



Annual Meeting Update: Celebrating Another Successful Year

By Jim Denham

The Essex Land Trust held its Annual Meeting on April 9th, 2026, at the Essex Steam Train events hall. Over 100 participants celebrated the occasion enjoying a social hour followed by a business review featuring highlights from the past year. Meeting presentations were made by President Jeff Croyle, Program & Events Director Tom Gezo, Treasurer Bob Dryfoos, Preserve Management Director Leif Owens, and Deb Carreau, First Vice President. While a detailed Annual Report is being mailed out to all members as part of the 2026 membership renewal campaign, following are some notable highlights:

- We maintain strong membership levels including 446 families and 26 corporate members
- Volunteering support reached nearly 11,000 hours
- In addition to over 40 preserve stewards and trail monitors, we established the Invasives Steward role to remove invasive species and promote native plants and flora
- Social media followers increased to new highs
- Dues and operating income increased over the prior year by 12%
- We established the Sharon D. Clark Memorial Garden at Falls River Park to recognise significant memorial tributes with support from the Clark family
- We have embarked on a very ambitious, multi-year proj-



Officers elected by the Board (l to r): Bob Nussbaum, Vice President, Carrie Daly, Secretary, Deb Carreau, President, Jeff Croyle, Vice President, and Bob Dryfoos, Treasurer

ect at Johnson Farm to improve the climate resiliency and health of the forests and shrubland areas.

Special thanks were given to retiring Board member Kathryn Ryan and to Jeff Croyle who is passing along the presidential baton to Deb Carreau. Members approved the minutes of last year's annual meeting and the nomination of the 2029 class of Board members: Deb Carreau, Carrie Daly, Bob Nussbaum and John Hincks.

After the meeting, the Board elected the officers for the coming year: Deb Carreau, President, Jeff Croyle, and Bob Nussbaum as Vice Presidents, Bob Dryfoos, Treasurer; and Carrie Daly, Secretary.





Photos of the Annual Meeting were made possible by Mara Lavitt Photography.



The Great Meadow Phragmites Story

By Bethany Erkkila

Editor's note: Bethany Erkkila is a senior at Valley Regional High School. This Woods & Waters article is her third in a series on environmental topics as part of her senior Capstone project.

For the past 15 years the Essex Land Trust has been working to remove an invasive species of non-native phragmites (also known as common reed) from our Great Meadow Preserve, with the hope of building a more biodiverse and sustainable ecosystem in this critical habitat.

What is Phragmites?

Phragmites is a tall perennial (a species that recurs through seasons) grass that is found in wetlands. It can be both an invasive (*Phragmites australis*) and a non-invasive native species (*Phragmites australis americanus*). Most often it takes over wetlands, lakeshores, and marshes impacting biodiversity.

Phragmites can grow to be 15-20 feet tall and have roots up to 6 feet long. It spreads itself through what are

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called rhizomes. Rhizomes are horizontal underground stems that grow extensively. It can produce up to 200 stems per yard and can be up to 6 feet deep. The purpose of rhizomes is to send nutrients up to the vertical stalks and spread quickly over land. Because of this complex system, stands of Phragmites are very difficult to remove.

Phragmites lives in both tidal and nontidal freshwater and brackish environments. When invasive phragmites (non-native australis) take over a space, it has a dramatic effect on biodiversity. Its roots prevent other plants from taking root and can release chemicals that create toxic soil conditions for other plants, ensuring its own survival. Non-native phragmites can also block access to water and become a fire hazard because they are tall, dry, and dense.

Clusters of native phragmites benefit the ecosystem around them. They are able to coexist with other species and do not form monocultures like invasive species do, which allows healthier ecosystems to develop. Native phragmites provides shelter to animals such as birds and fish, and their roots help filter pollutants and improve water quality.

Essex Land Trust Works to Help

Native Phragmites is believed to have been in Connecticut for over 3,000 years, while the invasive species was likely introduced in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The US Department of Agriculture states the non-natives are a European strain and were likely brought here in the ballast of ships. In the last few years, the percentage of non-native phragmites australis along the river has risen around 1 to 3 percent per year, which is a significant increase.

Because of the non-native phragmites complex root system, they require significant effort and careful management to remove. If any part of a root is left behind, a new plant can sprout.

Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) has been working in several different ways to make a change. One of these methods is to help restore tidal saltwater flows. If the water flow is restricted, tidal marshes become drier meadows which increases sedimentation and alters flow paths. A solution to this problem is installing culverts and flood control structures that allow water to flow through obstacles. Culverts allow more salt water to flow through, and because phragmites is sensitive to high salinity levels, it will die off. When phragmites dies off, natural vegetation is able to take root. Since this technique began in the 1980s, it has been used in over 15,000 acres on the



The Essex Great Meadow as it appears today following years of efforts to control invasive phragmites

How to tell the difference between non-native and native phragmites

Plant Color



Stem density



Inflorescence



Source: The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) Factsheet

Connecticut coast.

Another solution that has been worked on for the past few years is the use of biodegradable herbicide application and regulated mowing, which has been endorsed by DEEP. Mowing is used to remove the dense stalks of the plant and allow the opportunity for native species to take root. Mowing also allows for better herbicide application.

Non-native Phragmites australis are a complex and harmful species, and the Essex Land Trust is doing its part to reduce its spread in order to allow native species an opportunity to thrive, helping to create more diverse ecosystems for our community.

Volunteer Spotlight

Jeff Croyle - Leadership in Action

Jeff Croyle's 3-year tenure as land trust President has had a meaningful impact on the organization, characterized by vision, dedication, and lasting improvements. His commitment to conservation and community engagement elevated the organization, setting new standards for stewardship and growth. Through his leadership, Jeff inspired both Board members and volunteers, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to shape the Essex Land Trust's mission and values today.

Jeff became a member and volunteer of Essex Land Trust, first starting as a steward at Windswept Ridge where he managed the incorporation of the 11-acre D'Alessio parcel acquisition into the preserve and its trail system. In 2018, he joined the Board, bringing with him a strong background in human resources that made him a natural fit to lead our Nominating and Volunteer efforts. In 2023, he was elected President and has gone on to guide the organization through a period of meaningful growth and accomplishment.

During Jeff's tenure, the land trust expanded its protected landholdings from 650 to 770 acres through the acquisition of new properties and the expansion of existing preserves, including Turtle Creek and Toby Hill Ridge. He also led the organization through a successful reaccreditation process and the development of a forward-looking strategic plan to guide future stewardship and growth.

Jeff's leadership helped bring several important initiatives to life. These include the creation of the Sharon D. Clark Memorial Garden at Falls River Park—a special place to honor loved ones—as well as key improvements such as the electrification of the Cross Lots Barn, installation of a floating kayak launch at Mill Pond, habitat restoration work at Johnson Farm, and the establishment of a Purple Martin nesting location at Great Meadow. Even while President, Jeff continued with his steward role at Windswept Ridge, partnering with artist, Jennifer Longworth, to create a four-season meditative garden out of natural materials in the woods.

Equally important, Jeff strengthened the land trust from within. He enhanced Board and committee

structure, increased volunteer engagement, growing volunteer hours by more than 10 percent. In 2020 he developed the concept of engaging area environmental scientists to provide land trust stewards and the Board with

information and guidance on a wide range of scientific considerations to better manage our preserves. With help from Board Director, Chet Arnold, the Science and Technical Advisory Committee was born. Along with Preserve Management Director, Leif Owens, he recently established an Invasive Steward position to coordinate invasive species removal across all preserves. His efforts also advanced the organization's social media presence, significantly increasing community awareness and engagement.

When Jeff became President, the land trust truly benefited from a "two-for-one," as his wife, Pam Peters, generously contributed her time and talents to create and maintain three pollinator gardens and serve as steward of the Chestnut Orchard at Cross Lots.

As Jeff steps down from his role as President, we hope he finds more time to enjoy kayaking with Pam and spending time with his grandchildren. Fortunately for us, Jeff will continue to serve as Vice President, where he will remain actively involved in supporting our volunteer network and Nominating Committee.

Jeff has worked tirelessly on behalf of the Essex Land Trust, and his legacy will be felt for years to come. A true measure of leadership is leaving an organization stronger than you found it—and Jeff has done exactly that.



Stewardship for a changing world:

Kicking off forestry project at Johnson Farm with the guidance of UConn expert

By Chet Arnold

Silviculture. Shelterwood treatment. Stand regeneration. Basal area. Desirable growing stock. These terms and the concepts they represent are unfamiliar territory to most of us, but a cadre of Essex Land Trust (ELT) stewards are absorbing this knowledge as they begin to implement our new professionally developed Forest Management Plan at Johnson Farm.

As noted in the last issue of *Woods & Waters*, ELT has embarked on an ambitious project at Johnson Farm to make this preserve healthier, in the process improving wildlife habitat and bolstering climate resilience. This involves a multi-faceted plan that addresses the unique range of landscapes packed within this 49-acre area, including grassland, meadow, shrubland, and forest. The project has substantial financial support from a grant from the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC), but there is a sizeable amount of sweat equity involved, which is being supplied by a group of stewards known as the “Farm Team.”

Even with the new Forest Management Plan to point the way, there are a lot of “whys”, “hows”, and “whens” to line up. For assistance, we’ve turned to UConn faculty member Tom Worthley, a Forestry Stewardship Extension Professor who also moonlights as a member of our Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). In his role as a forest stewardship researcher and educator, Tom felt that this part of the Johnson Farm project could be a valuable case study for owners of similar forest stands around the state. As a result, ELT is getting a level of help above and beyond what



UConn's Tom Worthley (orange helmet) and the Farm Team assess trees in Stand 6. Photo by Kara Bonsack, UConn Extension

like oak and hickory in the overstory, and an understory dominated by large numbers of smaller, largely unhealthy trees, many of them beech and birch.

By estimating the number, species, and diameter of the trees in the stand, it can be determined that the stand is “overstocked,” a crowded condition not conducive to forest health. The prescription: a “shelterwood” treatment that removes some of the less desirable species and sick and damaged trees, opening up the canopy to the larger individuals of desirable species like oak and hickory and letting more sunlight into the forest floor to encourage

the growth of their seedlings. Regenerating a forest stand using shelterwood techniques is a long-term, iterative process – but ELT is in this for the long haul.

As these decisions were made, the team began the task of marking trees to be thinned. Finally, following Tom’s demonstration of techniques for the safe felling of trees, the team began ELT’s first steps toward renovation of the Johnson Farm forest.



ELT Director of Preserves Management Leif Owens marks a tree as Tom Worthley and the Farm Team look on. Photo by Kara Bonsack, UConn Extension.

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We are taking a conservative approach, recognizing that we can always cut down more trees if needed but won't be able to put them back up again (?!). Still, the shelterwood project will continue for many months to come, so don't be alarmed if you visit the preserve and hear the rather atypical noise of chain saws at work! There is no trail through this part of the

preserve, but in time you may be able to see a change from the parking area as more sunlight filters through the canopy. In 5 or 10 years, our new young oak and hickory trees will thank you, as will, we hope, the new species of birds and other wildlife making their home in a healthier, more diverse, and more climate resilient forest.

Connecticut Botanical Society Visits Turtle Creek

By Deb Carreau

On a bright and sunny day, five members of the Connecticut Botanical Society visited Turtle Creek Preserve to help us gain a deeper understanding of the flora found throughout the property. During a carefully studied 2.5-hour walk through the woods, and a preview trip done by two members of the group, they identified more than 100 plant species. Signs of spring were everywhere.

No area was off limits, as members eagerly scrambled down hillsides and explored difficult terrain in search of elusive species such as the native wild rice plant. In fact, one of the participants, Lauren Brown, is the co-author with Ted Elliman, of the 2020 book, *Grasses, Sedges, Rushes: An Identification Guide*, published by Yale University Press.



Photo by Chris Penniman

Chris Penniman, the botanist who recorded and photographed the plants for the walk, was pleased to see so many plants that support birds. She wrote, "The plants here that provide berries or seeds for birds include maple-leaf viburnum, winterberry, blueberry shrubs, black elderberry, serviceberry, Virginia creeper, pokeweed, asters and goldenrods. The group also identified four species of oaks: red, black,



Botanical Society Team Photo by Deb Carreau

white, and pin. Oak trees host the largest number of species of caterpillars of butterflies and moths. Caterpillars are a nutritious, critical food to many birds, as they are the primary food feed to their nestlings."

The group also noted several invasive species, adjacent to the parking lot and in the beach area, which will be addressed over time as part of our ongoing stewardship efforts.

We extend our sincere thanks to the team for their diligence and expertise in helping us develop an inventory of plant species at Turtle Creek. The list of plants will be sent to the land trust. A summary of the trip will be included in the Connecticut Botanical Society's annual report and the list of plants found will be sent to the Yale University Herbarium.



Photo by Chris Penniman

ELT Briefs

Essex Bank's Community Investment Program voting has resulted in the land trust being awarded \$2,172. These funds help to support the land trust's mission in our community. We extend our appreciation and thanks to both Essex Bank and community supporters who voted for the land trust. The program represents the bank's commitment to community banking and to providing donations to non-profits since 1996.



The Essex Land Trust's annual membership campaign is now kicking off. As a §501(c) (3) non-profit organization, we depend on membership dues and donations to fund operating expenses. The land trust's annual Stewardship and Programs activities account for 82% of our total expenses. Our recent mailing included the land trust's Annual Report along with a free copy of the full color updated **Invasive Plants In Your Backyard!** published by the Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District, Inc. We encourage members to renew your dues as soon as possible and at as generous a level as possible. Your continued support helps us to plan future efforts to "Care for our world here at home."

We are issuing a reminder that Spotted Lanternfly (*Lycorma delicatula*) season is here once again. It is a non-native plant pest that poses a threat to Connecticut's environment, residential areas, and agricultural interests. Both Spotted Lanternfly nymphs and adults feed by often sucking sap from the stems and leaves of host plants. Depending on the severity, this can weaken and damage the plant by reducing photosynthesis. The invasive tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) is the preferred host plant, but the insect also feeds on a wide range of crops and plants, including grapes, apples, hops, walnuts, and many Connecticut hardwood trees. For more information and to learn what individuals can do, we recommend the Connecticut DEEP site: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Forestry/Forest-Protection/Spotted-Lanternfly>



Coming Events – Mark Your Calendar!



All of our events are free. Many are weather dependent so please check our Facebook page.
More details available on our website: essexlandtrust.org/events/

Community Concert featuring Melaena Saturday June 27 @ 5:00 PM

Main Street Park, Essex

Enjoy an evening at the Essex Main Street Park with Friends, Live Music, and views of Middle Cove. The Essex Land Trust is hosting the event featuring Melaena, a 6-piece cover band whose sole mission is to perform music that "makes you want to dance." All are welcome: bring your family, friends, picnic baskets, blankets, beverages, and be prepared to sip, dance, and have some fun. Dogs on leash are OK.

Ivoryton July 4 Parade Saturday, July 4; 10:00 AM start Walnut and Main, Ivoryton

The Essex Land Trust will participate in the Annual Ivoryton Fourth of July parade celebrating our Nation's 250th! We will have a tractor and decorated trailer and will spread general good cheer! ELT volunteers, members, and families are encouraged to attend and wear your red, white, and blue! Gather at 9:30 AM. Rain Date is July 5.

Mill Pond Family Paddle Saturday July 25; 10:00 AM Falls River Park, Falls River Drive, Ivoryton

Sue and Bob Cornell, Jean's Island Stewards and avid paddlers will lead a canoe/kayak tour around Mill Pond. Participants must check-in on site, sign a waiver, and launch their boats prior to the 10:00 AM departure. Parking is onsite. Bring a lunch, refreshments and chairs to enjoy socializing at Falls River Park following the paddle. Participants are solely responsible for providing and use of their own equipment, including pfd's. Dogs are permitted and must be secured on the water and on leash on land.

Geocache Adventure Tuesday August 11 @ 3:30 PM The Millrace, Ivory St., Ivoryton

The Essex Library Summer Reading theme this year is "Plant a Seed, Read!" Each week, join Essex Library for a hands-on workshop where we'll explore a different hobby, skill, or craft. The last session is all about Geocaching! In this session,

families will join Essex Land Trust to explore The Millrace property and learn how to use the free Geocache app to join the world's largest treasure hunt by using a GPS-enabled device or smartphone to search for hidden geocaches! Program open to families with children ages 5+. Registration is required at the Essex Library website.

Patriotic Paddle and Picnic Saturday August 29 @ 11:00 AM CT River Museum, Essex

Join the Essex Land Trust and the CT River Museum for an intermediate guided canoe/kayak paddle from Essex village to explore Historic Falls River Cove. Jeff Croyle, Essex Land Trust Vice President will lead the paddle. Participants must check-in on site, sign a waiver, and launch their boats prior to the paddle. Please drive down to the ramp to drop off your boat and gear. Parking is at the Lay House parking (upper) lot of the CT River Museum. Additional street parking is available.

A BYO (Bring your own) picnic on the CT River Museum lawn will follow the paddle at 1:00 PM with the Corinthian Jazz Band performing a blend of American favorites and patriotic tunes, ending with a medley to honor our armed forces. Refreshments will be available for purchase. Decorate your boat and wear red, white, and blue to celebrate the occasion. Participants are solely responsible for providing and use of their own equipment. Dogs are permitted at this event and must be secured on the water and on leash on land.

Other Upcoming events - Save the date!

Hike and History at Osage Trails Saturday September 12 at 10 AM

Source to Sea Cleanup September 19 at 9:00 AM

Hike at Bushy Hill/Platt Preserve Thursday, October 15 at 10:00 AM

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