

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Manumuskin River borders protected forest

Sharing the Wealth

Protecting the Holly Farm tract is about connecting preserved lands—and keeping connected with species both rare and common

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Just a few days before Thanksgiving Governor Murphy, DEP Commissioner McCabe, and the NJ Natural and Historic Resources Group's Green Acres program bestowed a great gift on the citizens of NJ – The 1400-acre Holly Farm tract. The property will be part of the Menantico Ponds Wildlife Management area, completing some 5500 acres and connecting it to an existing 28,000 acres of previously protected land which surrounds it. I must also give praise where praise is due: to Pepco/Atlantic Electric for recognition that this land "supports the

continued well-being of the region's natural environment and ensures the continued benefits of this open space for generations to come." (CEO David Velazquez). For two years I have said that it would give me great pleasure to walk hand in hand to a podium and sing their praises – so kudos, David!

Some folks might ask why CU Maurice River has doggedly tried to protect the forest commonly called the Holly Farm for 30-some years. Over time housing developments, coal-fired plants, soccer fields, race tracks, and solar and sod farms have been proposed for it. Throughout each of those salvos CU and many other conservation organizations have held firm to the belief that it should be protected instead.

The City of Millville's Master Plan zoned it Conservation and called it out as a great property to help meet its 50% preserved-land goal. This shows a great commitment to the environment and to clean air and clean water. Granted the City would have preferred mixed uses on the property, and in fact there is an electric generator for peak use hours located near Route 49.

So why would CU and so many other conservation groups rally efforts for so long to see the 'entire site' preserved?

In previous articles we have talked about how forests are the lungs of the planet, cleaning our air, while wetlands are the kidneys and clean our water. This property offers both and is a local investment in a sustainable future.

Beyond this clean air and clean water, the property's promise of *contiguous forest* and its very special values are critically important.

Fragmentation of forests is caused by roads, agriculture, utility lines, subdivisions, mining, logging, and other human disturbances. Each incident of fragmentation is an impediment to wildlife movement and to more beneficial wildlife habitat. There are instances where trees are cleared, or fires create meadows, or savanna-type habitats exist. These often prove to be useful to certain species, but development is not. When NJ Fish and Wildlife manages land they need to have an understanding of the species that the property supports. Then a management scheme can be instituted for a suite of species that use the site. Sometimes a management regime can exclude usage by a particular species, so decisions on what habitats to foster on preserved space are not made lightly.

Today a let-it-be policy doesn't work, if for no other reason than the rapid expansion of unwanted exotics when they are unchecked. Also the suppression of fire prevents savanna-type habitat. Species like red-headed woodpeckers need more sparsely-forested areas with a lower understory.

The Holly Farm tract contains a wide variety of habitat types and it supports the greatest concentration of endangered species in the state. Existing environs include wetlands, forest, savanna (grasslands), riverine, and open water ponds. This diversity supports rare as well as common species. The now-protected property also connects two National Wild and Scenic Rivers and their corridors, safeguarding them from the risks of development and further fragmentation.



The Holly Farm as grassy habitats

This brings us to the most important component in prioritizing land for

protection: connecting preserved lands for use as wildlife corridors. Species are reliant on diverse habitats at various stages in their individual life cycles, and in their individual connections with other species, often for sustenance. There are many intraspecies communications that we have yet to understand. Possibly a mockingbird's imitation of the local bird calls may be a dating service of sorts: "Hey, your potential mate was in the 'hood!"

Some species like barred owl are reliant on large tracts, with ornithologists studying the owls actually estimating that a pair needs 2,500 acres of contiguous forest. When they hunt they may prefer a grassy area but they roost in wooded areas. As cavity nesters they need large hollow trunks, so some of the forest must have old stands of trees. Take that one step further: they like swampy woods. Traditionally they are referred to as the "swamp owl" because they use remote contiguous, old-growth forests. For mating they are reliant on vocalizations so they prefer a quieter locale vs. a situation where there may be constant industrial noise. This limits the places they can prosper. And this newly-acquired tract fulfills their needs.

Each of the other rare plants and animals that uses this site has similar

complex requirements that the property satisfies. And this does not even to begin to address the importance of the common species on site. The interrelatedness of species is key to success. So although we often cite the presence of rare plants and animals to protect locations, the truth is – if a habitat supports rare species it is likely harboring a very large number of common species as well. The rare species' presence is an indicator that this is a highest-value habitat.

This is why the NJ DEP rated this site as a *National Heritage Priority Site* - because it represents some of the best remaining habitat for rare plant species and rare ecological communities in the state, thus a complete suite of species both rare and common.

Remember water and light are the beginning of all life. Here's icing on the proverbial cake: two National Wild and Scenic River corridors, the Manumuskin and Menantico, now frame protected lands vs. land at risk for development. Many years ago the National Park Service studied rivers for their unique natural and cultural resources. Fewer than 2% of America's rivers qualified as prospective rivers for designation. These two rivers made the cut, and were placed on the National Wild and Scenic River's inventory. And ultimately

in 1993 they were 'designated' as Wild and Scenic, as National Treasures! This means as local stewards we have a responsibility for the protection of these resources.

You may ask, "Has over 33 years of advocacy for our region's resources been worth it? Rewarding?" Yes, yes, it has been well worth it. I have teamed up with some of the State's greatest stewards in the process. And I have had the great satisfaction of working with CU members and volunteers locally who share a similar love for our region's resources. And most importantly of all, in the end we have succeeded!