



# The MIDDLESEX LANDSCAPE

Serving the towns of Durham, Middlefield, Middletown, Cromwell, Portland and East Hampton

Volume 22, No. 2

The Middlesex Land Trust, Inc.

Spring 2018

## PINE BROOK: *Spring Herring Runs*

By *Stu Winquist*

Earlier last fall, we received two storms worth a total of 10" of rain. The impact in terms of flooding was pretty muted. Our woodland soils soaked up a good part of it, with our rich organic soils releasing the water back into our streams over the next many days, weeks or maybe months. In late fall, in the dark of a new moon with the banks swelling from fall north'easters, adult eels migrate en mass, down from the ponds, lakes, creeks and rivers, down to the Sound, where they hold to acclimate to salt again, before starting their journey to their spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea, 8000 miles away in the middle of the tropical Atlantic. Starting now and through the winter, our wetlands will recharge from the dry summer, as mosses, rotten logs, and leafy humus store up water like a big sponge, so our streams have enough water in them to support the spring migrations in the other direction, of the river herring making their way up our rivers and creeks to spawn.

25 years ago, 800,000 thousand herring were lifted over the Brockway dam in VT on the CT River. For the last 2 years it has been less than 6000. Now every stretch of spawning habitat draining to the Sound or to New England's biggest river, has become critical for recovery of these species. For two years, we have monitored the river herring runs up Pine Brook, a small creek in East Hampton that drains into

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## ANNUAL MEETINGS: *Past and coming*

We had a great celebration of our 2017 Annual meeting, celebrating our 30 years and 1000 acres milestones. A sunny morning greeted friends and supporters at our home base, the Rockfall Foundation's deKoven House in Middletown. The Land Trust presented long time board member, Attorney William Howard, with the *Middlesex Land Trust Cattail Award*, for his more than 30 years of service to the cause, which predated the incorporation of the Trust. In addition to helping to found the Land Trust, Bill has served as pro-bono counsel for all of our preserve closings. We owe a debt of gratitude for his unwavering service. We were fortunate to be joined by Rand Wentworth, who currently is the "Louis Bacon Senior



*From left to right: Stu Winquist, Bill Howard and Ralph Urban*

Fellow in Environmental Leadership" at Harvard, and formerly led the Land Trust Alliance for 14 years as its President. His mission during his career in conservation has been

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The Middlesex Land Trust Inc. is a non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve open space in northern Middlesex County (Durham, Middlefield, Middletown, Cromwell, Portland and East Hampton)

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## **CHAIRMAN'S CORNER**

30 Years. 1000 acres protected! It was quite a milestone that we celebrated at our Annual Meeting in April of last year. An average of 33 acres conserved each year, sometimes more, sometimes less. Those of us who feel nature in our bones are sometimes overwhelmed by the sense of urgency facing us. The urgency to protect what is imminently threatened – by development, pollution and climate change.

That is why it is important to step back and take stock of how far we have come and remember how we have gotten here - by the steady, consistent tread toward the light. Sometimes that lesson shows itself on dark nights in unexpected places.

Traveling through Portland near the Meshomasic State Forest this past fall, I was driving my way through the first solid rain in months. I watched as my headlights illuminated driving rain, blowing leaves swirling down and a multitude of frogs that were jumping around. I slowed. Sometimes I swerved as I made my way home through night, hoping another frog made it to its destination without being crushed beneath my tires.

I noticed that when I was passing wooded lots, I saw frogs in the road ahead. When I passed nicely cut lawns, I did not. All of these frogs had run the summer gauntlet of survival and some would get where they were going and eventually lay eggs for the next generation in a vernal pool. Some would feed another hungry critter, a screech owl, or perhaps, an opossum. And some would meet their fate on the road that night.

We have acquired several preserves in that area of Portland over the course of many years. Even small preserves like the General John Hoar Preserve at the intersection of Cox and South Roads, can hold hidden treasures that reveal themselves in your headlights on a rainy night. Others like our Cedar Meadows or Oak Ledges work in concert with other conserved blocks like the State forest, to provide bigger and better habitat, less impacted by us humans.

Each preserve is important in its own way, and that is why the volunteers and donors of the Land Trust have chosen to continue support of this mission.

The Middlesex Land Trust - thirty years and stronger than ever.

From the Land,



Stuart Winquist – Chairman

## PINE BROOK SPRING HERRING RUNS *Continued from Page 1*

freshwater tide zone of the Salmon River, which in turn flows into the Connecticut River, about 15 miles from Long Island Sound. There are no dams between this point and the Sound, and the herring can make it nearly a mile up this rifling brook.

Talking to locals who are 50 or older, we know this creek once was filled with fish during migration. One man I talked to, when I asked if he could describe how many came in, paused while he thought back to his years as a young boy, and said, “well they were thick enough that if you wacked the top of the water with a stick, you would break a few in two.” “So thick you couldn’t see the bottom of the brook” was another man’s comment.



Today the runs are so much more modest, possibly the result of over-fishing of the population at sea, when the river herring co-mingle with schools of ocean herring. These schools of herring are targeted by trawlers, and while they don’t impact the ocean herring, they could be impacting the river herring populations. If you are lucky enough to catch them at their peak when they do come in, it is still impressive to those of us who don’t have the history of what once was, etched into our own memory. In 2008, with the help of a State of Connecticut DEEP Open Space matching grant and partnering with the Haddam Neck Spirit, we bought the Kruger Farm Preserve. One reason for targeting this property, was to protect the hydrological cycle of Pine Brook – ensuring enough water in this small brook to support fish

habitat even in the dry years. Maintaining clean water was also a major reason for acquiring additional properties upstream around the Pine Brook Falls Preserve (now part of the Salmon River Division of Silvio O. Conte U.S. Fish & Wildlife Refuge).

River Herring are protected from harvest in CT due to their low numbers. Hopefully, we will be able to improve our understanding of these diadromous species fast enough to identify the key threats to these fish, and then be successful in addressing them. They are an important keystone species in the food chain, supporting large predators like striped bass, seals, river otters and osprey. They also contribute marine nutrients to the glaciated, nutrient poor environment of New England.

For the last two years, volunteers including myself, have collected observations for the CT DEEP and the CT River Conservancy, to learn more about the lower CT River tributaries’ spawning populations of blueback herring and alewives. Gary Meisinger, Ehren Meisinger, Rowan Lytle, and myself monitored Pine Brook in 2016 and Gary and I carried on again in 2017.

I am pleased to report that there are still river herring spawning here (Alewife and/or BlueBack Herring - you can only identify the difference between them by cutting them open). It is difficult to obtain firm estimates of numbers, but at the peak of a big run of which there may be only one or two a season, there are probably a minimum of 1000 fish in the length of the brook at one time. There could possibly be many more, due to the difficulty in counting fish moving up and down the brook at the same time, and it appears that the peak run may actually occur at night when surface observations are even more difficult.

In the two years we have been observing, we have seen small numbers at various

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times, and then a big push when the fish start to move up from the mouth of the stream in the morning, reaching farther upstream late in the afternoon, and possibly peaking overnight, with substantial downstream migration by morning. In both years, the big runs occurred when the water temperature in the brook was climbing up from 12C to 17C.

We have seen Great Blue Herons and Common Mergansers far up the brook during the spring, and out of place in the narrow valley, crowded in by steep, forested banks. Herons prefer open marshes or banks of ponds and rivers that offer an easy escape with their awkward takeoff. Common Mergansers prefer more open water. Both species are there for the food supply of river herring, which leads me to believe that the presence of the herring at times prior to the big peak run, is more prevalent than we have been able to directly observe.

James Arrigone did observations in the Cognichaug River in Middeltown in 2016 and 2017. He was able to observe herring 3 times in 2016. One thing we have learned is that it is very easy to miss a large fish run. On Pine Brook, some of the observations of larger runs were picked up by friends, who were there just a few hours after our core team saw only a handful of fish.

Hopefully, we can recruit a few more volunteers to increase the density of observations this spring on these CT River tributaries which flow through the MLT's area. Better data will help DEEP and their conservation partners implement better targeted, conservation measures. It also helps illustrate how important land conservation efforts are, and the breadth of that impact to our natural neighborhood and far beyond to our coastal ecosystems.

**“Take nothing but memories, leave nothing but footprints!”**

Chief Seattle

to accelerate both the pace and quality of land conservation.

An engaging speaker, he wove the American history of conservation before us, which could be argued to have its infancy with Thomas Jefferson's purchase of Virginia's Natural Bridge. Jefferson called it "the most Sublime of nature's works". Relating his own story of how he came to conservation after being a shopping mall developer, he reminded us that as we travel on our own personal journeys, we each serve a role in the fabric of this truly American tradition, which has never been more important and urgent.

A big thanks to Rand, for taking time in his busy schedule to make the trek down from Boston, and to all of our guests who came out to support us.

Hold the date, Saturday, April 21, 9:30 am, for our 2018 Annual meeting at the DeKoven House. Our speaker will be L. Keolaha Freidenburg, an Ecology Research Scientist from Yale University. We will have refreshments and afternoon hikes on our preserves. We hope to see you there.

**SERENDIPITY – the phenomenon of finding a desirable discovery by accident.**

A big thanks goes out to Lesley Braren, a talented plein air painter from East Hampton (Lesley-Braren.com), whose work captures the mood and light of natural landscapes from around New England. She gave away some of her beautiful paintings, in exchange for donations by the lucky recipients, to one any of a few of her favorite organizations, including the Middlesex Land Trust. So how did I learn of this generosity? After touring local studios during Artist Open Studio weekend in East Hampton, my wife and daughter came home with two paintings, and a story of the painter who asked they make a donation to a good cause. This is a wonderful illustration from our community of diverse talents and efforts, given in support of our common goal of preserving the natural world around us.

## COLLINS PRESERVE STREAM CROSSING

The Stewardship crew has kept busy during the year with various projects ranging from general trail maintenance to eradicating invasive plants to working around major trail obstructions in the form of large tree blow downs to bridge rebuilding. But in the case of one bridge that had spanned a stream at the R. H. Collins Preserve in Portland, we decided to remove a failed bridge and install a stone crossing instead



Photo by Doug Bonoff

John Shomsky and Elwin Guild placing stones for the crossing

Consideration was given to replacing the bridge, but with a span exceeding 24 feet, getting the necessary support into the site would have been challenging. After scouting out the area, we found a suitable crossing spot a little downstream with

## EVERYONE OUTSIDE CONTINUED FROM BACK PAGE

larly children, to explore and connect with nature. Having a personal connection with nature is important for health and environmental stewardship.

In 2017, a total of approximately 430 people have participated in Everyone Outside events that have taken place on MLT preserves. Everyone Outside is a nonprofit organization under the leadership of director, Lucy Meigs. It provides opportunities for families and school children to participate in unique programs all designed to get them to connect with nature.

several large, flat stones nearby which, if strategically placed, could be used to step across the stream. There was a lot of muscle involved in moving the stones, but the crossing was completed in one action-packed work party and it will serve the people who access the trail well.



Photo by Steve Crusberg

From left to right: Jeff Nelson, John Shomsky, Elwin Guild, Doug Bonoff.

Our Stewards are a diverse bunch with a variety of talents, knowledge and opinions. We are always looking for new people to join us in our efforts to ensure access into some of the most beautiful spots in this area and have fun in the process. If you are interested in becoming a Steward for the Middlesex Land Trust. Please send an email to: [stewardship@middlesexlandtrust.org](mailto:stewardship@middlesexlandtrust.org)



For more information please visit their website at [www.EveryoneOutside.org](http://www.EveryoneOutside.org).

## SILVIO O. CONTE NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE REFUGE UPDATE

The 15 year effort to conserve the site of the former Conn Yankee Atomic power plant as part of the Silvio O Conte Salmon River Division continues. This property is on the peninsula between the Salmon and Connecticut Rivers.

It was the target of preservation before the power plant was envisioned back in the 1950s by The Connecticut Fish and Game Commission, as DEEP was once known. Former Commissioner Lyle Thorpe, once said "The saddest day of my life was the day I got a phone call telling me that "The power company has bought the land."

This past October there was a morning meeting between principles from Connecticut Yankee and US Fish & Wildlife Service along with representatives from the Nature Conservancy and CYCP. In the afternoon the group was joined by Congressman Joe Courtney and officials from the town of Haddam.

Shortly thereafter, Connecticut Yankee received a proposal for a conservation easement, which, while subordinate to the safe and secure interim storage of the spent fuel, would ultimately result in the conservation of the property by USFWS and the Silvio O Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. This offer follows years of planning and discussion. We are hopeful that it will result in a positive and concrete response from Eversource, who is the majority stakeholder in Connecticut Yankee.

In early December, USFWS contracted for the complete demolition and removal of three structures on the 38 acre former "Schmitt" property which was purchased from Connecticut Yankee several years ago. This happened very quickly and with the site leveled and landscaped, all that is left is hay and grass-seed. The Schmitt property, while now part of the refuge, remains closed to public access as is the entire Connecticut Yankee property

All this came after the recent purchase by USFWS of the 15 acre Fetske property which begins at the riverbank and crosses the road at CY's front gate, thus filling the gap between the CY property and MLT's Brainerd Quarry Preserve. With the exception of Eversource power-line property, the remaining 544 acre Connecticut Yankee property is now surrounded by conserved land or water.



*Service Building*

***GONE!***



*"Schmitt" House*



*Service Building Site*

## TIME TRAVELLING THROUGH THE WOODS *By Doug Bonoff*

Early in my surveying career I had the opportunity to interview an elderly farmer in southern Maine regarding his knowledge of local property lines. His mind still sharp as a tack, the gentleman recounted his early life on his grandfather's farm and the seasonal round of work and chores on a rural homestead. He recalled incidents from his own youth that his grandad had described to him, going back to watching volunteers march off to the Spanish-American War. And I realized afterwards that I had experienced a living memory that extended over 100 years into the past! Since that time I have had the good fortune to repeat the experience with old-timers throughout the northeastern states.

These encounters usually occur while searching for evidence of ancient occupation of the land. Not only the stone walls and traces of barbed-wire fenceline, but subtle differences in the ways that the early occupants bent the land-

scape to their means and livelihood. Surface mining was conducted all across our parishes and townships, and open quarry pits are found everywhere. Excess male labor was assigned the task of tending charcoal ricks and building stone walls – there were always more walls to be built. Young ladies were kept busy twelve hours a day with domestic chores. We must admit that our yankee forbearers were a generally humorless lot who looked upon idleness as a sin: God help the early nineteenth-century boy or girl who complained of boredom! In these ways the landscape talks to me as I make focused inspections of former agricultural properties. This historical "fabric" is still intact across most of Connecticut, but a discerning and sympathetic eye is required to recover its secrets.

*To those devoid of imagination a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part."*

*Aldo Leopold*

## STEWARDSHIP & BOARD FEBRUARY GATHERING

The end of February brought the Stewardship Committee and Board of Directors of the Land Trust together to share a potluck supper, listen to live music provided by one of our stewards, Karen Stein and share some conservation conversation.

We commemorated our past season's achievements, and considered some goals for the coming year. It was a chance to show appreciation for the work our volunteers put into caring for our preserves and an opportunity to award the coveted "Golden Blaze" to Steve Crusberg for his exemplary work this past year. It was a fun evening all around!





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## MIDDLESEX LAND TRUST PARTNERSHIP WITH EVERYONE OUTSIDE

### Slip into Nature...

Explore a mysterious vernal pool brimming with fairy shrimp, salamanders and frogs,

Slide between the vertical rock faces and discover a cave once used by native Americans,

Search for trees chewed down by beavers and used to build a dam and lodges for their young...

It is easy to find this magical world and it's very close by. And you are so welcome to enter and explore.



Everyone Outside and the Middlesex Land Trust are partners on a variety of programs on MLT preserves including school field trips, after school events and public hikes. This partnership supports getting more people outside, particu-

*Continued inside on Page 5*

The Annual Membership Drive is on  
**Don't forget to Renew**  
Recruit a Friend!