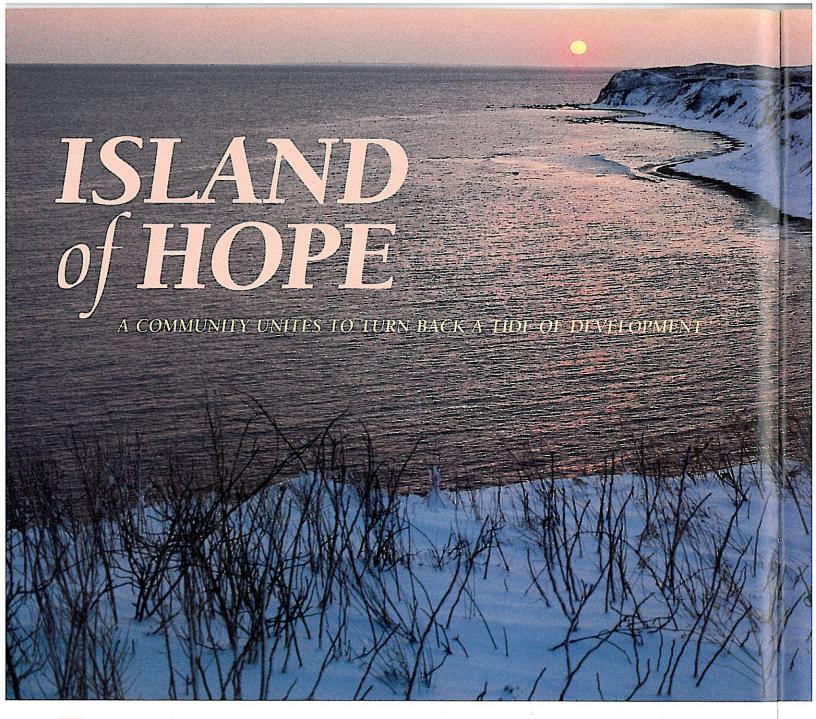
## JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1992 ONSENVALORY ONSENVAL

New England's ISLAND of HOPE

THE HERITAGE NETWORK:

DETECTIVES OF DIVERSITY

ROCKY MOUNTAIN REFUGE FOR BIGHORN SHEEP



ob Lewis, a 73-year-old retired sea captain, gazes out the window of his gray-shingled home on Block Island, a teardrop of land 12 miles off the coast of Rhode Island. His hands clasped behind his back, Lewis appears to have returned to the helm of his ship, calmly surveying the sea of rolling hills and grasslands before him.

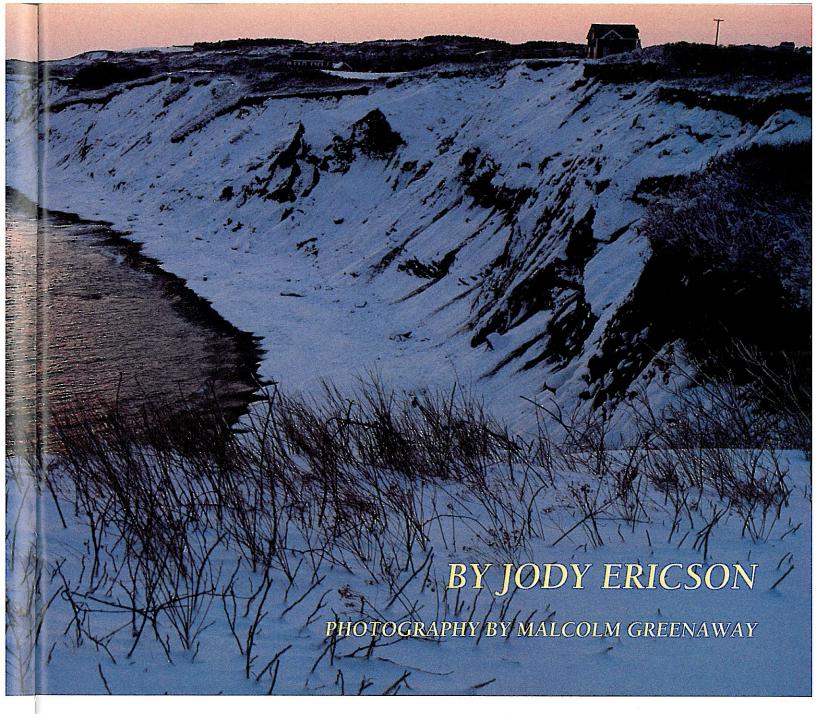
Only two decades ago, a tide of development threatened to engulf these lands, which had provided a safe harbor for four generations of Lewis's ancestors—and a refuge for a wide variety of migratory birds and threatened species. A building boom had hit Block Island, a popular summer tourist destination, and there seemed to be no stopping it.

Then the tide hit Rodman's Hollow, a favored spot over-

looking the Atlantic. Out-of-state developers bought part of the shadbush-covered chasm and announced plans to turn it into a housing subdivision.

"People were alarmed, but no one had the courage to do anything," recalls Lewis, barefoot and clad in typically informal attire: dungaree shorts, a short-sleeved shirt and a floppy fishing hat.

The former sea captain decided to send out an SOS—literally. He and a handful of volunteers printed up and sold fluorescent orange "S.O.S." (Save Open Space) bumper stickers as part of an island-wide publicity campaign to save the Hollow from bulldozers. Eventually Lewis's group, which called itself the Block Island Conservancy, raised enough money to purchase a key piece of the Hollow and protect it.



A "LAST GREAT PLACE"

Since then, cooperative efforts by residents such as Lewis, state and federal agencies, and conservation groups have set aside almost one quarter of the island as open space. Thanks to their work, birds, insects and plants all but crushed by civilization on the mainland persist here.

But Block Island is not merely a refuge for wildlife. It supports a vibrant, active human community that swells

from 800 in the winter to thousands in the summer. The island's beaches attract swarms of visitors,

and an entire industry has sprung up around servicing them: fast-food stands, shops, bed-and-breakfasts, bicycle and moped rentals.

"The island proves that it's possible for a community to

take responsibility for itself and still have a viable economy," says Dennis Wolkoff, a Nature Conservancy official who works on projects on the island.

BLOCK ISLAND'S GENESIS STRETCHES back 400 centuries, when it was carved out of the Earth by two advances of the same glacier that formed Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and Long Island. In addition to bringing the rocks and soil that

formed the island, the glaciers also provided a bridge for animals to migrate from the mainland. Then

the ice receded and left the land surrounded by water.

From Sandy Point, its northernmost extremity, to Mohegan Bluffs, towering 200 feet above the Atlantic, the island runs a mere seven miles. Its freshwater ponds mirroring the late afternoon sky, its hills and flocks of wild geese like black embroidery on the horizon, the place has an ethereal quality.

The land gently undulates under green, white and pink clusters of shadbush and beach roses, and dwarf-like forests, gnarled and weather-beaten, are the only seams in this tear-shaped mass. Grasslands harbor species of plants, animals and insects not seen in decades on the adjacent mainland.

Among these species are the American burying beetle and the northern harrier. The beetle is an endangered insect that uses small carrion (such as the island's numerous pheasant chicks) to feed its young (see "Nature's Undertaker" on page 20). The northern harrier is a ground-nesting bird that was once common on the mainland, but has become scarcer as its habitat has given way to forests or development.

Similarly, several other species of grassland birds once common on mainland Rhode Island—including the grasshopper sparrow and the upland sandpiper—are now found in the state only on Block Island. Even more significantly, the island is an important stopover for migrant land birds making their way south in the fall.

BLOCK ISLANDERS HAVE ALWAYS lived in ways that kept them connected to, and dependent upon, their immediate environment. Rob Lewis's family was one of many that raised chickens, cows and crops to support themselves, and Lewis himself joined a long line of Block Islanders who sought their fortunes on the seas.

But it is a grade-school lecturer, Elizabeth Dickens, who is widely credited with planting the seed of conservation on the island nearly 100 years ago. The story goes that Dickens was out hunting for her dinner one night and shot what she thought was a common goose. But on closer inspection, she found that she had killed an exotic black swan. Dickens was so distraught that she dedicated her life to bird conservation and thereafter would lecture on the topic to the island's schoolchildren and others.

"Her lectures were an hour, but they seemed as though they were much shorter," recalls Lewis, who first heard Dickens speak more than 60 years ago. He talks often of the times he and his classmates would take bird walks around the island during migration and conduct a bird census on the day after Christmas—"even if there was a blizzard."

Dickens could always be found in the midst of the noisy cadre of census-taking youngsters—wearing a long black dress, thick cotton stockings and men's sneakers laced up to her ankles—telling a story about a bird. "He dressed in such a hurry that he put his clothes on backward," she might say of the bobolink. "All of his beautiful markings are on his back."

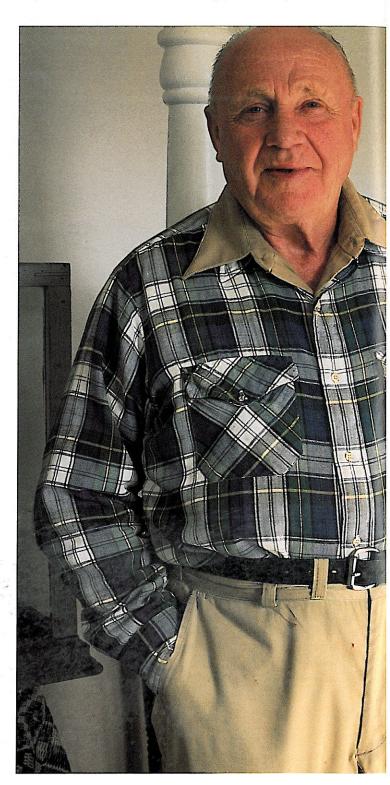
The seed that Dickens sowed in Lewis and her other stu-

Grade-school lecturer Elizabeth Dickens (*inset*, with her collection of stuffed birds) is credited with planting the seed of conservation on Block Island. Among her students was Rob Lewis (*right*), who went on to found the Block Island Conservancy.

dents began to sprout in the sixties, when bucolic Block Island suddenly became a mecca for tourists and their summer homes. The island was soon up for grabs, with developers plotting subdivisions and pounding "For Sale" signs in every available bit of soil.

The conservation spirit burst into full flower in the early seventies, when the news came that Rodman's Hollow would be carved up into a dozen house lots. Lewis, who had retired and was serving on the town's planning board, began to mobilize islanders against the proposed subdivision.

Although others shared his concern, "they would just throw up their hands and say, 'We don't have the money to buy it'," Lewis recalls. His standard reply: "How do you know



if you don't try?"

And try he did. In November 1972, the Block Island Conservancy was formed with the retired ship's captain as its president. Within a few months the group was working with the town, The Nature Conservancy and federal and state agencies to raise the money to purchase 37 key acres of Rodman's Hollow. Some 10 years and numerous battles later, it succeeded. Eventually The Nature Conservancy would buy 114 acres of the Hollow for \$1.6 million.

The battle over Rodman's Hollow was only the beginning. The conservation spirit spread, and Block Islanders began turning down million-dollar real estate deals in favor of protecting their land. There were the Laphams, who in 1978

offered The Nature Conservancy a conservation easement to 135 acres of valuable land bordering the island's clay bluffs, along with rights to follow paths there. Not only did they want to protect the property, they wanted people to enjoy it. So David Lapham also volunteered to maintain an estimated 50 miles of paths himself.

In 1982, Block Islander Bill Lewis, Rob Lewis's brother, sold 142 acres of his farm to The Nature Conservancy for \$800,000—far less than its market value. A few years later another life-long resident, Adrian Mitchell, would make a similar sacrifice. When his mother died, Mitchell sold the development rights to his small farm to the Block Island Land Trust for a fraction of their value—only enough to



pay his inheritance tax.

Other members of the Lewis family have gotten into the act as well—chief among them Rob Lewis's son, Keith. With his thin, jaw-line beard and dark, bushy eyebrows, Keith's resemblance to the photographs of his father as a young seaman is startling. And Keith's similarity to his father is more than physical—he, too, goes to sea on merchant ships.

Keith can trace his interests in conservation back to a time when he was eight years old and sitting in the back of the family car with a friend. "We were driving past an open field, and the friend said to me, 'Wouldn't that look nice with houses on it?' Oh, but I thought it was a horrible idea," says Lewis.

Keith Lewis has followed in his father's footsteps by working tirelessly on behalf of the island. He once spent an entire year—at his own expense—lobbying for a local real estate transfer tax to raise money to help buy more open space. And he sold most of his 84 acres of water-view property (partly inherited from his father) to the Conservancy for \$125,000. Had he sold the land to a developer, it's estimated he could have made as much as \$6 million.

"Here's a guy who owned a great deal of land and has essentially given it away at a great personal sacrifice," says Dennis Wolkoff. "What a tremendous example for others; what a great salesman he makes for conservation."

The success of protection efforts on Block Island is not sim-



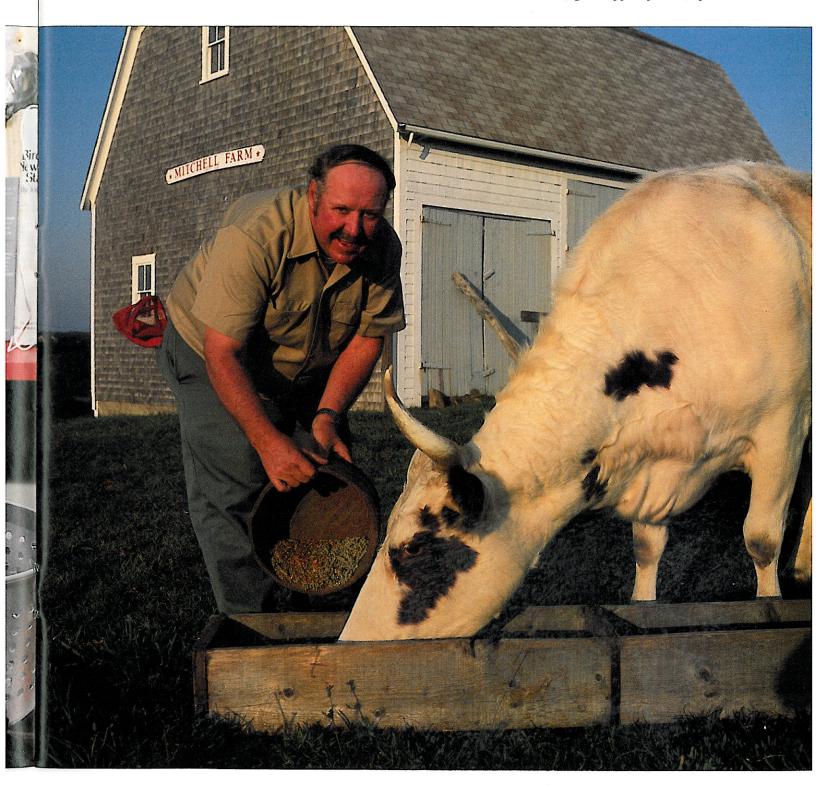
ply the result of individual actions; private groups and government agencies also played important roles. Some of the key private organizations include the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, the Block Island Land Trust, the R.K. Mellon Foundation, and the Champlin Foundations (which have donated \$2 million a year for land preservation in Rhode Island). On the government end, the Rhode Island

Facing page: Elise Lapham (pictured with a great crested flycatcher) and her late husband, David, protected 135 acres of their valuable seaside property. *This page*: Adrian Mitchell, head of the island's road crew, sold his farm's development rights to a local land trust for a fraction of their value.

Department of Environmental Management has purchased key parcels of land and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has worked to identify ways to preserve the island's endangered species and expand it's own refuge on the island.

NOWHERE ARE the results of these various conservation efforts more tangible than on the 274-acre Lewis-Dickens Farm, which encompasses land donated or sold by the Lewis family and their neighbor, Elizabeth Dickens. The farm supports the highest concentration of rare and endangered species in Rhode Island and is considered by The Nature Conservancy to be the most important ecological property in the state.

The northern harrier, grasshopper sparrow, upland sand-



piper and other ground-nesting birds have flocked to the farm for its grassy habitat, according to preserve manager Chris Littlefield. Here, mowing and grazing (and the general lack of large mammalian predators on the island) make for almost ideal living conditions.

At least four rare plants are also found here, including the bushy rockrose and the Maryland golden aster, which thrive on the island's exposed, grassy knolls. The farm is also the home of the regal fritillary butterfly—once common throughout the East, but now seen in New England only on Block Island and the islands of coastal Massachusetts, where its larvae feed on violets in fields.

The ecological importance of these and other sites have

earned Block Island (along with nearby Peconic Bay on Long Island) a place on The Nature Conservancy's initial list of "Last Great Places." These are significant ecosystems that the Conservancy is striving to protect, while encouraging compatible economic activity at the same time.

"Rhode Island as a whole isn't exactly the Amazon," says Keith Lang, the director of the Conservancy's Rhode Island field office, "and some people thought Block Island wasn't worthy of its title 'Last Great Place.' [But] when you look at it from the standpoint of nature and humans coexisting, there's nothing like it."

Working in partnership with the island's residents, the Conservancy hopes to protect additional environmentally sig-

## Nature's Undertaker



he American burying beetle is perhaps the rarest, and certainly the most unusual, of Block Island's denizens. The two-inch-long insect earned its name from its rather macabre habit of

interring dead mammals and birds and raising its larvae on them.

The insect sniffs out a carcass with the olfactory organs on its antennae. Then, after fighting off other beetles, the insect and its mate begin the two-nightlong process of burying the carcass. Having stripped the body free of feathers or fur and added secretions to retard decomposition, the insect lays its eggs near the corpse, from which the larvae subsequently feed.

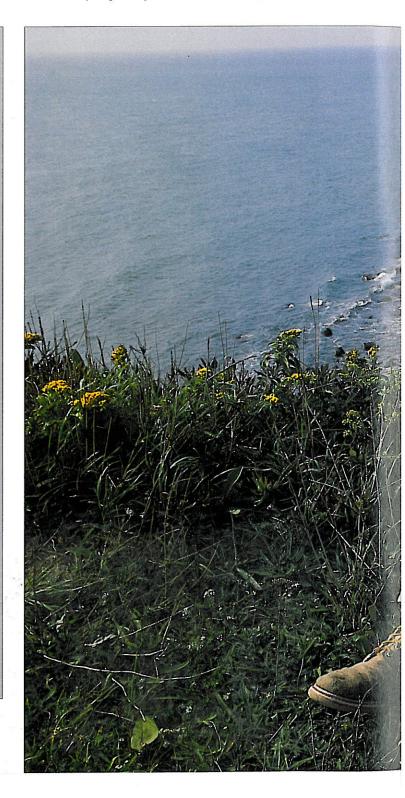
Once common as far west as Texas, the American burying beetle today exists only in a small area of Oklahoma and on Block Island, where as many as 500 to 1,000 are believed to live. There are many theories on the cause of the insects' decline, but the most common is the dwindling supply of animals that the beetle relies on for its reproduction.

Land clearing and hunting, which have diminished the numbers of suitably sized animals (such as passenger pigeons and grouse) are probably to blame, says Chris Raithel, a Rhode Island biologist. The young of such species are the optimum size for the beetle's reproduction needs, he says.

Block Island's Lewis-Dickens Farm has the highest concentration of pheasants in the East, says Raithel. The high death rate among the bird's offspring could explain the seemingly ample supply of birthing chambers for the beetle.

"We can't demonstrate [this theory] for certain, but it does fit the available information," says Raithel.

-J.E.



nificant land here. About half of the land on Block Island is 'up for grabs'—neither protected nor developed. Safeguarding this land by purchasing it would be expensive, but much can be preserved by private landowners through conservation easements and voluntary management agreements, says Dennis Wolkoff.

Looking beyond local issues, conservationists also hope that Block Island will serve as a model for other communities seeking to balance economic and environmental concerns.

"We hope the conservation commitment of the island can

Rob Lewis's son, Keith (pictured here on the Lewis-Dickens Farm), is making conservation a family tradition.

be exported," says Wolkoff. "Ultimately, this may be Block Island's most important legacy."

Rob Lewis sees Block Island as a "laboratory test—a little world unto itself." Professing a belief in the inherent goodness of people, Lewis is optimistic about the outcome of the experiment.

"You have to believe in people," he says, "and people are the same everywhere in the world."

JODY ERICSON is a freelance writer based in Providence, Rhode Island.

