Woods & Waters
Essex Land Trust Newsletter
Caring for our world here at home
Fall, 2026

Our Connection to Trees

By Susan Scott

Editor's Note: Susan Scott and her family live in Essex and have been Essex Land Trust members and volunteers for many years. Having retired recently, Susan has offered to contribute articles to the Woods & Waters newsletter. This article is a first in a series that will focus on trees, their relationship with humans, Oak trees as keystone species, and their role in our communities.



The land behind my childhood home was populated with towering pine trees. A cluster of them gathered to create a cathedral-sized sanctuary in the middle of the woods. This was a place where the stillness and distinct aroma of the pine forest would make even the busiest mind pause, look up and take a deep breath. In their full magnificence, these pines, living models of longevity and resilience, were a comforting presence in the landscape.

According to a British survey of people's connectedness to nature, 50% of people have a specific, favorite tree in the area where they live. Somewhat amusingly, the survey also found that more people reported having a close bond with trees in their neighborhood than the number of people who said they had a close bond with a neighbor. In other words, sometimes people feel more strongly connected to trees than they do to other people in their community.

Maybe this sense of connection is a natural consequence of the debt of gratitude that humans owe to trees. Throughout the ages, people around the world have relied upon trees to satisfy basic needs like food, shelter, and fuel. Think of all the things that are made from trees – buildings, tools, furniture, toys, books, boats, musical instruments, toilet paper and thousands of other items we use every day. In Norse mythology, even the first humans were made from trees! The Norse god, Odin, and his brothers sculpted a man from the log of an ash tree and a woman from the log of an elm tree and then breathed life into the pair. Many other cultures have regarded trees as sacred symbols of life and repositories of knowledge.

According to the Arbor Day Foundation, 79% of Americans say that "being among trees is my happy place." The restorative value of communing with nature is not just supported by public opinion. Forest bathing— broadly described as quietly spending time in nature with trees and engaging the five senses— has beneficial effects on physical and mental health. Studies have shown that humans benefit when plants and trees, especially conifers, release volatile organic compounds called phytoncides (sounds like "fight-on-sides") as part of their natural defense systems. Phytoncides are released into the air and soil to protect the tree from harmful bacteria, fungi, insects or other pests. Once released into the air, phytoncides help to create the "fresh air" scent of forests. When people inhale phytoncides, it calms the human nervous system, reducing stress hormones, improving immune system functioning and enhancing mood.

People who live in cities also benefit greatly from the presence of trees. Urban parks and other greenspace provide residents with a sense of place that improves

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social cohesion and reduces stress. Trees also improve the urban environment by cooling and filtering the air. Their shade blocks direct sunlight from sidewalks, streets and parking lots, preventing those surfaces from absorbing heat and re-radiating the heat after the sun sets. Meanwhile, trees also release water vapor through the leaves, cooling the air as the water evaporates in a process called evapotranspiration. Forests purify the air by absorbing pollutants (such as ground ozone, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide) and creating healthy ecosystems that reduce the presence of fine particle pollutants in the air. Trees also help mitigate the effects of climate-warming carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Through the process of photosynthesis, trees take in carbon dioxide and water and use sunlight to create and store energy in the form of sugar, releasing oxygen as a by-product. As a result, the carbon is removed from the atmosphere and stored in the physical structure of the tree from the roots to the foliage.



Trees play many different roles in our lives, from the sublime to the scientific to the sentimental. The pine trees that I visited regularly as a child fulfilled all three of those roles. The Essex Land Trust protects and maintains 770 acres of open space where an estimated more than 300,000 trees thrive. There is a good chance that your special tree is nearby!

Who Lives Here - Beyond the Bird House

By Nathan Sage

One of my favorite questions about the Essex Land Trust came from another member: "What is your favorite preserve?" I didn't know how to answer it. With 24 preserves to choose from, there are plenty of possibilities. Since becoming Bird Steward, I've had many opportunities to think about the question—and the more closely, and more often, I visit these places, the harder it becomes to choose just one.

My first assignment sounded straightforward: find the birdhouses. Bird Steward John Mikstay devoted years to building and tending houses, especially at Cross Lots, Johnson Farm and Mill Pond. Building on John's work, I began inventorying, mapping and monitoring the birdhouses, returning monthly to see what changed. I've found nearly all of them. Johnson Farm's mysterious Box #6 still eludes me.



A Johnson Farm Tree Swallow peers from a nest box—a reminder that a "bluebird box" does not necessarily house a bluebird

Finding a box, of course, is only the beginning. Who lives there?

A "bluebird box" doesn't necessarily house an Eastern Bluebird. Tree Swallows, House Wrens, Black-capped Chickadees and other native cavity nesters may move in. Sometimes the nest reveals the occupant: feathers suggest a Tree Swallow; sticks point toward a House Wren; moss may indicate a chickadee. House Sparrows present a different challenge: this introduced, non-native species also occupies nest boxes and can displace native birds.

Different birds need different homes—and sometimes something much bigger than a home. While we have not confirmed Bobolinks yet at Johnson Farm, they depend on open meadows—grassland birds that need considerably more than a wooden box. They

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need the right habitat. At Great Meadow, a Connecticut Ornithological Association grant helped establish the Purple Martin gourd colony. Kristin and Leif Owens have lovingly tended the gourds, a Purple Martin "condo" built for a colony; Kristin even played Purple Martin calls on spring mornings, hoping to attract a returning "scout." At Mill Pond, a Wood Duck box rises above the wetland.



An Eastern Bluebird pauses on an Essex Land Trust boundary marker.



A Wood Duck box rises above the wetland at Jean's Island / Mill Pond

Monthly monitoring has taught me that no preserve stays the same. Migrating birds arrive and depart. Nests appear, fill and empty. Meadows grow. Familiar calls disappear and new ones replace them.

Bird stewardship has also introduced me to fellow bird enthusiasts—or "Twitchers," as I've come to affectionately call us—sometimes as early as six in the morning. Jim Denham has become my birding guru, generously sharing his remarkable knowledge of birds, wildlife and the preserves; ornithologist Lisa Wahle has brought scientific expertise to our surveys; and Myron Stacks has provided the practical know-how—including helping relocate a birdhouse from the chestnut orchard to the pollinator garden at Cross Lots. Along the way, I've met fellow stewards, board members and neighbors, and many have become friends.

And when you go looking for birds, you never quite know what else you'll find. I've listened for owls in the woods after dark, attempted a bird survey during a windy storm—not recommended—and, on a recent visit to Windswept Ridge Preserve, watched a bobcat suddenly bound from the preserve and across neighboring lawns.

I've learned that preserves aren't simply parcels of protected land or lists of species. We develop relationships with places. We return through different seasons—and different seasons of our own lives. We watch things hatch, migrate, disappear and return. And we change, too.

So, what is my favorite preserve?

The answer isn't one preserve. Johnson Farm has its Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows; Great Meadow its elusive Purple Martins; Mill Pond and Jean's Island its Wood Ducks; Osage Trails its Bald Eagles, Ospreys and Great Egrets. Each place provides something different.

Introducing our new Bird Steward - Nathan Sage



Nathan Sage is the Essex Land Trust Bird Steward and conservation professional who recently returned to Essex after nearly two decades working internationally with USAID Foreign Service. His career has focused on conservation, coastal resource management, and climate resilience around the world. Now back home in Connecticut, Nathan can often be found exploring the Land Trust's preserves—looking for birds, learning from fellow stewards and birders, and occasionally searching for a missing birdhouse.

Volunteer Spotlight: Juliana Barrett

Is There an Ecologist in the House?

By Chet Arnold



When it comes down to it, a land trust deals mostly with native habitats. Wouldn't it be ideal, then, for the Essex Land Trust (ELT) to have access to an expert ecologist? Someone, say, who is well known for their extensive knowledge of Connecticut plants, their expertise on invasive species, and a leading expert on climate resilience to boot? Well, this ideal scenario actually exists for ELT, which is lucky enough to have benefitted from the assistance of UConn's Dr. Juliana Barrett for a long time.

Juliana is widely known, of course, for her membership on the land trust's Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC). But her resume is a bit longer than that. A native of Delaware, Juliana got her PhD from the UConn Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and spent eight years with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Connecticut Chapter. In 2006, she returned to UConn as an Extension Educator with CT Sea Grant and the Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR), where she developed programs for communities on coastal habitat restoration. Her expertise extends beyond the coast, however: for instance, she is co-author of the book The Vegetation of Connecticut: A Preliminary Classification, which describes native habitats statewide. She soon added to her focus on habitats by becoming an early adopter on the topic of climate change education, co-creating both the Climate Adaptation Academy, an information exchange for town officials, and the Climate Corps, an undergraduate course in which student teams conduct climate-related projects for communities.

It took several of us old-time board member types, representing thousands of years history with ELT (or thereabouts), to piece together a record of Juliana's contributions. "Looking back, it's really remarkable how many of our properties and projects have benefitted from Juliana's expertise," says Vice President Bob Nussbaum. "Her willingness to help continues to amaze me." Here's an abbreviated list of some of the assistance she's provided, in approximate chronological order:

- Contributed to the Platt property grant proposal.
- Helped develop a management plan for Heron Pond, supervising several students from the Yale School of Forestry.
- Together with several other UConn faculty members and experts, used Cross Lots as a model for developing statewide guidance on the development of habitat-based management plans for open space preserves. This led to an ELT wildlife habitat grant from USDA focused on Cross Lots.
- Provided a biological assessment of what would become the Woodja Hill property, which again contributed to a successful grant from the state.
- Advised the Millrace stewards on invasive species control and created a planting plan for a section of the preserve's Falls River frontage.
- Provided the scientific basis for the riparian assessments done by Valley High School students on Osage Trails and the Millrace.
- Advised Pond Meadow stewards on invasives control.
- Provided yet another assessment, this one of Turtle Creek prior to our assuming ownership of the preserve from The Nature Conservancy.

That's eight ELT properties! But the preserve garnering most of Juliana's attention for the past two years has been Johnson Farm. After numerous site visits to analyze the early successional (meadow/shrub) half of the preserve, Juliana authored our new Management Plan for the area in 2024. Since then, she has been advising the Johnson Farm Team on implementing that plan. For these last two tasks, both very involved and time-consuming, ELT has been able to use grant funds to pay her for her time -- but at bargain basement rates that still lean heavily toward volunteerism! Leif Owens, former Director of Preserves Management, says "Juliana has been involved from Day 1 with our effort to improve the habitat value and resiliency of Johnson Farm. She has guided our every step on renovating the meadow and shrubland areas." Juliana has recently retired from UConn, but her time remains in great demand statewide. The land trust will continue to clamor loudly for our (unfair) share of it!



New Essex Open Space Trail Guide Published

By Jim Denham

The Essex Land Trust has published its 2026 Guide to Essex Open Space Preserves, an update of the 2019 edition. The format remains the same with individual preserve descriptions including its history, flora and fauna, trail details and location access, all accompanied with updated preserve maps. Photo images have also been updated. The 48-page guide includes both land trust preserves as well as Town of Essex properties.

Generous funding from the Paul Foundation and support from Essex Bank, Essex Financial and Essex Printing were invaluable in bringing this project to reality. Copies are for sale for $19.95 at various local retail outlets, notably The Griswold Inn Shop, The Connecticut River Museum, Gracie's Corner, Essex Hardware, and Wild Birds Unlimited of Old Saybrook.

The land trust has also updated preserve maps and brochures on the website. These are available free for downloading: https://essexlandtrust.org/preserve-profiles/



Your Membership Matters

Your membership is vital to the future of the land trust. Members show their commitment by providing annual financial support and contributing their time as volunteers. Importantly, over 80% of our expenses are dedicated to ongoing preserve stewardship and programs. The Essex Land Trust thrives thanks to a broad community of members who renew annually to support our mission.

We also want to remind our members that year-end timing is ideal for tax effective giving. Many land trust members have successfully saved for their retirement years and find that the IRA required distribution rule leaves them with more than they need. Qualified Charitable Donations allow contributions to favored charities that may reduce the tax burden from these annual IRA distributions.

With the holiday season approaching, have you thought about giving an Essex Land Trust membership to a family member or friend?

ELT's New Preserve Management Director - John Hincks

By Jeff Croyle

The Essex Land Trust Board is excited to announce that John Hincks has agreed to take over the role of Preserve Management Director now that Leif Owens has moved to Nevada. John joined the Board in 2025 shortly after he and his wife Anne moved to Essex. His hands on management consulting expertise in scaling small businesses and non-profit organizations by leveraging technology and social media has been incredibly valuable to the ELT and important to our continued growth and outreach.

John is an active outdoorsman and well suited to his new role. He will continue his role as Finance Committee Chair, member on our Land Acquisition Committee, and contribute to our social media strategy.

The Board thanks Leif for his 5+ years on the Board and successfully leading our stewards, improving and expanding our preserves and all his organizational work and progress to date in our massive Johnson Farm climate resilience project. For continuity purposes, Leif will remain on the Board through the end of the year. We wish Leif and Kristen all the best in their move West to be closer to their daughter, son-in-law and grandchild.



Social Media - Be Part of the Essex Land Trust Community

In the last three years, the land trust been able to expand its social media communications to reach over 2,100 Facebook and Instagram followers. Our social media is a great way to stay connected with the places you enjoy. Follow along for nature discoveries, preserve news, events, and ideas for exploring Essex. Share your own photos and experiences and connect with others who love the outdoors.

We encourage our members to follow us on your Facebook and Instagram account: @essexlandtrust.org

Our Website

The Essex Land Trust has a wealth of information about all matters related to the land trust. It also includes useful educational information, much of it available to be downloaded. We keep the website updated and encourage all those interested to visit the site on a regular basis. Many questions about the organization, its mission and activities can be answered by simply logging onto the site. Bookmark our website (www.essexlandtrust.org) on your browser or scan this QR code for easy access.



The website's masthead shows the many areas that can be accessed. Each item is a drop down menu featuring relevant and related topics.

- The **About** menu concerns the land trust's mission, organization, features its latest annual report, and related topics.
- **Membership & Support** details our membership levels and how individuals can donate, make memorial tributes, and importantly, volunteer.
- Have a question about land trust **Preserves**? This drop down menu shows the town's open space areas and provides detailed preserve descriptions. Each preserve has its own brochure, a map of its trails and lists the stewards responsible for the preserve. We also include information about our 48 page full color trail guide and where it can be purchased, the location of pollinator gardens, and our public use and dog policy.
- The **Projects** section features significant long-term projects which the land trust is embarked on, i.e., the Johnson Farm Project for managing biodiversity and resiliency.
- Want to participate in one of the land trust's **Events**? Our calendar of upcoming events is listed here with a description and details of timing and locations.
- The **Explorers** menu is focused on families and children. Getting outdoors can be a stimulating experience. We have interesting information about flora and fauna and encourage exploring to make new discoveries, have adventures, develop friendships, and have just plain fun.
- Finally, our **News** and **Resources** tabs include recent copies of our Woods & Waters newsletter, information about Ospreys, tick safety, and invasive plants. We also include links to other land trusts and a range of environmental organizations.

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/

Thursday Morning Hike at Bushy Hill/ Platt Preserve

Thursday, October 15 at 10:00 AM
Bushy Hill Road, Ivoryton

Join us for a Thursday morning guided hike ex ploring the Bushy Hill and Platt Preserves which we are pleased to be co-sponsoring with the Valley Shore YMCA. Our Bushy Hill and Platt Preserves are a local gem. The preserve is fully wooded and hugs the Falls River in the southern part of the Platt Property. Terry Stewart, the steward of our Platt Preserve, will lead the hike. There are a lot of interesting features including a mountain laurel maze, foot bridges, and a cascade on the Falls River. This hike will be 1.5 hours over moderate terrain. Please arrive by 9:45 AM for a timely start. Park at the Bushy Hill Preserve Trailhead and on Bushy Hill Road. You will be directed by our team. Dogs are ok and must be on leash at all times.

Ivoryton Pumpkin Chase

Saturday, October 17 at 9:00 AM
Ivoryton Village Green

Supported by the Essex Land Trust, this race benefits the Ivoryton Library and its programs. A portion of the run goes through our Falls River Preserve. Registration is online and check-in is at the Ivoryton Village green starting at 7:30 am. Race starts at 8:30 am for children and at 9:00 for adults.



Trek-or-Treat

Saturday, October 24, 11:30 AM-1 PM
Millrace Preserve, Ivory Street, Ivoryton

The Essex Land Trust and Town Libraries are joining the Pumpkin Festival this year! Join Essex Land Trust, Essex Library and Ivoryton Library for a family hike through The Millrace Preserve! Kids and families are invited to solve silly Halloween riddles as they walk along a festive path, enjoy a treat afterward courtesy of ELT, and take home a fun craft kit, courtesy of the libraries! This is a 15-30 min self-guided hike, come any time during the scheduled time frame! This program is free and open to the public. In the event of rain, this program will not be held. Dogs are not permitted at this event.

Thanksgiving Hike at Canfield Meadow Woods

Saturday, November 28 at 10:30 AM
Book Hill Trailhead, Book Hill Woods Road, Essex

Did you overindulge? No problem, take a break from your Thanksgiving festivities and enjoy a hike with your land trust friends. We will be stretching our legs and exploring the Canfield Meadow Woods Preserve guided by Canfield Steward Tom Soboleski. This 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 like one of Connecticut's oldest poplar trees and a platform for some great views. Dogs are ok and must be on leash at all times.

Fall Reserve Cleanups

Dates, Times and Locations to be announced

Please watch for updates with the specific locations for our Fall Cleanup on our Facebook page.

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