



## The Crooked Bridge

By Merle Drift

To be honest the bridge isn't just crooked. It leans a little and slopes down from the midpoint. I'll explain.

There were four on the project—average age around 70—Al, Leif, Scott and Geoff. Then, when they started working on the river full time, I say this with complete conviction, God sent them Brian—age 30 with muscles.

Those that have followed the saga of the Millrace know about the bridge problems on the Falls River—they kept washing away when the rains got heavy. So in the Fall of 2018 the land trust began a three bridge building project—starting with the Miracle Bridge, then the Historic Millrace Bridge and ending with the Crooked Bridge in June of 2020. These bridges will not wash away. They will endure The Flood.

### The Crooked Story

The challenge with bridges is span. The bridge at the bottom of the hill at Doanes' Woods is 18 feet long—not a big problem. The bridge crossing the stream at Heron Pond is 12 feet long, hardly worth mentioning. The site of the new bridge—we'll call it PNCB standing for Proposed Non-Crooked Bridge—requires a 57-foot span, 10 feet more than the Miracle Bridge. And the Miracle Bridge was, well, a miracle...so it was a challenge. The team had to do more than a miracle.

Before lifting a hammer, they studied the concept of trusses. A truss is a sharing tool. Every wooden member of the truss holds some weight and hands some weight

off to the next wooden member.... Install the right truss across a long bridge, with every board sharing weight appropriately...it's almost more than a miracle....there is no sagging...So the team built 120 feet of truss for the PNCB in one of the backyards...and carried the truss

sections to the river...Then they began building the bridge.

And while the Crooked Bridge is crooked and leans and slopes—it does not sag.... The truss works...it serves as both a weight and force distribution tool as well as an attractive railing. The land trust placed a sign by the bridge reminding folks that it is a narrow pedestrian bridge and asks that no more than three wayfarers cross the bridge at any one time—

- out of an abundance of caution.

But why is the bridge crooked? And slopes and leans a little?

Try picking up a 24-foot 2 X 12. It's heavy. And not just heavy, it has an unwieldy, long heaviness to it. So now try picking up a 24 foot 2X12, carry it up a ladder in the middle of the river and place it on a support with the ends exactly 180 degrees from each other and do it 4 times; then apply long pieces of plywood slathered with glue to both sides for added rigidity. Then add 6 more 20-foot 2X12's. Clamp the whole thing and bolt the entire span. Nearly 100 bolts. And don't once let your brain remind yourself that you need to go home for a nap.

This is only one part of the bridge building process, but it tells the story. It was really hard work. Every piece of the bridge is heavy, long, and clumsy. It's up in the air for heaven's sake! And they did it all by hand.



## The Crooked Bridge ... continued from page 1

Just a team of four old guys. Five counting Mr. Muscles. And they are proud of the job. It has integrity. And it's pretty. And, well... crooked. Who isn't?

The Team: Leif Owens, Scott McCoid, Al McGregor, Geoff Furtney and special guest worker—Brian Jones from California.



# 150 Miles on the Trails – Two Friends Amid the Pandemic

By Steve Knauth

The world turned upside-down in March as the COVID-19 virus spread across the country. Businesses, schools and the nation's institutions shut down; social distancing became a new term.

Suddenly people who had lots to do – had nothing. So, two friends decided to weather the early pandemic shut-down by logging more than 150 miles on the land trust's trails.

Sarah Higgins is an in-home daycare provider in Ivoryton, with 5 children to keep her busy; Janice Knauth, a semi-retired sign language interpreter, had her freelance work and her daily swim at the YMCA. Both are Jazzercise regulars, too. All that stopped for the two friends; suddenly Sarah had no children, Janice had no work and they both lost their exercise venues.

So, they took to the trail.

From mid-March into early June, the two walked on Essex Land Trust (ELT) and other nearby properties,



**Sarah at Falls River Preserve**



**Janice at Canfield Tulip Tree**

going out almost every day and averaging from 2 1/2 to 4 miles on any given walk.

It started out simple (“I think it was like, let’s go for a walk,” says Janice.) Then Sarah took up her ELT Trail Guide. “That gave us a structure,” says Janice. “We’d look at it and decide where to go, based on the description, the weather and trail conditions that day.” Later, they used the ELT web site to pick out trails and print maps. “There are lots of kiosks, and they were a help, too,” says Janice. “Sometimes we took pictures of the maps there.”

Even as the world was closing down, Spring was coming on, and the two walkers saw the first shy Lady Slippers at Bushy Hill and the pungent and pervasive Skunk cabbage and Jack-in-the pulpits come up at James Glen. They heard the migrating songbirds arrive in The Preserve, watched the turtles emerge at Falls River. “That was a fun part of it,” says Sarah. “Watching Spring happen.”

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## 150 Miles on the Trail ... continued from page 3

Following well-marked, well-kept trails, they came upon big, old trees, moss-covered rocks and boulders, crumbling foundations and even a Geo-cache. They added to the painted stones and rocks left by other hikers. (Sarah left a ceramic frog from her collection.) They stood on the lookout at Canfield Woods, they rested on the benches at Osage Trails, crossed on the stile boardwalk at Windswept Ridge.

The Preserve was a favorite, and the two walked the Barbara Edwards Trail (named after the long-time ELT member and supporter). “We made sure to walk that trail, and we sat on the bench they have there,” says Sarah.

The Town of Essex’s Viney Hill Brook Park was an interesting place to walk, says Sarah. “There’s so much to see there - animals, birds, the old quarry and the turtle nesting site.” Chapman Mill Pond, on open space park in West-

brook was “a sleeper” with nice trails and a big beautiful pond with an island.

The two also found time to just be friends, to find support as the pandemic intensified. “No matter what was going on, we knew we’d be walking at 2 PM and we’d get away from it all for a while,” says Janice.

“It was good to re-connect,” says Sarah. “We don’t see each other when things get busy. It got to be that if we didn’t go walking, the day just didn’t seem right.”

Sarah is no stranger to the ELT’s nature trails; she takes her children to the nearby Millrace and Falls River. “We look for seasonal plants and animals and identify trees,” she says. “It’s nice to think that these places will be there for them, and their children, too.”

Hopefully, without a pandemic thrown in.

## Volunteer Spotlight - John Cosenza

Land and trust stewards tend to share a handful of characteristics and traits. First and foremost, they enjoy the outdoors. No surprise. Second, they define their own job. After all, they are volunteers, so their work fits their individual lifestyle and interests. Some walk their trails every day, clearing away brush and adjusting the paths. Others walk less, and let nature have a greater say in what a passable path is....

The steward we honor today clearly shares some of these common characteristics. But with this particular individual....well who knows? We have given up trying to figure him out. We just celebrate his work. His name is John Cosenza.

John is the steward of an 18 acre preserve that features a long bog walk straight through a dense swamp. The property also contains a smaller bog walk that branches into the swamp and abruptly stops – called The Trail to No Where....and, thankfully, there is a Trail to Somewhere as well.

What a perfect property for this steward. It contains thirty-three species of trees: everything from Eastern Hornbeam to Black Gum. There are two kinds of Hickory, five types of Oak and even (we think) a rare American Chestnut along with many more. Each species is identified with a small sign that provides the tree's true name and something about the tree's personality and lifestyle. For example, on a mature White Oak, we



learn that it acts as host to up to 200 different species of animals, insects and birds that live harmoniously together under its canopy. If you want to learn about trees, this property is a good place to start. The well-marked trees, the paths that travel right through the swamps are all John's invention – sometimes because he had an idea, and sometimes because he knew a good idea when he saw it....

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John likes to work alone, enjoying the solitude of the path. He has an introvert's energy and likes to create at his own pace. For those who walk his trails, he offers safe passage, a wonderful view of nature along with fun facts to share with friends.

John is tough (respectful but tough) on tools and equipment. That's probably because he is also tough. Once he fell from a ladder while cutting down a tree with a chain saw – a 70 year old man falls from a ladder holding a chainsaw! He gets up, brushes himself off and takes the rest of the day off. (The chief steward had a sit-down discussion with John after that episode.)

When the Essex Land Trust purchased this parcel of land in 2015 and the question of what to name it arose, John lobbied to call it “The Lorax Trail,” after the famous story by Dr. Seuss. If you haven't read *The Lorax*, pick up a copy and you'll understand what an inspired name it is. However, the folks at Essex Land Trust Headquarters had a different name in mind. They decided to designate it....drum roll....Pond Meadow. Creative, hmm.

John and Frank walk the property every day. God knows what they talk about – Frank being a dog. In 2015, when John started work on Pond Meadow, it was an insurmountable swamp. Today it is a jewel in the land trust's properties. While many properties attract butterflies and bees, John's oasis at Pond Meadow attracts

families. The notes, small statues, even large sculptures secretly left along the path by young and old folks alike are a testament to the charming work of John Cosenza.

Essex Land Trust stewards are a small tribe, and most have not met John Cosenza. He likes to keep to himself. Luckily for us, he is exactly where he wants to be—caring for the land and caring for his family.

We salute you John. Thank you. Please don't stop.



## ELT Briefs

### Scout Michael Roise Installs Benches in Falls River Preserve

Visitors to the Essex Land Trust's Falls River Preserve can now relax on three new benches along the scenic Falls River thanks to Boy Scout Michael Roise. Roise, a senior at Valley Regional High School, installed the benches in August with help from his mother Michelle Roise, his grandfather David Blifford of Chester and friend James Tedeschi of Deep River. The Roises, who live on West Hills Road near the preserve, donated the benches. Clearing areas for the benches, assembling them and anchoring them in place took about four hours, Roise said.



**Michael Roise adjusts a bench on the Falls River Preserve**

"Installing the benches was a pleasure, not only because I get to engage in scouting but also the local community," Roise said. "The Falls River Preserve is a wonderful area and I hope those walking in it will take a rest and enjoy the scenery." Currently a Life Scout, Roise installed the benches as his Eagle Scout project. Roise began as a Cub Scout at age six and has participated for 12 years, now as a member of Boy Scout Troop 13 serving Chester and Deep River. The benches are all located along the red trail of the preserve; one is by the boulder holding the plaque commemorating the 1998 acquisition, one is on the point closest to Trinity Lutheran Church on Main Street, and one is by the trail curve nearest to Jean's Island. The Essex Land Trust's 40-acre Falls River Preserve is located at the end of Falls River Drive.

### Japanese Barberry Clearing at Windswept Ridge

On October 3rd, 12 volunteers gathered at the Windsor Lane entrance to Windswept Ridge to clear Japanese Barberry. Steward Jeff Croyle was joined by local invasives expert Lois StahlbushTolley who educated the group on the harm barberry does and how best to eradicate it. Two hours later, we had cleared a massive section of Barberry allowing native plants to fill in. This will be an ongoing project and we are scheduling more volunteer work events including Fall cleanups at Osage on 11/7 and 11/14 at Cross Lots. Participants included: Mike Hines, Bob Malchiodi, Carrie Daly, James Daly, Emily Rapp, John Mikstay, Roger Salway, Lisa Krall, Mara Lavitt, and Patricia Hurley, plus Lois.



If you aren't already a volunteer and would like to help out, send an email to [info@essexlandtrust.org](mailto:info@essexlandtrust.org) with your area of interest.

### Johnson Farm Nest Boxes

John Mikstay started birding at a young age. His love of birds and an acute understanding of their shrinking habitat has led to a hobby in building nest boxes. As a result of hiking the trails of Johnson Farm Preserve, recognizing the amazing habitat there, and wanting to do something positive at the start of



**John Mikstay with nest box**

the Covid19 pandemic this past March/April, he volunteered to help that property become even better habitat for our bluebirds, tree swallows and other native secondary cavity-nesting bird species. His late spring project involved the following:

- Identifying, removing and retrofitting the four old nest boxes already on the property so they could be accessed not only from the top (hinged roof) for nest monitoring, but also from the side for cleanout after nesting season
- Building four new nest boxes from white pine, with ventilation along the roof line on each side and drainage in the box floor should soaking from heavy rain occur
- Covering the sloping, hinged roofs using natural bark from native trees, since the bark has natural insulating properties, natural rain protection for the pine roof and it provides an attractive aesthetic for the nest box
- And thanks to the generous donation of our friend Jessica Penfield, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Old Saybrook, eight (8) wrap-around predator baffles were installed on the posts to help keep climbing predators at bay

This year's 2020 nesting season started with two new and two retrofitted nest boxes installed in early May by John, his girlfriend Mandy Carroll and Dana Hill, Johnson Farm



Preserve Steward. The two remaining old boxes were being used by a pair of house wrens and bluebirds, so they were left untouched and will be removed and retrofitted over the winter. Those two families were successful. Nesting results for the newly installed nest boxes were encouraging as well, with a 50% success rate. Two of the four new boxes were successfully used by a pair of tree swallows (4 fledglings seen) and a pair of bluebirds (4 fledglings seen). The other two boxes were being held by house sparrows, who are detrimental to the native species using the boxes. Their nest attempts were repeatedly cleaned out. John will be installing the other 4 boxes throughout the fall and early winter on the property with high hopes for 2021!

## Membership Renewal Before Year-end



**The Essex Land Trust depends on membership dues and donations to manage its operating expenses. Over 60% of our expenses are focused on caring for our 23 preserves. The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has seen an unprecedented number of visitors to our properties. They require regular maintenance, which this year has been impacted by several wind events, requiring a significant amount of tree work. Your support really does make a difference. We thank you.**

# Coming Events – Mark Your Calendar!



Although we have few remaining events this year, we want to encourage all to enjoy the results of over fifty years of efforts to protect the environment and the small-town character of our three villages. The Town's open space preserves cover approximately 1100 acres and include numerous, marked trails. Our preserves are open from dawn to dusk. We ask is that participants heed the advice of authorities to respect personal distances when out on the trails. If you are feeling ill, please stay at home. Please keep pets under your control.



**A new calendar of events is being planned for 2021 and will be published before year end. In the meantime, please check our website for any updates or contact us at: [info@essexlandtrust.org](mailto:info@essexlandtrust.org).**

## **Bats: Their Lives and Lore - Thursday, October 28, 7 pm – To be conducted via Zoom.**

Master Wildlife Conservationist Maureen Heidtmann will provide an overview of bats of the world, with an emphasis on our local species. She will talk about the persisting myths and misconceptions about these fascinating creatures, the many roles bats play to ensure a healthy planet, and the perils bats face in their struggle for survival. Join Zoom Meeting: <https://zoom.us/j/6404903692> - Meeting ID: 640 490 3692 - Dial in +1 646 558 8656.

## **November Property Clean-ups - Please bring rakes, blowers and tarps.**

**Families welcome.**

**Dress warmly. Refreshments provided.**

- Saturday, November 7, 9 am: Osage Trails, Foxboro Point Rd, Essex.  
Rain Date: Sunday, November 8.
- Saturday, November 14, 9 am: Cross Lots, 40 West Avenue, Essex.  
Rain Date: Sunday, November 15.

## **Year-End Hike at Windswept Ridge**

**Saturday, December 12, 10 am - Plains Road Entrance behind Essex Financial**

Revisit this unique and expanded property which has gone from a neighborhood property to a large preserve stretching 47 acres from Ivoryton to Essex. Trails traverse the ridges, ravines and wetlands of this very special property. All ages welcome. Boots recommended. Rain cancels.

**Woods & Waters** is published three times a year. **Jim Denham**, Publisher & Editor

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