

LANDMARK

The newsletter of the Northern Connecticut Land Trust



Number 18

February 2007

NCLT Celebrates 20 Year Anniversary

In the early 1980's, two separate groups decided to formally approach the problem of widespread development and loss of natural resources in the north-central Connecticut area by starting new land trusts. In Vernon, Lisa Moody organized a handful of interested residents after a large parcel of beautiful forest, the Bissel-Belding property in southeastern Vernon, was donated to the State because there was no local organization to look after the protection of land which the family wanted to remain in its natural state. In East Windsor, a small group of landowners organized by George Grant, Arend Knuttel, and Albert Grant, was becoming concerned about the rapid development of farmland in the region, and banded together to protect some of this open space before it became too late. Thus the Vernon Land Trust and the Four Town Land Trust came into being. Both went through the lengthy process of adopting bylaws, incorporating with the State, and applying for their non-profit, tax-exempt status with the IRS. In 1987, both Trusts incorporated and obtained their letters from the IRS declaring their "501(c)3" status approved, allowing them to begin accepting tax deductible gifts of land or other assets. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the progress in protecting open space that began with these grassroots efforts.

Early on, much effort was spent in getting their message out to the public and developing support, both financial as well as volunteer time, putting themselves in a position to acquire property for protection and preservation for future generations to enjoy. Public hikes were held to attract people out to appreciate the open areas in the respective towns. Informational programs of local, natural and historic interest were held. And fundraising to allow all this to happen had to be undertaken. Both struggled for several years with only the efforts of a handful of people to keep making progress.

In 1988, after assimilating funds from a disbanded conservation group in Somers, the Four Town Land Trust acquired its first parcel from a donation by Marianne Bovarnick, ultimately to become the 65-acre Skyline Scenic Overlook, off Stafford Road in Somers. In 1991, Stafford joined the group, and the name was changed to the Five Town Land Trust.

In 1991, the Vernon Land Trust received its first property via a donation of 7 acres from George Risley, becoming the Indian Trail Preserve on the corner of Bolton Road and Indian Trail. The bronze plaque on the large rock at that corner still marks the location of the first dedication ceremony the Trust held. But progress continued to be slow, with support of 30-40 members annually barely allowing bills to be paid and minimal additional programs to be held. The idea of ever being able to purchase property seemed far off indeed.

After a chance discussion between George Grant and Ed Dresner during a joint hike, Presidents Ernie Boothroyd and Ed Slattery contacted each other in 1996 with the idea of merging the organizations to create a larger, more influential Trust. The merger of members, funds, and property was completed in 1997, with a new Board of Directors representing all the 6 member towns. A contest was held throughout the area schools to find a name that would represent the overall area, with the \$200 prize going to a Ellington Middle School science class for the Northern Connecticut Land Trust name.

Since then the Trust has grown to several hundred members and celebrated many successes. The 84-acre McCann Family Farm donation in 1997 has become the premiere hiking area in Somers, as evidenced by the many activities planned this year (see Hike schedule). And once the State of Connecticut began its Open Space matching grant program, significant funds became available to supplement fundraising, resulting in the Trust's first large purchase in 2002, the 56-acre Swann Farm in Ellington. The Trust has been awarded over \$800,000 through several successful grant applications to this program over the last 5 years, allowing its protected property acquisitions to grow to almost 800 acres. And the group continues to run itself as an all-volunteer organization, with all funds raised going directly towards the objective of protecting open space. The latest success, and by far the largest project undertaken, was the 2006 acquisition of the 270-acre Whitaker property in Somers, a \$1.2 million joint purchase with the Town of Somers, made possible by a DEP Open Space program grant, several grants by private foundations, and lots of individual work and private donations.

To celebrate the anniversary, plans are progressing to assemble as many past officers and members of the Trust as possible at a gathering later in the year, with the hopes of energizing even more activities to benefit area residents.

Chestnut Project Set to Plant Seeds this Spring

The Northern Connecticut Land Trust has partnered with the CT Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation to establish a research breeding orchard for blight resistant American chestnut trees.

Until the early 1900s, chestnut trees made up as much as 40% of the forests of the Appalachians. These magnificent trees grew to five feet in diameter and up to 100 feet tall. They were an important source of lumber and provided food for wildlife and people. In the early 1900s, a blight introduced by chestnuts imported from Asia killed nearly all native chestnut trees.

The American Chestnut Foundation has spent the past 20 years developing blight resistant chestnut trees through a program of selective breeding. Pollen from this program was used to pollinate a local tree in Stafford in June 2006. Approximately 200 chestnuts were harvested from this controlled pollination.

These nuts will be planted on the NCLT's Swann Farm on Reeves Road in Ellington in the spring of 2007. A one and a half acre area in the northeast corner of the farm has been prepared and a deer protection fence will be installed this spring. The purpose of this orchard is to grow blight resistant trees with the characteristics of local Connecticut chestnuts. Ultimately, the offspring of the trees in this orchard will be introduced into our New England forests to help restore these important trees.

Similar programs are being conducted by The American Chestnut Foundation at four other Connecticut locations and in twelve other states. The NCLT is proud to be part of this nationally recognized program.

The NCLT has received contributions from the American Chestnut Foundation and the Norcross Wildlife Foundation to help with this project, but needs more help from our friends. A deer proof fence must be installed to protect the tasty new chestnut sprouts and we need to raise an additional \$2,000 to offset the cost of this fence. Your help with this important project, in any amount, will be greatly appreciated.

Scantic Riparian Area Receives Utility Attention

NCLT's Scantic Riparian Area (SRA) has been the site of major activity over the past 12 months. According to the Northeast Utilities' on site subcontractor the splices on the high tension power lines that run the length of the property were in danger of failing from overheating and had to be replaced.

Activity started last March with the installation of a gate at Durkee Road closing off the service road that heads south more than a half mile under the lines. (Yes, we've got the combination.) Next, ground crews used a giant brush hog on

the arm of an excavator to clear sufficient overgrown brush to create a fourteen foot wide roadway where there had been only a narrow path. They also created parking spaces adjacent to the Durkee tower by adding fill in the wetland. Finally, in late March line crews arrived with oversized boom trucks ("cherry pickers") and manually replaced all the splices at the Durkee Road tower.

After a peaceful spring and summer, activity resumed with a vengeance last fall when they came back to replace the splices at the southern tower as well as some in the sag line south of it. This was a much bigger job.

First, they graveled more than a half mile of the service road so it could support the weight of heavy equipment. Second, they created extensive platforms of heavy pallets that easily covered (floated on) 10,000 square feet of wetland around the southern tower and under the splices in the sag line. Next, they brought in even larger boom trucks and replaced the splices.

This time they used a relatively new and very noisy technology called *implosive* splicing. Anyone living within several miles of the lines probably heard some of these explosions. The thunder-like sounds can supposedly be heard 10 miles away.

In implosive splicing, the cable ends are forced into an aluminum sleeve which is surrounded by coils of high explosive cord. The detonation is timed precisely in such a way that the explosive force is directed inward to compress and fuse the cable sleeve tightly around the cable. Finally, they removed the pallets and equipment and let peace return.

It is too soon to tell how this disruption will affect the wildlife in the SRA. It is clear that bird activity along the service road was reduced during the spring and summer. In the long run it will surely recover as the shrubbery and wetland plants grow back. My greatest concern is that the disturbances will make it easier for invasive plants such as Purple Loosestrife and Phragmites to spread further. Careful monitoring is planned.

Somers Farm Latest Land Trust Addition

The Northern Connecticut Land Trust recently announced the acquisition of a 38 acre farm off Battle Street in Somers. The land was a gift to the Trust from Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Schlaf. The farm, which will remain in agricultural production and provide income to support Trust activities, had been in the Schlaf family for many years.

"Mr. and Mrs. Schlaf wish to preserve and protect their heritage," said Trust President Culver Modisette, "and the land trust will honor their wishes. We are most grateful for their concern and generosity." Property holdings have now grown to almost 800 acres throughout East Windsor, Enfield, Ellington, Somers, Stafford, and Vernon.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN USING A PLOT IN A POTENTIAL COMMUNITY GARDEN ON THIS



Hiking/Walking/Paddling thru 2007 with the NCLT

Daytime Hiking or Paddling



Sunday, March 18th

Valley Falls Park in Vernon

Walk the scenic Railroad Brook trail, with optional short climb to the Rails-to-Trails. Learn about natural resources, trail construction and history from leader George Arthur. Walk length will be about 2 miles. Meet at Valley Falls parking lot on Valley Falls Rd. (between Tunnel Rd and Bolton Rd) at 2 P.M. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs.

Sunday, March 25th

Andrew Kenneth Webster Preserve in Vernon

Explore the boundaries of this scenic open space property owned by the NCLT. It abuts the Rails-to-Trails and Valley Falls Park. Some bushwhacking and climbing with total distance of about 3 miles. See vista of Railroad Valley, several large vernal pools, trail constructions and more. Meet at Valley Falls parking lot on Valley Falls Rd. (between Tunnel Rd and Bolton Rd) at 2 P.M. Rain or shine, no dogs.

Sunday, April 22nd

Somers EARTH DAY: McCann work party & Whitaker hike

Join hike leader Ginny Patsun and work party leader Jerry Stage for exploration of Whitaker Woods and for invasive plant removal on McCann's. Meet at the Somers Town Hall parking lot at 9:00AM. Bring work gloves. Tools will be provided.

Vernon EARTH DAY Hike

Join with Vernon Conservation Commission and Parks & Rec. Meander along Hockanum River Trail for 2 miles, enjoy scenery, learn about natural resources, trail construction and history. Meet at Dart Hill South Park at 1 P.M. Turn west from Rt. 83 traffic light at Dart Hill Rd. for 1/2 mile, park is on left. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. L George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Saturday, May 5th

Birding from Boats on Mill Pond in Somers

Enjoy looking for spring birds while paddling on Mill Pond and accessible stretches of the Scantic River with leader Judith Snyder. Boats not provided. This event is cosponsored by the Scantic River Watershed Association. Meet at Mill Pond parking lot at 8:30 AM.

Sunday, May 6th

Paddling Excursion / Bird Watching on Upper Bolton Lake

Meet leader Karl Hasel at 9:00 AM for this exploration of Upper Bolton Lake. He can be reached at (860) 649-4949 for more information. Meet at the boat launch for Middle Bolton Lake off Hatch Hill Road in Vernon with your canoe or kayak and enjoy a leisurely paddle through some pristine backwater areas.

Belding Wildlife Management Area Hike

Enjoy a 2 ½ mile walk on the Shenipsit Trail and Belding Path. Learn about natural resources, trail construction, history, and enjoy the scenic Tankerhoosen River. Meet at Valley Falls parking lot on Valley Falls Rd. (between Tunnel Rd and Bolton Rd) at 3 P.M. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Wednesday, May 16th

Vernon Center Middle School (VCMS) Hike

Walk the Hillside Loop trail, some climbing, and the scenic Ecker Pond Loop trail for a total of 1 ½ miles. Learn about natural resources, trail construction and history. Meet at the northeast end of the VCMS parking lot on Rt. 30 at 6 P.M. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Sunday, May 27th

Valley Falls Hike in Vernon

Walk the scenic Railroad Brook trail, with optional short climb to the Rails-to-Trails. Learn about natural resources, trail construction and history. Meet at Valley Falls parking lot on Valley Falls Rd. (between Tunnel Rd and Bolton Rd) at 3 P.M. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Saturday, June 2nd

Somers TRAILS DAY: Hike from Soapstone Mountain to McCann's

Celebrate Earth Day by hiking from the Gulf Road parking lot of Soapstone Mountain down to and across Whitaker Woods and the McCann Family Farm to the parking lot of McCann's. This hike is cosponsored by the Somers Trail Committee. Meet at 9:00 AM at the Somers Town Hall parking lot.

Vernon TRAILS DAY Hike

Join CT Forest & Park Assoc trail managers on a scenic three mile tour of the Hockanum River Linear Park trail, enjoy the scenery, learn about flora and fauna, trail construction and history. Meet at Naek Rd. cul-de-sac at 9 A.M. Turn west from Rt 83 traffic light at Naek Rd. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. L George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Wednesday, June 6th

Risley Pond Trails in Manchester

Walk the scenic Risley Pond trails constructed by CT Forest and Park Assoc on Manchester Conservation Land Trust property. Learn about natural resources, trail construction and history. Meet at 6 P.M. at Risley Pond parking area on Lake St (across from Amy Lane) about 0.6 miles south of Lake St School. Rain or shine. Children welcome, no dogs. George Arthur (860-871-0137, trailsarthur2@comcast.net). Co-leader: Joe King.

Sunday, June 10th

Explore Bald Mountain in Somers

Enjoy exploring parts of Bald Mountain with leader Albie Grant. This bush-whacking excursion will visit parts of the Galbraith and the Bridges parcels, two properties owned by the land trust. Since these two lack marked, maintained trails this a good opportunity to see them. Meet at 9:00 AM at the Somers Town Hall parking lot.

Sunday, October 14th

Fall Foliage on the McCann Family Farm

Tree lover George Grant will take you to some of the most spectacular views of fall foliage on McCann's (and perhaps Whitaker's too). If you are unsure of the species he can help. Meet at 9:00 AM at the Somers Town Hall parking lot.

Sunday, October 28th

Fall Foliage along the Scantic in East Windsor

Join leader Albie Grant to enjoy the fall foliage along his section of the Scantic River. Some mud and bush-whacking is likely so wear appropriate shoes or boots. Meet at 11:00 AM at his residence at 128 Melrose Road.

UNight Hikes

Sunset / Moonlight Hikes in the Skyline Scenic Area

**Saturday, April 28th, 6:45 PM (pizza at 5:00 PM) &
Saturday, November 17th, 3:30 PM (pizza after)**

These popular 3 to 5 mile hikes are held twice a year, once each spring before the leaves are out and again in the fall after the leaves fall. After climbing the short, steep half mile Ledge Trail hikers have a fine vantage point for watching the sun set across the Connecticut Rive Valley. From there the group is led northward in the moonlight on unmarked trails on Minnechaug Mountain in Massachusetts and finally back to their cars by alternate trails. Sturdy hiking shoes and flashlights are recommended. Meet at the Somers's Town Hall parking lot. Leader: Jerry Stage (860) 870-4255.

UNature Walks

Join naturalist Jerry Stage on these informative nature walks on some of the land trust's prettiest and most biologically interesting properties. While each walk tends to have a specific theme, such as spring wild flowers, a wide range of subjects tends to be covered as interesting situations are encountered. Most of the walks are cosponsored by the Appalachian Mountain Club. The one on June 16th is cosponsored by Hartford Audubon and will be limited to a small number of non-HAS members. Please call Jerry at (860) 870-4255 to reserve a slot if interested in that one.

All but one will be on the Scantic Riparian Area (forested riverside and open wetlands) and/or the McCann Family Farm (diverse habitats). Which particular parcel(s) will be visited will depend on conditions at the time. Participants are invited to join the leader(s) for pizza afterward. All these walks are on Sunday and start at 9:00 AM. In each case participants are to meet at the Somers Town Hall parking lot.

McCann Family Farm / Scantic Riparian Area

May 27th (spring wildflowers); **June 16th** (birds and flowers); **June 17th** (early summer wildflowers); **July 8th** (ferns & club mosses); **August 5th** (summer wildflowers); **September 23rd** (late summer wildflowers)

UUEast Windsor's Wapping Bog - Sunday, July 22nd

Bogs, relics of the ice ages, are fascinating wetlands that often harbor rare and unusual plants and animals. Wapping Bog has its share. Come see for yourself. Meet at 9:00 AM at the parking lot on Wapping Road where it crosses the abandoned railroad. A golf course is across from the parking lot.

More News from the SRA

By Jerry Stage

Wildlife along the tree-lined Scantic River in the SRA is thriving in spite of recent disturbances in the nearby open wetlands under the power lines.

Even the most inattentive hikers cannot miss the beaver works visible along the first 150 meters of the riverside trail. Many trees have been girdled and many are down. The old lodge (abandoned following vandalism by fishermen two years ago) has been repaired, reoccupied, and enlarged. It's about 100 meters below the trailhead but not quite as far as the bridge with the handrail. Two dams are evident: one on the drainage ditch that flows under that bridge and one across the Scantic itself another 50 meters south of the same bridge.

The beaver are most easily observed near dusk though some occasionally appear during the day. Muskrats, river otters and mink are also present and sometimes also appear during the day. While standing next to the lodge one morning last fall I enjoyed a truly memorable show.

Over the course of about an hour I saw 2 beaver, 3-4 muskrats and 2 mink. The most exciting incidents involved the mink. First I was privileged to watch the larger one chase down and attack a swimming muskrat! Since they both disappeared under a swirl of turbulence and bubbles I don't know the outcome but suspect the muskrat didn't fare too well.

Sometime later a smaller mink came bounding along the river bank on the opposite side from me. Then it abruptly dived into the water and disappeared. To my amazement it popped up a few seconds later on my side less than a meter from my toes! Its body was in the water but its front feet were on the bank and its head was turned up towards me with eyes blinking, nose quivering and whiskers twitching. Eventually it surmised I wasn't suitable company and disappeared back into the river.

It was a real thrill to have this delightful close encounter with such a beautiful wild creature! I am grateful the NCLT is able to preserve such places as this where wildlife can thrive and sometimes we are treated to brief glimpses into their lives.

As I write this in mid February the river is mostly frozen, the ground is snow covered and all is quiet save occasional birds calling, wind rushing through bare trees and the boom of shearing ice. Yet the plethora of tracks is mute evidence that the animals are still active. And so are the hikers!

Judging from the abundance of human tracks the beaver colony is enjoyed by many hikers who visit regularly. Indeed, now is a particularly fine time to visit. It's beautiful, tracks are everywhere, and mosquitoes are not. Besides, once the river starts its regular spring flooding, much of the trail will be under water. The trailhead for the one mile loop route is by the Scantic River Bridge on Durkee Road in Somers.



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If you have a friend interested in joining the Trust and supporting the work of protecting our natural resources, please pass this newsletter on to them. Contributions are tax deductible.

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