



THE BARRINGTON LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

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SPRINGTIME AT SOWAMS WOODS

This issue celebrates the second anniversary of the BLCT's acquisition of Sowams Woods, our newest, accessible parcel of open space. Located on the corner of Washington Road and North Lake Drive it adds to a green corridor of protected lands extending from East Providence south to the Rhode Island Country Club.

Sowams Woods is part of the ancient territory of the Pokanoket Tribe of the Wampanoag Nation depicted in 1895 maps by Thomas Bicknell. Stone tools and hearths believed to be ceremonial and possibly related to nearby burials were discovered at the site by the Narragansett Archeological Society in the early 1990's. More recent artifacts indicate that the site was in use during the colonial period in the 17th Century. Nicholas Cooke purchased the property in 1777. An 1851 map shows Sowams Woods as a walnut grove. Around 1895 local golf enthusiast, Charles H. Merriman, purchased the property that is now the RI Country Club. Designed by renowned landscape architect and conservationist, Fredrick Law Olmsted, the golf club property retained many of its natural features. The Barrington Land Conservation Trust purchased the property in 2007 with assistance from the Town of Barrington, RIDEM, NOAA, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Amica Insurance Corporation and many generous donors.

Helen Tjader, who was instrumental in acquiring Sowams Woods and remains a leading steward in preserving it, has contributed the following article.

TREASURES & INTERLOPERS

Precious Vernal Pools

Among the significant protected natural features at Sowams Woods are two vernal pools. Vernal pools are seasonal water bodies. In winter and spring, the two pools at Sowams are generally filled with water or covered in ice. In wet years, there has even been water year round at both pools, but typically visible surface water disappears by summer. The ground beneath the leaf litter may still be soft underfoot and it may refill briefly following rainy spells.

The Hampden Meadows Greenbelt and Brickyard Pond are two other protected local natural areas with many vernal pools. During the drier seasons, the most obvious indication of a vernal pool may be the lack of a tree canopy. Trees will grow just about everywhere in New England. If you spot an area without trees on an otherwise wooded hike this summer, check back next winter or spring and you may well find an active vernal pool.

Animals unique to vernal pools thrive in these temporary water bodies because there are no fish to eat them or their eggs. The animals, such as frogs and salamanders, require both the water habitat in spring and an approximately 1000 square feet radius around the pond for the balance of their life cycle. However,

amphibians have been known to travel up to a half mile to return to their hatching pool for breeding. Plants that live in vernal pools must be able to tolerate fresh water..

The most obvious inhabitants of the pools at Sowams Woods are Spring Peepers, small light brown frogs with a dark brown 'X' on their backs. The chorus of singing male frogs makes it easy to locate these pools. On a tour in early April, the deeper pool nearest Washington Road had a full compliment of male croakers while the shallower pool toward Echo Lake was still silent but with jelly-like masses of eggs visible on floating leaves. By approaching stealthily and crouching low you will also begin to see the many aquatic insects skating on the surface or diving into the water.

Did you Know?

- Salamanders can live up to 20 years?
- They spend up to 99% of their lives below ground?



Pernicious Invasive Plants

Invasive plants are non-native species that cause harm to the native ecosystem. Most invasive plants spread rapidly; in fact, these plants have often been intentionally selected for nurseries or gardens because of this characteristic. Colorful and plentiful berries are another common trait of plants selected by humans that become a disaster to our local wildlands.

Another way these plants thrive is from the fragmentation of our local woods and fields by development. The remaining open space becomes more vulnerable to invasive encroachment than it would from a single large property with the same combined acreage. Dumping and clearing are common along the edges of developed property. Residential garden plants 'escape' into neighboring woods. Birds that land on tree limbs located along the woodland edges drop berries and seeds and invasive seedlings take root where extra sunlight gives them an edge. Others spread along the woodland floor as vines. Destructive plants smother and strangle native plants widening the woodland edges on their trek into every potential growing space.

Some of the worst species of invasive plants are easily identified: Asiatic Bittersweet, Burning Bush, Privet, Japanese Barberry, Multiflora Rose, English Ivy, Common Reed (Phragmites). Several less common invasives at Sowams are Lesser Celandine (Fig Buttercup), Yellow Flag Iris and Cork Amur Tree. Non-native honeysuckles occur at Sowams but require a careful eye to distinguish them from native honeysuckles. Japanese knotweed appears to be a limited invasion, but it will require prompt treatment to prevent its spread.

You can help protect vernal pools:

- walk gently to minimize vegetation damage
- allow leaves and logs to remain in place for critter food and shelter
- never dig at the bottom of a pool, even if it is dry or you may destroy dormant animals or even impact the pools ability to hold water
- don't dump or throw anything into a vernal pool
- never allow a pet to run through a vernal pool
- report any vandalism to the Barrington Police and to the Land Trust
- let the Land Trust know about any vernal pool species that you observe

Lesser Celandine, is an attractive invasive, dense, springtime groundcover with heart shaped leaves and yellow 'buttercup' flowers found in the northeast corner of the property where English ivy and another as yet unidentified invasive vine have slowly killed the forest understory and trees.

A sole Cork Amur tree was found near the end of the old dirt road off the South Lake Drive entrance. Although the tree has attractive flowers, its leaves smell like skunk or turpentine when crushed. This invasive has the potential to outcompete native oak and hickory trees that are found at Sowams Woods. Its berries are far less nutritious for wildlife than the nuts of oaks or hickories. The berries are only available for a short season while nuts provide food throughout the otherwise lean winter months. The many spreading trunks of Cork trees crowd out other tree seedlings. Like many other invasives, they prefer the disturbed forest edges such as the old dirt road at Sowams Woods.



What Can Be Done?

The Land Trust has held many stewardship projects to haul away litter and dumped materials and to control and remove invasive plants. A 'fort' constructed from trees cut on the property was dismantled and the site restored. Large tree choking ivy and bittersweet vines have been cut away allowing the trees to recover, but much work remains. Cut and pulled plants are stacked in a pile to decay so that re-sprouting can be minimized and monitored. One tall stack of invasives from two seasons ago has dried to a small pile with no evidence of regrowth. This spring the bark of the Cork Tree was stripped from each trunk, exposing the neon yellow core – a process known as 'girdling'. Though this process kills the tree, seeds can remain viable in the soil for several years and sprouting can occur from the roots.

If you'd like to help in our clean-up projects, please email Helen at hhtjader@cox.net. Your assistance will be welcome!

Help us Celebrate Doug Rayner's 89th Birthday!!

We are selling note cards featuring five of his exquisite nature photographs (including the squirrel at left) to raise funds for the Land Trust. Doug, long-time member of the Board, a noted naturalist and advocate for the environment, has graciously allowed us to use the photos for this purpose.

Packets of 10 cards and envelopes are \$20. Each packet has two of each photo.

Send in a check made out the Barrington Land Conservation Trust and mail to BLCT, PO Box 324, Barrington, RI 02806. The packets (\$15 tax deductible for each) will be delivered to your house promptly. Questions? Call Charlotte at 245-8467.



A sixth grade class inspecting a large excluder box.

Save the Date
Annual Meeting
Tuesday, June 16, 7:00 PM
Barrington Library Auditorium
Audubon Society presents
Rhode Island Birds of Prey

New Grasslands at Pic-Wil

A grant from US Fish and Wildlife has allowed us to plant five acres of former agricultural fields with native grasses at PIC-WIL Nature Preserve on Washington Road. Since the sandy soils are of poor quality after many years of farming, we selected a seed mix that is designed to take hold and thrive under such conditions.

In mid-April Four Town Farms provided a tractor to rototill the fields, and Pete McCalmont, volunteer extraordinaire, used a hand seeder to broadcast the mix. A half-acre was reserved for native wildflower seed, and another area was kept bare to serve as habitat for a special kind of beetle (to be supervised by Ginger Brown, entomologist and member of the Board).

Open fields are no longer common in our state, but they create habitat for ground-nesting birds, and provide seeds, insects and small rodents for a variety of other birds. Since the hanging gourds erected last summer were successful in attracting Purple Martins to the north field, eight more gourds have been added this spring. Ray Marr, Purple Martin specialist, will tend to the gourds and alert us to successful nesting.

We will keep you posted on the success of these new projects; it is your memberships and donations that enable us to do this important work.

Planning for 2009 Terrapin Study

On April 30th, participants met to plan our 20th year of Land Trust sponsored study at the Doug Rayner Refuge at Nockum Hill. This year three students will be involved - Evan Bulman (BHS student intern), Brian Williamson (Roger Williams University) and an intern student from Bristol Community College. We showed the Power Point report of Alex Patterson's senior project (the first of its kind in his department at URI), based on two year's research on the comparison of the sizes of nesting terrapins and that of their hatchlings. Alex Patterson presented a report of his senior project (the first of its kind in his department at URI), and Renna Salhany reported on her senior project at BHS based on her internship with the Land Trust last summer.

Near the first of June participants will begin to look for nesting, which will continue until about the middle of July. Identification of individual terrapins will be recorded, and some nests will be protected from predators, using both individual and group excluders. Students will also be instructed in caring for the bluebird boxes on site; typically, the boxes are used by tree swallows, although a pair of bluebirds was seen in on the fields in April.



THE BARRINGTON LAND CONSERVATION TRUST
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We solicit funds to help maintain our properties via an Annual Appeal in December. Membership dues are solicited in May and are for that current calendar year.

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