it. And for us, the property has become a part of our very beings. It's hard to express what it means to us: deep respect and love, at the very least. Protecting it forever has become increasingly important to us. Thank goodness for conservation easements and the Land Trust!

of Danby over the course of a week in June 2009. The work was conducted by the Upper Susquehanna Coalition (USC), who covered all construction costs. Likewise, the USC paid for and installed 32 vernal pools and one large wetland on Betsy and Dick's 225-acre property in the Town of Candor. Tom reports that just two weeks after his pools were installed, they already hosted a plethora of life. Betsy had a similar experience: just a few weeks after the pools on her land were created she noticed many different species of frogs there. Betsy also notes that because four of her pools are in the woods, whereas the other 28 are in fields, she sees different forms of wildlife depending on the pool's location.



*A natural vernal pool in forested habitat at the Land Trust's Stevenson Forest Preserve.*

Resources are available to landowners interested in creating vernal pools on their property. As mentioned above, Tom Reimers and the Darlington's utilized a program available from the Upper Susquehanna Coalition ([www.u-s-c.org](http://www.u-s-c.org)). The USC generously helped by aiding in site selection and providing the necessary monetary resources for construction of the new vernal pools. The Coalition is happy to provide committed landowners with such aid, but because the USC relies on state and federal grants for funding, and their targeted projects change from year to year, landowners may have to wait a long time before their project's groundbreaking. Also, the USC currently only works on projects that are within the Upper Susquehanna Watershed, so, depending on the location of your property, you may not fall into the scope of their efforts. But don't worry - vernal pools are relatively simple and inexpensive to construct on your own, as outlined in the free on-line book by Thomas R. Biebighauser entitled "A Guide to Creating Vernal Ponds." This comprehensive text can be



*USC has made these "Salamander Signs" available to landowners who map their vernal pools.*

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## CE Landowners Create New Vernal Pools

by Will Holets, FLLT intern

Vernal pools, also known as ephemeral wetlands, are small ponds that are separate from streams, creeks, and rivers and provide a unique habitat. The defining characteristic of vernal pools is that they periodically dry up and do not contain fish. The absence of fish makes these ponds a perfect breeding and rearing environment for many species of amphibians, crustaceans, and insects. In fact, one-half of all species of frogs and one-third of all species of salamanders rely solely on ephemeral wetlands for reproduction. Consequently, vernal pools are a critical landscape feature for the preservation of biodiversity. Despite the critical habitat they provide, ephemeral wetlands are not as common as they once were, mainly due to the fact that they do not receive the legal protections provided for larger, more permanent wetlands. This means that many of the vernal pools that used to be widespread in the Finger Lakes region have been drained, filled, or made into permanent ponds.



*A constructed vernal pool on the Darlington property*

The disappearance of any kind of wetlands across the region not only threatens the diversity of species that rely on them, but also the health of our watersheds. They help protect water quality by minimizing runoff, thereby lessening erosion and flooding, as well as reducing the amount of sediment in streams and rivers. Because of the recognized importance of vernal pools, there is now a growing movement for the protection of existing vernal pools, as well as the creation of new ones. To this end, a growing number of landowners concerned with the ecological integrity of the Finger Lakes are installing these pools on their properties.

Tom Reimers and Betsy and Dick Darlington are Finger Lakes Land Trust conservation easement landowners who have installed ephemeral wetlands on their properties. Tom and the Darlington's pursued the development of new vernal pools in order to improve the variety of wildlife habitat on their land. Tom installed ten vernal pools on his 52-acre property in the Town

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