

NEW YORK UPDATE | SPRING/SUMMER | 2021

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IN THIS ISSUE

Protecting Plum Island

A Slam Dunk for Oysters

Songs to Fill the Air

Saving the Forest for the Trees

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The Nature Conservancy is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) international membership organization. Its mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

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Celebrating Conservation Milestones



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Dear Friend,

As the natural world awakens this spring, The Nature Conservancy in New York would like to thank you for your ongoing support as we commit to a future where all of nature, including humanity, thrives. And as we celebrate nature, we applaud the people who take meaningful actions for the planet. We also acknowledge that science and conservation are best advanced by the leadership and contributions of people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and identities who reflect the communities they serve.

Scientists and conservationists, donors and philanthropists, farmers, fishers and more are all working toward a brighter tomorrow. They inspire us today and every day. And by partnering with them, we are achieving extraordinary things across the state of New York. This year, despite incredible challenges, we achieved groundbreaking results:

- Setting the course for a renewable energy future, we launched our Solar Roadmap, which demonstrates where Long Island can help New York meet its climate and clean energy goals by siting commercial and utility-scale solar energy. Solar could power some 4.8 million New York homes. Importantly, we can install solar cells on low-impact sites such as parking lots, capped landfills and commercial building rooftops, thus avoiding impacts to wildlife and natural habitats.
- We're accelerating forest conservation in New York and neighboring states so that wildlife can safely move to new habitat to adapt to climate change. We're securing key wildlife corridors in the United States and around the world, and tapping into the power of trees to mitigate climate impacts.
- Charting a course for abundant waters, we've worked with fishers, scientists and environmental advocates to protect a key source of food for a diverse array of marine life: Atlantic menhaden. These efforts are paying off, with dolphin and whale populations returning in record numbers off New York's shores and up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

Yet, despite the myriad successes we've had, we face immense challenges ahead. Pollution plagues our fresh and marine waters, climate change degrades our forests and woodlands, and unsustainable practices threaten our fish, birds and wildlife. These threats harm the environment and human health and put economically important industries at risk.

We can't solve the world's biggest challenges alone. Together, we are harnessing the power of nature to protect the thing that matters most: our home. Thank you for your support.

Bill Ulfelder
Executive Director
The Nature Conservancy in New York



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Plum Island is an oasis for endangered and rare species of plants and animals. Some 227 bird species have been counted here, and its waters include one of the few remaining seagrass meadows in Long Island Sound. It's also the largest seal haul-out area in southern New England; the rocky coast hosts hundreds of grey and harbor seals each winter.

Protecting the Mysterious Plum Island

“All islands carry a certain mystery, but Plum Island has more than its share of stories and secrets,” says Marian Lindberg, conservation specialist for The Nature Conservancy in New York. Tucked away into eastern Long Island Sound, Plum Island is an 820-acre gem that not many people have seen. It was purchased by the federal government for military use 120 years ago and is the site of a coastal fortification called Fort Terry, as well as a laboratory that conducted classified research on contagious animal diseases since the 1950s.

While Plum Island sits just 100 miles east of New York City, its relative isolation has allowed plants and wildlife to flourish in an otherwise heavily developed region. But in 2008, this national treasure—with its vast historic, cultural and natural resources—was designated by Congress for sale to the highest bidder.

Now, after 12 years of collaboration with scores of organizations and individuals, The Nature Conservancy and partners are heralding a landmark win to remove Plum Island from the auction block. Land protection specialists, policy experts, historic preservationists and others helped pave the way for the island to be conserved.

Greg Jacob, senior policy advisor for the Conservancy, explains that last-minute deal-making in the Senate secured the repeal of the sale as part of the Omnibus Budget bill (the stimulus bill). The measure was approved by Congress in December 2020 and signed by the President the day after Christmas, paving the way for federal agencies and New York State to agree on new ownership and management.

“The ultimate goal is a conservation outcome, with limited public access, protection for sensitive areas, and stabilization of the Fort Terry buildings,” Jacob explains.

Input from ecologists, Long Island’s First Nations, military history buffs, business representatives, local government and others helped imagine a future for Plum Island. The hope is to open much of the island for guided visitation and ecological/historical research. Another possibility is opening a small museum about the island’s fascinating history, from Native American use for fishing and trading trips across the Sound to the court-martial of Fort Terry’s commander in 1914.

Until then, for most of us, Plum Island remains shrouded in mystery.

Visit nature.org/savingplumisland



An athlete in love with the sea, Sue Wicks grew up on Long Island, clamming with her siblings and bayman father, all the while honing her basketball skills. At Rutgers University, she became an All-American and Player of the Year, then hooped professionally in Europe and Japan before joining the WNBA in its inaugural, 1997 season. She played six years with the New York Liberty, the league's Big Apple franchise.

A Slam Dunk for Oysters

Oyster farming has more in common with women's basketball than one might think. There's the teamwork involved, the dedication and the physical labor. Sue Wicks, former WNBA all-star and native Long Islander, expected all that when she took up oyster farming in Moriches Bay. But she never anticipated that her fledgling farm—and the nation's oyster industry as a whole—would be put at risk by a pandemic. In the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 flared, her usual sales of 6,000 oysters a week dropped to 500. She started working solo, handling work on the water by herself that she says had been “a team sport” until then. Wicks began to question the future of her business.

Luckily for Wicks and three dozen New York oyster farmers like her, she got a valuable assist through a Nature Conservancy program called SOAR: (Supporting Oyster Aquaculture and Restoration). Recognizing that oyster reefs offer important ecological benefits, including water filtration and habitat for young fish, the program purchased 20,000 of Wicks' farmed oysters and, with the help of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, moved them to local restoration sites to help build natural oyster reefs.

“This is a big score,” says Adam Starke, New York estuary scientist for The Nature Conservancy. “The participating farmers get paid for oysters they otherwise wouldn't be able to sell. And nature—including all of us—wins because oysters play a critical role in the coastal ecosystems we depend upon.”

For oyster farmers like Wicks who are concerned not only about the survival of their businesses but also about the ecosystems that allow them to thrive, SOAR has enabled them to stay in the game during a difficult time. For the next two years, SOAR will extend \$2 million in payments to oyster farmers to support more than 100 shellfish companies and preserve over 200 critical jobs in northern New England, the Mid-Atlantic and Washington state. Over five million oysters will be deployed nationwide to rebuild imperiled native shellfish reefs across 20 restoration sites.

“That's good news for our environment and our economy.” Wicks says, “I think what makes you an oyster farmer is radical optimism. You can't miss a season and say, ‘I'm going to sit this one out.’”



© Kent Mason

Across New York, we are using cutting-edge science to protect and restore woodlands that will withstand climate change—anchoring a broad Nature Conservancy effort to safeguard swaths of resilient, connected forests from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to the boreal forests of Canada. This 179-million-acre region stores millions of tons of carbon, sustains communities and provides a habitat bridge for wildlife, such as birds, bobcat and moose, to move through.

Songs to Fill the Air

Nothing heralds the arrival of spring like birdsong. But the calls you hear echoing through the woods today may be different from the ones you heard when you were growing up.

Nature is on the move as warmer temperatures, increased flooding and other climate impacts alter and destroy habitat, forcing species to search for new homes. And birds aren't the only example—in North America, animals are moving an average of 11 miles north and 36 feet higher in elevation each decade. Climate change is altering the home ranges and migration routes of animals worldwide.

To help address this threat, The Nature Conservancy is focused on accelerating forest protection and restoration and securing key wildlife corridors—places that wildlife need to move safely to new habitat.

The forests and valleys stretching from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains to the Canadian Maritimes and beyond function as a climate life raft for North American species—but currently only 21% of the area's protected. New York's forest stand out as a stronghold, anchoring the larger area. We are focused on accelerating forest protection and restoration here and in neighboring states because this landscape is paramount to a thriving future for all of nature, humanity and wildlife included.

“Now is our last chance to conserve and restore a vast, connected ecosystem on the East Coast. Our work in New York is central to that goal,” explains Dirk Bryant, the Conservancy's New York director of lands. “We use science and work with partners to put that knowledge into action. We have innovated new ways to help towns and landowners revitalize their forests. And we are ramping up programs that transform privately owned forests into powerhouses of capturing carbon, a major contributor to climate change.”

One of these programs, Working Woodlands, helps landowners conserve and sustainably manage their forests and generate third-party-verified carbon credits for sale. Working Woodlands now has more than 200,000 acres under management in six states (including New York), and our goal is to expand this program to sequester more than seven million tons of CO₂ by 2030.

While our forests may harbor different species of birds in the future, with this effort underway, we can rest assured that come spring, birdsong will continue to fill the air.

Visit nature.org/workingwoodlands to find out more.

By the Numbers

The Nature Conservancy works to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Our 70 years of experience, our network of partners and our practical know-how are achieving long-lasting and meaningful results across New York and around the world as we tackle climate change and secure healthy lands, waters and oceans. With nature, we can build a healthier, more equitable and resilient world for future generations.

Thanks to your support, we are achieving conservation successes throughout New York, from the tip of Montauk to the High Peaks of the Adirondacks and the Great Lakes and beyond. The world we depend on depends on us. Here are some of our recent successes.

500,000

oysters recently replanted in local shellfish restoration areas across New York's bays and harbors

5,000

pounds of nitrogen prevented from leaching into local waters daily due to upgrades at Nassau County's Bay Park Wastewater Treatment Plant

\$250,000

in direct economic relief to New York oyster farmers struggling due to the impacts of COVID-19

106

coastal parcels in Mastic Beach recently protected, allowing nature to act as the first line of defense against community flooding

90%

decrease in nitrogen pollution thanks to a new Suffolk County law requiring new or major reconstruction projects to install clean-water septic systems

5,000

forested acres conserved across the Black River Valley and Tug Hill landscapes to secure climate-resilient habitat for wildlife

12

miles of trails at The Nature Conservancy-owned Deer Lick Conservation Area in the Zoar Valley

60

partners spanning the Northern Appalachians participate in our Staying Connected Initiative to enhance important wildlife corridors

100

miles of river reconnected in New York, protecting important wildlife habitat and reducing the risk of flooding to communities

12

years of dedicated effort helped set the stage for future protection of Plum Island—an 820-acre oasis for rare and endangered species

75

Nature Conservancy-owned preserves with public access being assessed for expanded opportunities trail

1954

the year of The Nature Conservancy's first land preservation purchase, the Mianus River Gorge

50th

anniversary celebrated this year by our Adirondack chapter

128

feet is the tallest basswood tree in the Northeast, found in protected lands in the Zoar Valley



Prairie warbler. © John Leon

Saving the Forest for the Trees

Deep in the ancient Mayan Forest of Belize, a jaguar is hunting. Perched near the edge of the water, where a tapir drinks, she freezes—then lunges forward with immense force and speed. Water splashes as the tapir thrashes about. This time, the jaguar loses her hold and the tapir trots away.

For the jaguar and big cats like her throughout the world, human encroachment and deforestation are causing her habitat, and that of her prey, to shrink—threatening their survival.

But forests are not only critical for wildlife, they also hold the key to mitigating climate change. Just one mature tree can sequester as much as 48 pounds of carbon per year, keeping it out of the atmosphere. When trees are cut down, the carbon they store is released.

The land here is also home to vibrant Mayan communities. Many continue to practice traditional farming techniques and steward the forest as they have for generations.

However, development pressures are greater than ever before. Traditional small-scale production is giving way to extensive agriculture and ranching, posing a threat for this vast and unique resource.

The Nature Conservancy's efforts seek to transform the region into a green economy that allows people and nature to thrive. With an unprecedented coalition of public and private partners, we are working with the government of Belize to ensure that the land is permanently conserved through the acquisition of the available properties—260,000 acres of lush habitat that will not be seen again, the crucial missing link within a network of reserves, national parks and protected areas.

Protecting the Maya Forest secures habitat for iconic wildlife and maintains an ecosystem that contains huge stores of carbon—which means the world can breathe easier. And the jaguar can thrive as an inextricable part of a precious and protected ecosystem.

We have a rare opportunity to protect two available properties in the Maya Forest, the largest remaining forest in Belize and a global biodiversity hotspot. The mahogany and pine savanna tropical forest that comprise these properties are home to over 400 species of birds and 70 species of mammals, including the largest populations of jaguars and other native cats in Central America.



© Lara T. Tonidandel

With private and public sectors and local communities, The Nature Conservancy is reducing deforestation and forest degradation to conserve or restore millions of acres of forests worldwide.

After the Amazon, Mesoamerica's 35 million-acre Maya Forest is the largest remaining tropical rainforest in the Americas. Stretching across Belize, northern Guatemala and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, the Maya Forest provides refuge for countless rare and endangered species like white-lipped peccary, tapir, scarlet macaw, harpy eagle and howler monkey.



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BEAUTIFUL AND BOUNTIFUL MEADOWS SPRING TO LIFE

Meadows and grasslands are some of the world’s most threatened—and overlooked—natural areas.

Across New York, The Nature Conservancy is restoring these areas that provide needed habitat for a community of climate-threatened birds and other wildlife species, such as the American goldfinch, woodcock, monarch butterfly and several important pollinators like bats and bumble bees.

Consider a walk at one of our spectacular meadow restoration sites in New York: Thousand Acre Swamp, Chaumont Barrens, Rob’s Trail, Uplands Farm Sanctuary and David Weld Preserve. For detailed information about these preserves and other places to visit, check out nature.org/newyork