



New Project at Johnson Farm Seeks to Protect Habitat Diversity and Resilience

By Chet Arnold

This fall, the Essex Land Trust (ELT) will be embarking on an ambitious multi-year project focused on improving the unique range of habitats at the Johnson Farm Preserve, a 49 acre preserve in the heart of Ivoryton, acquired in 2015 from the Johnson family. Unlike most ELT preserves, that tend to be characterized by one type of landscape, Johnson Farm is comprised of a range of vegetation types. This varied landscape gives rise to several distinct habitats that support a wide spectrum of birds, mammals, and insects.

Different Approaches to Eastern and Western Sections

Maintaining and protecting these habitats presents some thorny challenges, both figurative and literal. The western half of the property consists of former sheep-grazing fields that are maintained partly as grasslands, and partly as shrublands. With the decline of agricultural landscapes over the last century, these “early successional” habitats, and the species dependent on them, are increasingly rare in Connecticut. Establishing

an effective mowing, weeding and pruning regime in these areas has been challenging for our stalwart corps of stewards.

The eastern half of the property is a mixed deciduous forest that is experiencing some serious difficulties. There

are large swaths where the understory is heavily infested with invasive species, and a number of dead or dying beech trees as a result of the one-two punch of beech leaf and beech bark disease, both of which have recently moved into our region. For both halves of the preserve, there is also climate resilience to consider: as changing temperature and rainfall regimes take effect, the plant species best suited for survival and habitat value are changing.



Shrub and grassland consultant and STAC member Dr. Juliana Barrett (far left) visits Johnson Farm with stewards

Three-year Project

ELT will be addressing all of these issues over the next three years, with a very large dose of help from the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC). Last year, the land trust was awarded a \$5,400 planning

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grant from the CLCC Climate Smart Land Stewardship Program, which allowed us to hire experts to create management plans for both the forest and grass/shrub halves of the Farm. With the recommendations from those plans in hand, we were able to follow up with CLCC and, this September, received a \$50,000 grant from the same program to support implementation of the plans. To complete all of our action items, the grant will need to be supplemented by a similar amount of funding from the land trust, in addition to a small mountain of volunteer hours by our stewards.

Detailed Management Plans

Our action items are organized according to the six distinct stands of vegetation that make up the preserve. Management of the grassland area (Stand 1) and the smaller stand of shrubland (Stand 2) will only be tweaked. But there will be noticeable - one might say dramatic - action taken in the larger shrubland area (Stand 3), that has become peppered with invasive species; and in some of the most inaccessible areas that have overgrown the early successional stages that we want to maintain. Stand 3 will be almost completely cleared, with the exception of some of the more desirable trees. As the natural seed bank in the soil begins to regenerate in these areas after the clearing, desirable native species will be supplemented with seeds of climate-ready species bought by ELT. Stewards will be patrolling regularly to remove invasives as new growth emerges.

In the forested half (Stands 4, 5, and 6), the techniques will be different, but the goal will be much the same - remove undesirable species and promote the growth of more native, and resilient species. With the guidance of professional foresters, we will thin out the tree canopy in certain areas and regenerate those stands by encouraging the growth of desirable species (for instance, oak and hickory) and planting additional ones (such as conifers). In all the forested stands there will be a focused effort to eliminate invasive undergrowth species such as barberry, burning bush, and privet that are preventing the sprouting of healthy trees.

A quick note, as the familiar sign says: **Please excuse our appearance as we work to make improvements!** The clearing and thinning phases may at first look jarring to the eye – but not to worry, we are building a healthier, more climate-resilient preserve! In some cases, there may be temporary trail closures.

In embarking on this project, the ELT is proactively confronting environmental threats that only a few land stewards in the state have attempted. The Board, the Science and Technical Advisory Committee, and our stewards are excited about the work ahead, and looking forward to keeping our members and the larger community aware of our progress. Many, many thanks to CLCC for their support of our work!



Map of the JF Preserve, showing the six vegetation stands grouped into two major areas. Base map courtesy of Ferrucci and Walicki, LLC

Four Season Meditation - Art for All at Windswept Ridge

Windswept Ridge is home to a new art project called Four Season Meditation, a collaboration between the Essex Land Trust (ELT) and artist Jennifer Longworth. “I spend a lot of time foraging for materials to bring back to the studio, so the opportunity to stay outdoors, working with nature, is thrilling!” Longworth notes.

The Four Season Meditation is an artwork designed to change over the course of a year. As an ELT resident artist and practitioner of therapeutic horticulture, Longworth aims to convey nature’s restorative power. While studying therapeutic horticulture at the New York Botanical Garden, she learned how to use plants to help people achieve better health. She was also introduced to the teachings of Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh and his Four-Pebble Meditation, which uses stones representing four natural elements and personal affirmations:

- Flower is freshness/rejuvenation. I am a smiling flower in the garden of humanity.
- Mountain is solidity/stability. I am myself, stable, solid, content.
- Still Water is exact reflection. I perceive things as they are, calmly and peacefully.
- Space is freedom. I see myself as space, open and free.

Longworth transforms the art according to seasonal equinoxes re-using onsite materials and evoking these four elements successively for contemplation. She also encourages visitors to physically engage with the art, adding natural materials they find on Windswept Ridge’s trails. “This empowers people to tap their creativity and heightens their sensory experience. Several volunteers helped create the first two forms - Jeff Croyle did a heroic



Jennifer Longworth and Flower - Photo credit: Alex Matthiessen

job creating vistas and much more, Tom Gezo and Peter and Mary Grace Wright gathered, Noel Meyer shot lovely aerial footage (viewable on ELT’s social media), Alex Matthiessen is capturing poetic images.

“When Jen reached out to the ELT expressing her interest in volunteering and we learned about her background, we knew we were on to something,” said Windswept Ridge Steward and ELT President Jeff Croyle. “There was a little-used section of the red trail close to our parking area where we had accumulated a lot of natural debris. We had a concept of converting that into ‘forest art.’ Jen’s seasonal installations provide a hands-on area for hikers to sit, relax and participate in our ever-changing natural landscape. And the area is attracting new visitors to this preserve.”

ELT Communications Director Jim Denham added, “Land trust preserves are ideal locations not only to experience nature’s beauty but also to relax and de-stress. The Four Season Meditation combines these aspects while inviting passersby to participate in nature’s always-

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evolving diversity.”

Most rewarding for Longworth has been the involvement of A Little Compassion Inc. – working with program director Linda Bennett and Tom Gezo to bring neurodivergent young adults to the site. She recalls, “we had a wonderful visit this summer, meditating, hiking to the ridge, foraging, and building on the art. We plan to visit together each season. My hope is that all who visit

recognize that nature changes as it cycles through life, death, and re-birth, but like art, provides a constant source of nourishment and inspiration.”

A prime view of the area can be found further up the Red Trail looking down from the top of the cliff/ridge providing a bird’s eye view of the site. Follow the project posts on Instagram: @essexlandtrust and @jenlongworthfineart.com.



Photo credit: A Little Compassion



Photo credit: Jen Longworth

Volunteer Spotlight

Leif Owens, the Steward Orchestra Conductor

The Essex Land Trust (ELT) Preserve Management Director role requires a variety of skills to manage our 25 preserves and our 40 stewards. But that hardly scratches the surface of this demanding role. In addition to owning and caring for 770 acres of open space with 35 miles of trails, ELT also has 25 bird nesting sites, 5 acres of pollinator meadow and a 53 tree American Chestnut orchard.

So how is all this cared for? Who coordinates the effort of many to produce an efficient and admired preserve network? That’s what Leif Owens does, day in and day out. The result, in keeping with the analogy, is a fine-tuned

cohort of ‘musicians’ who play their individual roles while producing a cohesive and impactful melody.

Hands On Leadership

Leif took over leadership of the stewardship team in 2021 when he was also elected to the Board. He has been a land trust member since he moved to Essex in 2014 with his spouse, Kristin. Early on, he was a co-steward at Cross Lots, served as land trust DEEP Permitting Coordinator for five Preserves, and was involved in large scale projects at Bushy Hill/Platt and the Millrace. Since then, Leif has demonstrated a hands-on approach and has worked to

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encourage volunteering. Some examples illustrate this point:

- You'll see him on a tractor mowing at Cross Lots, with a post hole digger installing new kiosks, following the brush hog at Johnson Farm. You might also see him at the Cross Lots barn with grease on his hands as he and the stewards maintain our equipment.
- He was the lead in "electrifying" the Cross Lots barn in 2022, bringing this facility, as he put it eloquently, "into the 21st century."
- Leif has always embraced interacting with many of the groups who do volunteer work for the land trust, such as Valley Regional High School and the Scouts. In line with this, Leif works with the stewardship team to make sure we always have "shovel ready" projects when folks come looking for volunteer opportunities.



Leadership, Teamwork, and Willingness to Learn

Managing 770 acres of open space is not simply about maintaining trails and monitoring invasive species. The many dedicated "musician stewards" involved with the land trust bring many skills and energy to make it all possible. At the same time, not always seen by the general public, there are many areas requiring leadership, teamwork, and a willingness to learn. Leif epitomizes these traits as illustrated in the following:

- Maintaining annual management plans for all preserves in line with Land Trust Alliance standards; a key reason for the land trust's nationally accredited status.
- Working collaboratively with stewards and calling for assistance from the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee.

- Working with outside providers, i.e., arborists, landscaping companies, specialists in treatment of phragmites and pond vegetation.
- Keeping an eye on sensitive areas, riparian buffer zones, while also addressing ever present invasive species proliferation.
- Leif has been part of the team that has been awarded grants for stewardship projects from trailheads, to opening new preserves, to developing management plans promoting climate resilience.

A real example of Leif the 'conductor' can be found in the installation of the public kayak launch on the Mill Pond, where Leif took the lead in its installation at Falls River Park. Over the years, there has been an increase in shore erosion at the current launch site off the parking area. The new floating dock and launch helps protect the shoreline and improves accessibility for boaters and fishermen at the only public access to the Mill Pond.

A Family Affair

This volunteer spotlight would not be complete without mentioning the role Leif took in supporting his wife, Kristin, in becoming our Purple Martin steward, by working with others to install, monitor and maintain a gourd nest colony aimed to reestablish Purple Martins on our Great Meadow Preserve. The project, a team effort, represents his family's commitment to the environment and its species.

All in all, the 'stewardship orchestra' continues to perform to sellout crowds due, in part, to the dedication and inspiration of its "conductor," Leif Owens.

Learning about Nature is a Mood Booster

By Bethany Erkkila

Editor's Note: Bethany Erkkila is a senior at Valley Regional High School who is writing three articles for Woods & Waters as part of her senior Capstone project. Her interests include the ocean, biology, and climate change, and she is planning to study environmental science when she attends college next year. Her next two articles will focus on Climate Resilience and the History of Phragmites Treatment on the Great Meadow.

On average, Americans spend 92% of their time indoors. While most of us know that we should be spending more time outside, the real question is why? Research shows that being outdoors benefits both your mental and physical health and improves focus and attention. When indoors, we are often surrounded by screens and constant stimulation. Spending time outside gives the brain a break to reset, reducing mental fatigue and improving concentration.

Being outdoors also supports brain chemistry in ways that make us happier and healthier. A study in Denmark found that children who grow up with greater access to green space had a lower risk of developing mental health disorders later in life. Fresh air increases oxygen levels in the brain boosting the release of serotonin. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that links to happiness and emotional stability, and the same chemical that many antidepressants target to make you happier.

Sunlight has many benefits as well. When it hits the skin, the body produces Vitamin D strengthening bones and supporting the immune system. Time spent outdoors also helps regulate sleep by increasing melatonin production when it's dark, making it easier to fall asleep. It encourages physical activity strengthening your heart, increasing bone density and reducing the risk

of future injuries. By combining fresh air with physical activity, you lay the groundwork for a longer, stronger, and healthier life. Together, these natural processes show how being outside can improve emotional well-being.



Connecting Through Nature

Public outdoor spaces play an important role in recreation and community life. Parks and fields provide a space for a variety of activities. Playgrounds provide a space for children and their parents to interact with their peers. Hiking trails are also great allowing the opportunity to partake in physical activity while being outside.

Not only are these spaces used for recreational activities, but they also create areas where people can get together with others and connect with the environment. Outdoor spaces help build healthier and well-rounded communities.

Land trusts contribute to the community and the environment. The preserves and trails that they protect not only promote passive recreation but also add to the overall quality of the community. Trees filter the air while keeping

ecosystems protected, and storing carbon, reducing the impact of climate change.

Land trusts ensure that a variety of plants and animals can thrive. Diverse ecosystems are stronger and more resilient because they are able to adapt to things such as disease, pests, and fluctuating climate. Land trusts provide

I cannot say exactly how nature exerts its calming and organizing effects on our brains, but I have seen in my patients the restorative and healing powers of nature and gardens even for those disabled neurologically. In many cases, gardens and nature are more powerful than any medication.

- Oliver Sacks, British neurologist and writer

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a safe haven for many wildlife species and help promote biodiversity.

Ways You Can Make an Impact

To take care of public parks and hiking trails, we need to protect the environment in everyday ways. One of the simple memorable strategies is to follow, “reduce, reuse, recycle.” Reducing what we consume is the most effective. Reusing items, such as carrying a reusable water bottle, can help cut the use of single use plastic. Recycling is also important because it prevents items from ending up in landfill and instead giving it the opportunity to be made into something new.

Small actions make a positive impact. Turning off the sink when brushing your teeth, or taking shorter showers help conserve water, and using public transportation such as biking, or walking, helps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, helping to keep the air cleaner. These simple habits protect the planet for future generations.

Spending time outdoors we can boost both our mental and physical health. Public spaces and land trusts make it possible for people to enjoy spending time outside and allow a space for the environment to thrive. By choosing to make small choices that benefit the planet we can all make a larger impact.

Water Chestnut Threatens Connecticut River Basin

By John Hincks

The invasive aquatic plant water chestnut (*Trapa natans*) is spreading rapidly in the Connecticut River Basin, creating serious ecological and recreational challenges. Native to Eurasia, water chestnut forms dense floating mats that block sunlight, reduce oxygen levels, and crowd out native plants critical for fish and wildlife. These mats can also hinder boating, swimming, and fishing, while their sharp, spiny seeds pose hazards to people and pets.

Water chestnut was first reported in the Connecticut River in the 1990s and, despite extensive management efforts, continues to expand in backwaters and coves. The plant’s prolific seed production—each rosette can release up to 20 hard nutlets that remain viable for years—makes control especially difficult.

Treatment options focus on early detection and rapid response. Hand-pulling by volunteers and crews is highly effective for small or newly established patches. Larger infestations may be addressed through mechanical harvesting, though this is costly and can leave behind fragments that reestablish quickly. Herbicide treatments are used selectively in some areas but require careful oversight to protect native vegetation and aquatic life.

Essex Land Trust and Connecticut River conservancies urge boaters and anglers to help by reporting infestations, pulling what they can and cleaning equipment between waterways. In July members of our community identified water chestnut outbreaks in South Cove and quickly responded by hand pulling the weeds before they were able to spread aggressively. With vigilance and collaboration, communities can slow the spread of this destructive invader.



There's Good News Out There ...

New Steward Position Created



Preserves Management Director, Leif Owens, has announced a new steward position, 100% focused on invasives across all preserves. This is an actual hands-on role (pulling up invasives) as well as a resource to help individual stewards accomplish their goals. **Lois Tolley** has agreed to take on this new role. Lois is passionate about getting rid of invasives and has already worked with other stewards to address specific problem areas. The Invasive Plant Steward will work individually and with other stewards across all land trust preserves to identify and manage invasive plant species, will lead volunteer events to address specific areas and plants throughout the year, and will also function as the go to expert for best practices in consultation with our Scientific Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) members and additional outside training resources.

Chet Arnold Receives Tom O'Dell Distinguished Service Award from Rockfall Foundation

This award is given to an organization or individual for outstanding lifetime accomplishments in environmental preservation, conservation, restoration, or education in the Lower Connecticut River Valley. For nearly 30 years, Chet has been a leader with the Essex Land Trust, serving as board member, president, and land acquisition chair. During that time, he helped secure more than \$1.25 million in grants to acquire and protect 177 acres of open space. Professionally, Chet co-founded UConn's Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR) and helped create programs including CT NEMO, the Natural Resources Conservation Academy, and the Environment Corps. Chet established the land trust's Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) to advise the stewards and the board on how to apply best practices to preserve management. These professionals have helped the land trust develop plans and strategies to deal with a multitude of concerns, including invasives, riparian buffer protection, and climate resilience.



Toby Hill Ridge Preserve's Inaugural Hike



Naturalist Phil Miller led a crowd of over 20 explorers to this new preserve. The preserve was recently created by the Essex Land Trust covering 23 acres in Ivoryton and with a portion in Westbrook. A typical New England upland forest, reclaimed from its sheep grazing days, the one mile hike is an easy stroll from its parking lot. Toby Hill is named after Toby Bardo who, along with his spouse and children, was enslaved by the prominent Spencer family in Westbrook, from the mid-1700's until his death in 1825.

A unique feature of the preserve is a watershed divide which splits water flows to the north and south. North of this divide, tributaries flow into the Falls River eventually reaching the Connecticut River in Essex. South of the divide, tributaries flow into Trout Brook which makes its way into Long Island Sound in Westbrook.

Membership Renewal Reminder

Members are encouraged to submit their membership dues before the calendar year ends. We depend on dues to cover many of our operating expenses, particularly maintenance of our 770 acres. We hope you will continue to support the land trust as generously as possible so that we can continue...

Caring for our world here at home

Coming Events – Mark Your Calendar!



Join us on any of the following free events. Updated details available on our website: essexlandtrust.org/events/. Some of our events are weather dependent so please check our Facebook page for updates as the date approaches.

Tackling Invasives at Turtle Creek Preserve Saturday, October 25, 9 AM

**Turtle Creek Preserve, Watrous Point Road,
Old Saybrook**

Turtle Creek Stewards Deborah and Wright Carreau and Invasives Steward Lois Tolley will be leading an effort to clear invasive vegetation in the land trust's Turtle Creek Preserve. The focus will be the Tree of Heaven which has just started to grow along Fordham Road and the intersection of trails there. These trees can outgrow other deciduous trees, damage human infrastructure, and release toxins that inhibit plant growth. Volunteers should bring shovels, gloves and loppers. Most trees are small and can be dug up.

Full Moon Hike at Johnson Farm Wednesday, November 5, 6PM

Read Street, Ivoryton

Join us for our popular Full Moon Hike at Johnson Farm. The moon will rise before our start and we're hoping for a crystal-clear night so the moon can light our way. The first part of the hike is moderate and goes over rocky terrain with lots of roots and a bit of elevation. The trail then opens to meadow and pastureland for an open view of the moon. Following the hike, we'll head to a local venue for socializing. It's November, so please dress warmly and have appropriate footwear as the first part of the trail is rock and can be wet. Bring flashlights as well as binoculars or scopes for some stargazing. This hike is weather dependent. Please check our Facebook page for updates. Dogs are ok and must be on leash at all times. **Registration required:** <https://bit.ly/4n8HuU6>

Meet the Artist: Jennifer Longworth Saturday, November 15, 1-3 PM

**Windswept Ridge, Behind Essex Financial
Services facility off of Rt. 153, Essex**

Jennifer Longworth is the artist behind "The

Mountains," the second iteration of a Four Season Meditation art and nature journey at Windswept Ridge. "The Mountains" follows the "Flower Meditation," also created by Jennifer, in collaboration with the Essex Land Trust. These forest art installations combine plant materials found around the site (no living plants were used) and follow the Four Pebble Meditation taught by Buddhist monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh. All are invited to enjoy and add to the work as it changes over time. This event is weather dependent. Please check our Facebook page for updates. Dogs are ok and must be on leash at all times.

Morning Hike at Canfield Meadow Woods Thursday, November 20, 10 AM

Book Hill Woods Road, Essex

Join us for a Thursday morning guided hike exploring the Canfield Meadow Woods Preserve which we are pleased to be co-sponsoring with the Valley Shore YMCA.

The hike will be 1.5-2 hours over moderate terrain and will feature rock outcroppings, water courses, and some features unique to Canfield Meadow Woods such as one of Connecticut's oldest poplar trees and a platform with a great view. Please arrive by 9:45 am for a timely start. The hike is weather dependent. Please check our Facebook page for updates. Dogs are ok and must be on leash at all times.

Land Trust Preserve Cleanups December 6, 13 and 20

We are planning our fall preserve clean-up of Cross Lots, and Falls River Park. Help us to prepare three of our properties for winter as we rake leaves and clear up any fallen debris. Families are welcome. Dress warmly, bring rakes, tarps and blowers. Refreshments will be provided. Dogs are not permitted at these events. In the event of inclement weather, please check our Facebook page. Put these dates on your calendar and keep a look out on Facebook or our website for each location's date.

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Essex Printing Company
Centerbrook, CT 06409
860 767 9087
www.essexprinting.com