

The background of the cover is a photograph of three barred owl chicks sitting in a hollowed-out section of a tree trunk. The chicks are covered in light-colored down with dark spots and have bright yellow beaks. The tree bark is rough and textured, with some green moss visible. The title 'Woodlands' is written in a large, white, cursive script across the top. Above it, the word 'CONNECTICUT' is in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right of the title, 'SPRING 2025' is written in a white, sans-serif font.

CONNECTICUT

Woodlands

SPRING 2025

Who Cooks for You?

Listening for Barred Owls

A MAGAZINE OF THE CONNECTICUT FOREST & PARK ASSOCIATION



Land Acknowledgment Statement

CFPA acknowledges we are on the traditional lands of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, the Mohegans, the Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett, Nipmuc, and Niantic peoples. We pay our respect to the Indigenous people who are no longer here due to colonization, forced relocation, disease, and warfare. We thank them for stewarding this land throughout generations. We recognize the continued presence of Indigenous people on this territory who have survived attempted genocide, and who still hold ties to the land spiritually and culturally. We shall be good stewards of the land we all call Quinnentucket, Connecticut.



CONTRIBUTOR'S *Spotlight*

Eric Hansen has always enjoyed being in the woods. As a high schooler growing up in Connecticut, he even

took side jobs cutting down hazard trees for his friends' parents. But he never considered a career in the outdoors until he was in college at UMass. "It was not my first, or even second, major," he admits. It was a natural resources management course, which included an introduction to forestry, that changed the trajectory of his life. After graduating, he went on to work in forests throughout the Northeast, from Connecticut to Cape Cod to New Hampshire and Vermont.

We wanted to learn more about Eric's passion for forests and work as a certified forester.

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On the cover: Three curious juvenile Barred Owls emerge from their nest in an old tree cavity. Barred Owls learn how to fly when they're 10 weeks old.

You've worked throughout New England. What's special to you about Connecticut's forests?

It's being in that transition zone between the northern hardwood forests of northern New England and the forests we see further south. We have some of the best of both worlds. Connecticut is not a huge place, but there's so much diversity.

What's one misconception people may have about foresters?

The most common misconception is that we are only concerned with the bottom line and growing money with wood. Nobody goes into this work to become a millionaire. People go into forestry because they really like being outside and they care about the woods. It's that connection and that care that many people don't understand. There's a lot

of black and white thinking about forest management and cutting trees; it's really important that you understand the nuance. When it comes to the natural world, it's all gray.

When you're not out working in the woods, where can we find you?

I enjoy spending time with my family. And when not working in the woods, you can often find us out walking in the woods, down at the coast, or eating Mexican food.

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Editor’s Note

In 1962, Rachel Carson published a small book warning about the dangers of DDT, an insecticide that at the time was widely used to kill the mosquitos that spread malaria.

Already a celebrated author, Carson had spent four years meticulously researching and writing “Silent Spring,” which includes 55 pages of footnotes and scientific citations. The book’s opening chapter describes a fictional town in which no birds sing, no bees buzz, no sounds of spring are heard. It’s an omen not solely about the harmful effects of pesticides and other toxic chemicals, but also the hubris in thinking that humans are above and separate from the rest of nature.

“Silent Spring” awakened the American public to the ways in which human activity can profoundly alter nature, the folly in trusting technology to solve all our problems, and the need for common sense regulations to safeguard our collective environment and to protect human health.

The book became an instant bestseller. In response, chemical and agribusiness companies mounted an aggressive campaign against Carson. Not only was her professional credibility questioned, but her integrity and even her identity were attacked. Though undoubtedly hurtful, in archival footage she appears unfazed, confidently testifying before Congress and defending the book and her conclusions in a widely viewed CBS documentary.

Her work inspired the Kennedy administration to more closely study the effects of DDT, which was eventually banned, and led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. But Carson never witnessed the full fruits of her labor; she died of breast cancer in 1964, just shy of her 57th birthday.

This spring, as you head outside, pause to listen to the chorus of birds, frogs, and insects that animate the landscape. And take a moment to thank Ms. Carson and countless other individuals for having the courage to stand up to wealthy corporations, politicians, and powerful special interests in defense of science, human health, and this world we all call home.

I’ll see you outside,


Timothy Brown
Editor

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association, Inc.

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that protects forests, parks and the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails for future generations by connecting people to the land. Since 1895, CFPA has enhanced and defended Connecticut’s rich natural heritage through advocacy, conservation, recreation, and education, including maintaining the 825-mile Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System. CFPA depends on the generous support of members to fulfill its mission. For more information and to donate, go to ctwoodlands.org

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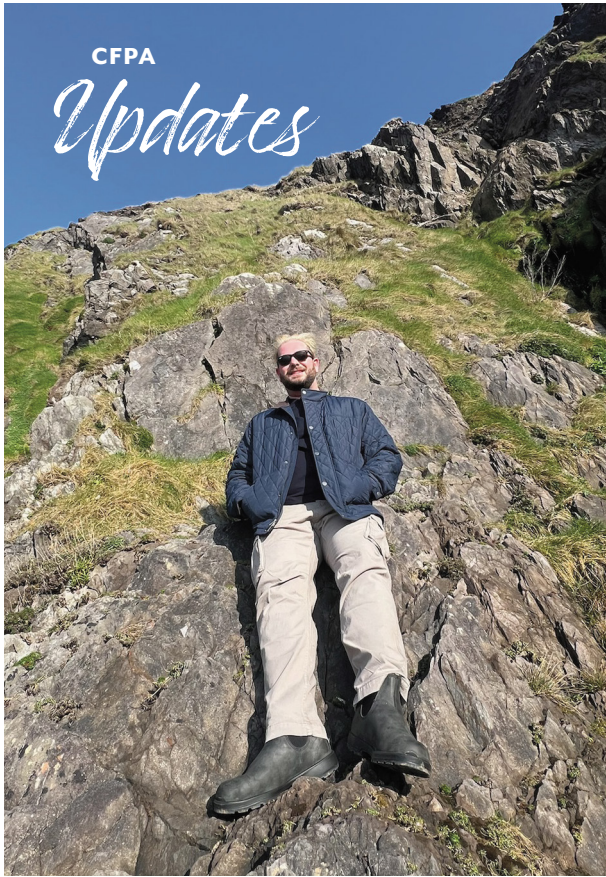
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New Faces at CFPA

CFPA welcomes new staff members who will support our conservation goals, ongoing trail work, and thriving education programs.

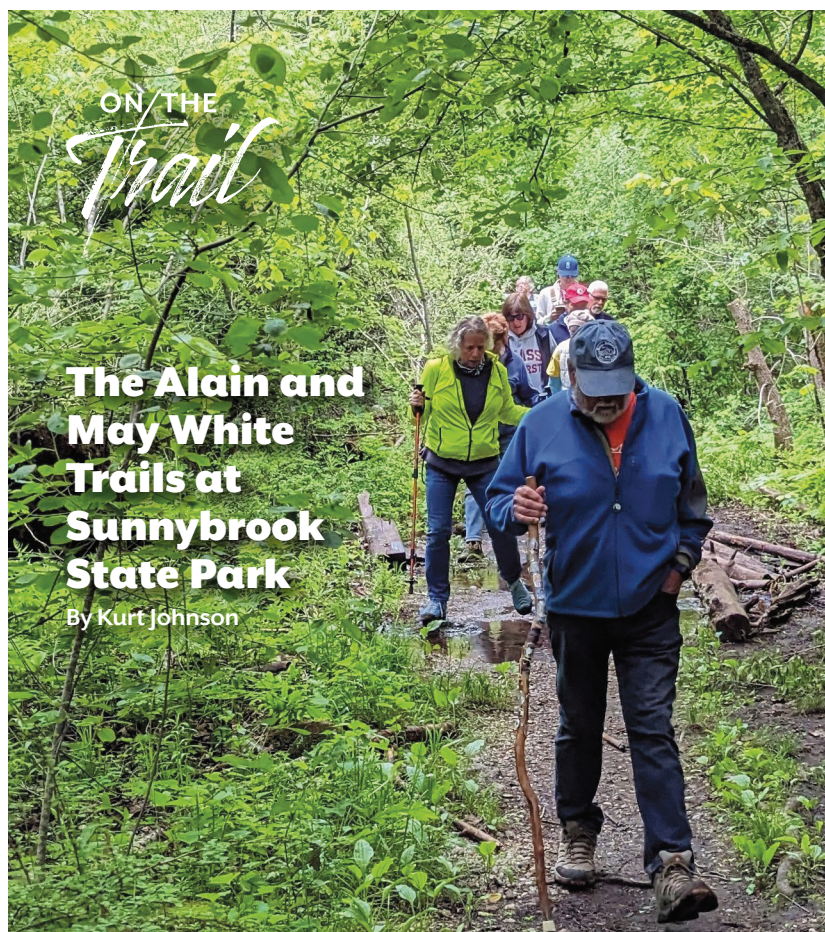
Julia Sonen (above right), our new Education Assistant, is a recent graduate of Allegheny College where she majored in environmental science and sustainability, with minors in Arabic and biology. She has organized and led service projects, guided overnight backcountry trips, and engaged the public in meaningful environmental programs as both a sustainability assistant at Allegheny College and a wilderness intern with the Student Conservation Association in the Green Mountain National Forest. As a 2024 intern with CFPA's Trails Program, she helped to advance our outreach and volunteer engagement on the New England National Scenic Trail, assisted the Connecticut Woodlands Conservation Corps, led public hikes, and enhanced our volunteer operations. Julia is eager to apply her background in environmental science, ecosystem management, and community outreach to CFPA's mission.

Callen Creeden (above left) is our new Development Assistant. Callen holds a Bachelor of Arts in environmental studies and political science from American University, and brings to CFPA a strong background in donor relations, fundraising management, and nonprofit operations. He

will be instrumental in managing donor data, assisting with fundraising campaigns, and supporting CFPA's development initiatives to expand CFPA's impact.

In other news, **Meaghan Strange** has been promoted to Communications Coordinator. Meaghan has been an integral part of our Development team, and in her new role she will take the lead in creating and executing a dynamic communication strategy that amplifies CFPA's mission.

Finally, CFPA and **Andy Bicking** have agreed to part ways. We are grateful for Andy's leadership and dedication to CFPA's legacy, and we wish him the very best in his next chapter. **Clare Cain**, CFPA's Trails Director, will serve as the Association's Interim Executive Director. CFPA is in a strong position to navigate this transition. For 130 years, we have successfully adapted to change while staying true to our mission and continuing to grow.



The Alain and May White Trails at Sunnybrook State Park

By Kurt Johnson

The Alain and May White Nature Trails are fully contained within Sunnybrook State Park. Named in memory of Alain White and his sister, May, the trail system consists of two longer loop trails (the Blue and Yellow-Blazed); two shorter loops (Orange and Red-Blazed); several blazed and un-blazed connector trails; as well as the park roads. Sunnybrook is the southern terminus of the John Muir Trail that takes hikers north through the Paugnut State Forest to Walnut Mountain to the trails of Burr Pond State Park.

The land comprising Sunnybrook State Park was farmland as recent as the 1950s. The Flood of 1955 was damaging for much of New England, but especially devastating in the Naugatuck River Valley, where portions of many towns were completely washed away. In the late 1950s, the Army Corps of Engineers began building a massive dam to control its floodwaters. Sunnybrook State Park is the retention basin for the dam, which was built on the East Branch of the Naugatuck River. After the dam was completed, the former farm became state property. The state managed this as a full-service park for a short time. Today, the park is gated

and accessed from a gravel parking lot on Newfield Road. The Alain and May White Nature Trails and the John Muir Trail begin at this parking lot.

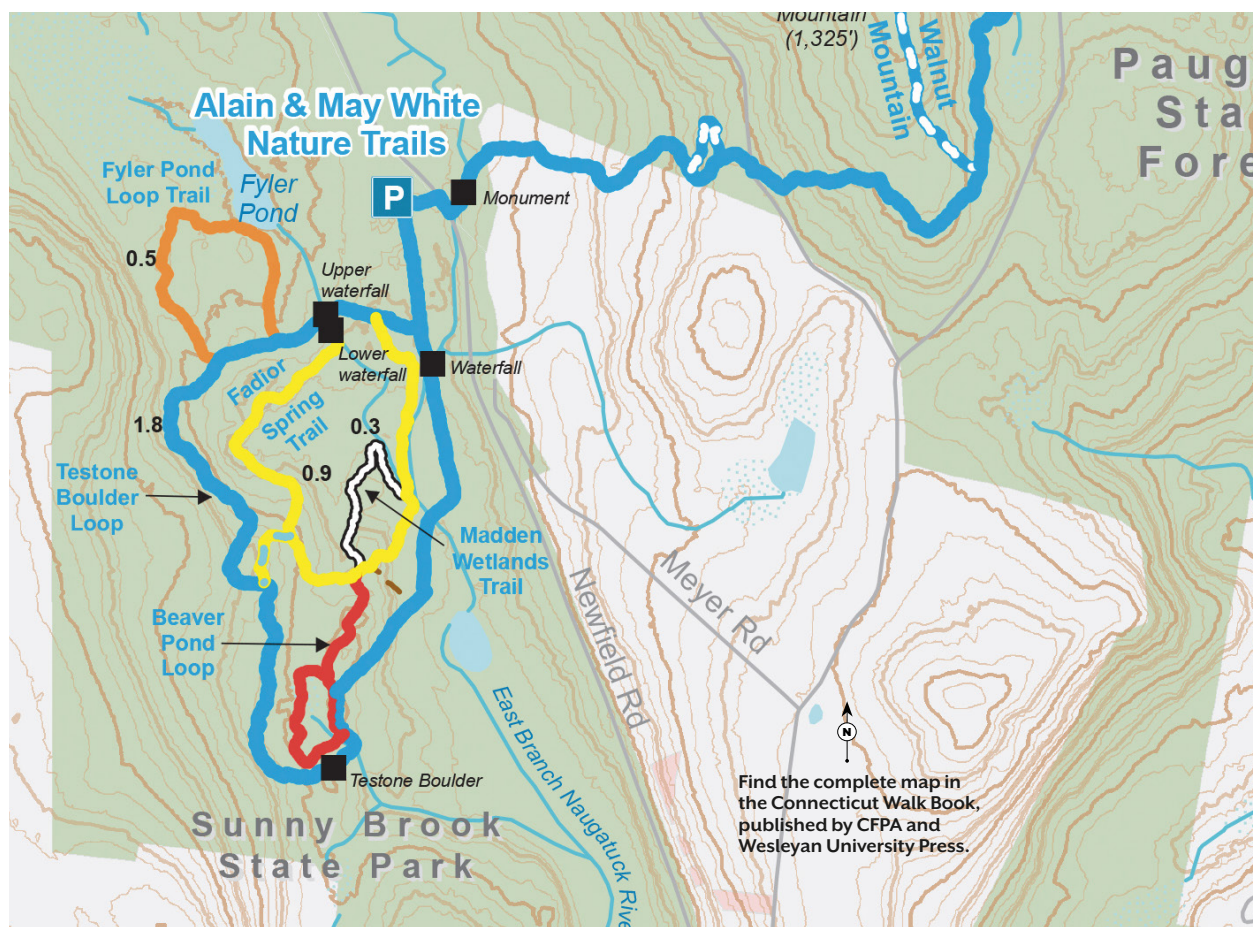
On my early walks on these trails, I came to know the previous Sunnybrook trail manager, Walt Morrison. After a few years of helping him with maintenance projects, Walt and his co-trail manager wife, Laurie decided to pass the Sunnybrook trails to another person and take on the role of trail manager of the Burr Pond trails while still managing the John Muir trail. I applied and was accepted as the trail manager for the Alain and May White Trails.

Sunnybrook is very popular for people seeking a quick and easy outdoor break. In nice weather, the parking lot is filled with casual walkers: families, senior citizens, dog walkers, and people spending their lunch break outside. Most casual walkers stay on the park roads. They are scenic, well maintained, and have little elevation change. In all weather, there are hikers, fishermen, and hunters present. The park road follows the East Branch of the Naugatuck River from the gate at the parking lot to the dam one mile downstream. Across this road is a large, maintained meadow and a pond.

The Alain and May White Nature Trails are a loop hikers' paradise. Using the trail system, park roads, and connector trails, hikers can put together one or more several trail loops. This "choose your own" adventure trail system is especially appealing to me, both as a hiker and as a trail manager. I have always favored walking trails where one does not retrace their steps. As every hiker knows, walking one-way on a trail is a very different experience from walking in the opposite direction. Loop trails give a choice of which experience to have on any particular day. For trail maintainers, loop trails are particularly advantageous; one only needs to carry tools and supplies half the distance to complete a task at the farthest end of the trail.

The wildlife that shares Sunnybrook with hikers is typical of northwestern Connecticut. One can see deer, bear, coyote, fox, porcupine, hawk, geese, herons, and the usual complement of small scurrying creatures.

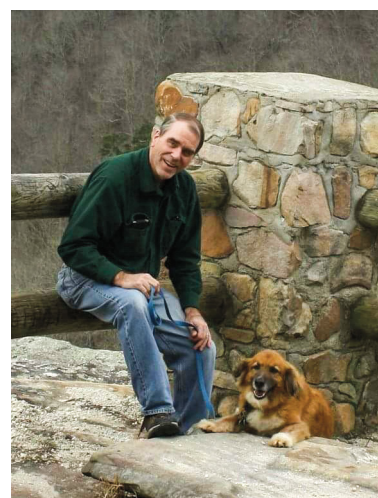
The primary change agent in the park is beaver. In the 20th century, beavers returned to Connecticut after being locally extinct since the 1700s due to the fur trade. In 2023, the dam held back the Naugatuck River several times due to heavy rainfall and flooded the



meadow as it was designed to do. This action flooded lodges in the retention basin, driving the beavers upriver to the marsh where the main access points of both the Blue and Yellow trails cross. This combination of newly constructed beaver dams, high flow rates, and diverted water from the river resulted in continuous flooding. In places, knee-deep water prevented most people from using the park. I thought that this was the end of Sunnybrook as a popular hiking destination. However, in early 2024, the beavers abandoned their projects in the marsh. They moved upriver and dammed the road culvert that was diverting water through the marsh and over trails. The trails are once again passable. I have learned that beavers always have the final say over trail routes, and whatever they decide to do, one must accommodate them. A good lesson for hikers

and trail maintainers alike: in all that you do, one must accommodate and complement nature.

I grew up in the northeastern suburbs of Hartford and have loved hiking and exploring public lands all of my adult life. In the early 1970s, with my first Connecticut Walk Book in hand, I set out to explore as much of the region as I could. I enjoy seeking out the history of the lands that I walk through. The old foundations, stone walls, abandoned roads, charcoal pits, and wolf trees attest to its recent history. Its glacial boulders, drumlins, exposed ledge outcroppings, and deep, soiled valleys show its much longer prehistory. Mysteries discovered in the woods are often solved with a trip to a local library. After retiring and moving to Torrington in 2017, becoming involved with the trail system has been an enriching experience and a great privilege.



Kurt Johnson and his wife, Ann, returned to Connecticut to be closer to family and friends after living in Tennessee for several years. Kurt retired after more than 40 years as a chemical and engineering laboratory manager in the power generation industry. These days, you will often find him with his hiking pups, Parker and Lucy, on trails all over Northwest Connecticut.

A photograph of a barred owl perched in a hollowed-out section of a tree trunk. The owl has brown and white striped plumage and is looking down. Below the owl, a grey squirrel with a bushy tail is climbing the rough bark of the tree trunk. The background is a blurred winter scene with bare branches and snow.

AN OWL FOR ALL SEASONS

**Anytime is a good
time to watch—
and listen—for
Connecticut's most
common owl.**

By Laurie D. Morrissey

Photo by Sonny Nguonly.

A soft *whoosh* overhead. A dark shadow sweeps through the dusky light. It seems to come out of nowhere, and it's gone almost before I even register what it is. I'm sharing this woodland path with a Barred Owl, a nearly silent hunter than can detect the slightest rustle of a mouse—not to mention a bat, opossum, flying squirrel, or other small nocturnal creature. This owl is likely on the prowl for a meal to bring home to its nest, where one or two fluffy owlets await a fast-food delivery.

The Barred Owl is Connecticut's most common owl, occurring here far more frequently than Great Horned, Eastern Screech, or Barn Owls. It differs from its relatives in several respects: it stays here year-round, frequents woodland edges and residential neighborhoods, and is not strictly "a night owl." In the early morning or evening or in the middle of a cloudy day, it's not unusual to spot this large, stocky figure perched on a low branch watching for unsuspecting prey.

This owl also makes its presence known by its distinctive call, a repeated "*Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?*" It gives me a thrill no matter how often I hear it—a direct connection with the non-human world. Even better is hearing a pair of courting owls calling back and forth, a sound that carries a long distance on a still night.

While many bird species are in decline, including some owls, Barred Owls are holding steady or increasing. They prefer dense, moist woodlands, especially deciduous and mixed woods where they find cavities for nesting. But they often hunt closer to human habitation where rodents and small birds are plentiful. They're also happy to eat big bugs that are attracted to outdoor lights and campfires.

"Barred Owls are very adaptable to the suburban lifestyle," explains Stefan Martin of Connecticut Audubon.

"They're generalists when it comes to diet. I've seen them at vernal pools in the middle of the day hopping around on logs catching frogs." Eileen Fielding, center director at Sharon Audubon, recalls seeing a Barred Owl land on her deck railing in broad daylight and stare through the window at a small turtle in a tank. "Finally, the owl tried to pounce on it, but was foiled by the glass and gave up," she says.

Barred Owls are 15 to 25 inches long, slightly smaller than Great Horned Owls and a foot longer than Screech Owls. The Barred Owl has a round, tuftless head, brown and white feathers, and a light facial disc with dark eyes. Its legs and parts of its toes are covered in feathers. Both male and female have a mostly white breast with vertical brown streaks, and horizontal brown markings on the upper neck and chest. Females are as much as a third larger than males, with a wingspan of up to four feet.

Fielding observes Barred Owls in the wild and has worked with them as a wildlife rehabilitator. "I always keep an eye out for them when I'm in damp woods or on the edge of a wetland,

especially if there are large cavity trees around," she says. "I hear more Barred Owls than any others, and their calls are by far the most fun to hear. A lot of people are familiar with their *Who cooks for you-all*, but they also get into raucous back-and-forth *Who-aa! Aw-aw-aw!* shouting matches that sound like a troop of monkeys has invaded the woods."

At the Sharon Audubon Center, Fielding uses non-releasable owls (who have healed from severe injury) as "ambassador birds," giving her opportunities to observe their behavior. "They're easy birds to work with, and as young birds, they're curious and playful. I've seen them playing with toys, picking them up and manipulating them with their feet and beaks."

Connecticut's Barred Owls begin courting in late winter and lay two or three eggs in April and May. The chicks hatch in about 30 days, looking like downy white puffballs and begging for food in a raspy buzz. In 4 to 8 weeks, they make their way out of the nest and exhibit a behavior called "branching." They clamber around in their nest trees, flapping their wings to keep their balance. If they drop to the ground, they climb back up the trunk using their bills and talons.

IT IS A MYTH THAT OWLS CAN COMPLETELY ROTATE THEIR HEADS, BUT THEY CAN TURN THEM 270 DEGREES IN EITHER DIRECTION AND 90 DEGREES UP AND DOWN.



Photo by Pat Miller

Owls are not good fliers until they are about three months old. To keep their increasingly loud, screechy youngsters' bellies full, the parents need to hunt during daylight. "I get a ton of emails from people asking if the sound they're hearing a bobcat or a fisher," says Martin. People also ask what to do when they find a baby owl on the ground. "If it's still in the downy stage, it might need the help of a rehabilitator. If it's feathered, it's just fine. It just needs to find its way to a safe place, and it's important to keep dogs away."

One of the most fascinating things about Barred Owls is their adaptations for hunting. Highly specialized wing shape and feather structure, and large wings relative to their body mass, allow them to fly unusually slowly with little noise-producing flapping. The feathers

around their facial discs direct sound to their ears, and their large eyes work efficiently in low light. Their eyes face forward and are fixed in their sockets. To look right or left, owls must turn their heads. It is a myth that owls can completely rotate their heads, but they can turn them 270 degrees in either direction and 90 degrees up and down thanks to highly mobile necks. Owls have twice as many vertebrae in their necks as humans do.

A good way to appreciate these amazing birds up close is to visit a wildlife facility such as White Memorial Conservation Center in Litchfield, home to two Barred Owls, Shakespeare and Ophelia. Some centers offer guided night hikes for viewing nocturnal wildlife. Bright nights are optimal, since moonlight

makes owls more active, as well as easier to see. You can also increase your chances of encountering these owls by understanding their needs and habits. Barred owls return to their nesting sites year after year, and disgorged pellets on the ground under a tree can signal their presence. You can also place a nest box near the edge of your yard. But whether you're lucky enough to see one, you'll likely hear it asking: "Who cooks for you?"

Laurie D. Morrissey is a New Hampshire-based writer whose work has appeared in Connecticut Woodlands since 2016. She has also been published in Northern Woodlands, Art New England, New Hampshire Home, Appalachia, and numerous poetry journals.

THEY ALSO GET INTO RAUCOUS SHOUTING MATCHES THAT SOUND LIKE A TROOP OF MONKEYS HAS INVADDED THE WOODS.

EILEEN FIELDING



Photo by Dale Monette

Connecticut's Barred Owl Boom

In the winter of 2019, Barred Owls were seen perching atop garden furniture, farm equipment, and bird feeders. Biologists call this kind of sudden population boom an *irruption*. The cause of the 2019 increase is not clear, says UConn professor Chris Elphick. It may have been caused by a very successful breeding season followed by food scarcity. If the food supply was low, the birds had to hunt further, and at different hours. "This year seems pretty normal," Elphick says. "2019 is the only time I've seen anything like an irruption happen in this species."



Photo by Mark S. Szantyr

Picturing a Healthier Forest

A forester shows how cutting trees can help nurture biodiversity and resilience.

**By Timothy Brown
Pictures by Eric Hansen**



**The regeneration
we talk about represents what
people three generations from
now will be looking at.**

When you hike through a forest, it's easy to be fooled into thinking that the surrounding woods have always looked the way it does today. Naturalists, foresters, ecologists, and others can often discover clues to the past—a handful of mature white pines towering above a sea of young saplings; a dry meadow surrounded by chiseled stumps; an old stone wall slowly sinking into the earth—all evidence that the forest you see today is simply a snapshot in time. To the untrained eye, however, it's not always clear what has happened, and is happening, in the forest; whether the forest is healthy, diverse, vigorous, and resilient.

But what if you could watch the forest slowly evolve? How would that experience change your understanding of the forest, and the role of responsible forest stewardship in promoting a healthy landscape?

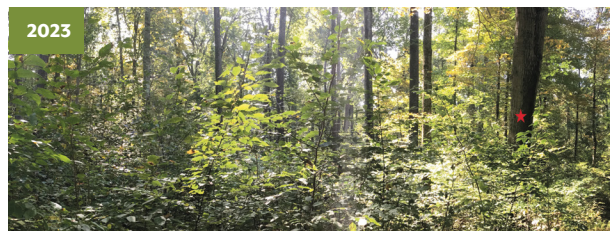
Eric Hansen, a certified forester with Ferrucci & Walicki, LLC, believes that documenting a changing forest is key to helping people understand that forests are dynamic and how active forest management that includes harvesting trees can be beneficial for both trees and forest-dwelling wildlife. So, in 2014 when he submitted a proposal to CFPA for a timber harvest at Field Forest in Durham, he included an educational side project to photograph the forest's regeneration over the succeeding years.

"My hope was to be able to show people that when you intentionally introduce a disturbance, which this is, there are implications and reactions to it," says Hansen. "And our forests have the capacity to respond."

Field Forest is a 152-acre mixed hardwood forest complete with rugged trap-rock ledges, clear flowing streams, and a vernal pool that bursts to life each spring. It is prime habitat for a host of migratory songbirds, amphibians, and other wildlife. The land—which was donated to CFPA by Howard Brigham Field, Jr., in 1999—also housed an estimated 2 million board feet of sawtimber.

After Hansen's proposal was accepted, he met with Dan Donahue and Lindsay Suhr, formerly CFPA's forester and Land Conservation Director, respectively, to discuss documenting the forest's regeneration and other characteristics well before any trees were marked to cut.

Hansen's photographs, several of which appear alongside this story, document the "treatment" areas, as they're called, before the harvest and over the ensuing years. Viewed together, they paint a compelling picture of a dynamic,



This series shows Field Forest's regeneration at one of the nine locations Hansen is photographing. The top photo was taken in 2016 before the harvest. Each subsequent photo, taken from the same position, reveals vigorous growth: in 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024.

healthy, and ever-changing landscape. “You’re going to see in pictures how quickly forests can respond to the perturbations we are creating” he says.

Selecting Trees

Foresters consider many factors when selecting which trees to cut and those to remain, including the general health of the forest and the conditions of the surrounding landscape. “Keeping in mind what the overall goals are for the property; what the goals are for the project; and what the prescription (from a management plan) is dictate what you’re going to mark,” says Hansen. For example, one of the goals of this treatment was to promote regeneration of species, mirroring what was growing in the main canopy.

“There was a fair amount of oak, black birch, tulip poplar, and ash throughout the whole area (but) not a lot of existing desirable regeneration,” Hansen says. “One of the primary goals was to create some canopy gaps within which less shade-tolerant species like oak, hickory, and tulip poplar could regenerate, all of which grow well here based on the appearance of existing trees.”

Another important consideration is spatial arrangement, particularly as it relates to the growing space for the retained trees (i.e., reduced competition for sunlight and water) and, critically for regeneration, the amount of sunlight that reaches the forest floor. Foresters think on a landscape scale and in terms of the forest 100 years from now, but they also assess overall tree health and vigor, often targeting less healthy or vigorous trees for removal.

“That is not always the case, however, particularly if we see evidence of active use of cavities. Dead and dying trees have a lot of ecological values. We try to make sure to retain some of those trees, even if they don’t look like they’re long for this world in their current form.”

With early successional habitat, critical for the endangered New England cottontail and other wildlife, close by on an adjacent property, Hansen decided on an uneven-aged approach to begin the process of encouraging multiple ages of trees as opposed to a single-regenerating age class. Using tree marking paint, he began to tag individual trees at eye level on a couple sides so that the logger selected to fell the trees would be able to see the marks from any direction.

CFPA had approved crossing existing hiking trails to access the trees, but didn’t want the trails used to remove the timber, so they created skid trails that ran parallel to hiking trails.

“In a relatively short period of time, unless you knew that something had happened there, you’re not going to see the skid trail or stumps, and the canopy gaps will become less obvious,” Hansen says. “You’re just going to see a lot of green.”

The Regenerating Forest

So, can harvesting trees improve forest health and make forests more resilient to the impacts of climate change and other disturbances? For Hansen and other foresters and ecologists, the short answer is, yes. As evidence, he cites greater adaptive capacity, improved vigor (tree growth), a variety of regenerating trees, and an increase in the diversity and abundance of wildlife species in the area.

“We’re thinking in time frames that are unfamiliar and difficult for most people to conceive of when they look at the forest as they’re standing in it. The regeneration we talk about represents what people three generations from now will be looking at,” he says. “Our job is to use the strengths of the forest and our knowledge of how trees and forests work to help guide their development and help our forests be diverse and resilient to future conditions, not knowing ourselves what exactly those will be.”

It’s an iterative process. For example, when Hansen was marking trees, there was no indication that the emerald ash borer was present. But by the time they started cutting in 2016, many ash were dying, so they ended up harvesting more trees than he had originally marked.

In addition, after completing the initial harvest in 2017, loggers had to return to salvage some black, red, and white oaks—particularly those that were close to hiking trails—that had died due to a spongy moth infestation. Some of the sick trees, especially those that were unlikely to fall on trails, were left as habitat for woodpeckers and other wildlife, Hansen says.

The result is a dynamic Field Forest that’s regenerating in both expected and exciting ways. Almost all of the species that returned were native. And increased species diversity at the ground level, including blackberry and raspberry canes that responded quickly to the increased sunlight, has attracted substantial populations of bumblebees and other pollinators.

“Three or four years after the treatment was completed, I walked the area during the spring birding season. I was really struck by the noise level in the project area compared to adjacent untreated areas,” he says. “The amount of bird activity was really off the charts.”

For Hansen, it’s evidence that his work as a forester is helping to create a healthier, more diverse forest.

“We care about managing forests so they are healthy,” he says. “My main goal when I work with any landowner is that when I leave, things are better than when I showed up.”

Trail Magic

A thru-hiker finds joy in helping other hikers achieve their goals.

Words and Pictures by Greg Gregory



As all hikers know, planning a hike and actually hiking are two separate things. While nothing beats getting your boots on the trail, there's a different kind of joy to be found in choosing your gear and obsessively mapping out your adventure. Backpackers excel at solving most problems with a safety pin and perseverance, but some obstacles require a little outside help.

Connecticut is home to half of the New England National Scenic Trail, or NET, which runs 235 miles from Guilford, Conn., to Royalston, Mass. Along with the usual concerns like identifying water sources and methodically planning each meal, the NET has some unique logistical challenges, including gaps as large as 60 miles between camp sites and major river crossings.

While some hikers prefer to go it alone, many solicit off-trail support from people known in the backpacking community as *trail angels*—volunteers, often hikers themselves, who provide local information and physical assistance to other hikers. Their help can make the difference between a successful hike and being stuck on the side of the road. I am grateful to have received support from generous trail angels on my own adventure on the NET and now enjoy providing assistance to others.

The NET was my first thru-hike, so planning felt a little intimidating. My biggest hurdle was the lack of available camping sites. There are nine campsites along the trail, but they are unevenly spaced and spread too far apart for most hikers. The majority of the NET is on private property and camping is only allowed in designated areas, which means that hikers must often leave the trail to sleep. (Illegal

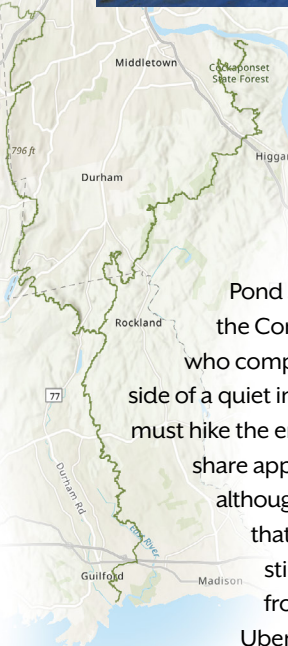
camping can jeopardize the relationship with landowners who host the trail). As a local, I decided to side-step this issue by hiking the Connecticut section as a series of out-and-back day hikes. In Massachusetts, however, I played “leapfrog” with my truck, hiking northbound and then catching a ride back to my truck on nights that I couldn’t reach a designated site. Luckily, I knew a few locals who were happy to assist me with rides. Some even lent me earbuds and replenished my snacks.



Top: the southern terminus of the NET in Guilford, Conn.
Above: Gregory (left) and his trail angel, Gina Pagona, near the northern terminus in Royalston Falls, Mass.



The Westfield River crossing in Massachusetts.



One of the most common requests for assistance on the NET is navigating the “spur,” a section that splits from the main trail in Guilford and crosses 27 miles of forested terrain, including Rockland Preserve and Millers Pond State Park, before coming to an end at the Connecticut River in Middletown. Hikers who complete the spur are left standing on the side of a quiet industrial road hoping to catch a ride or must hike the entire distance back. Thankfully ride-share apps are easy to use in this part of the state, although I can attest from personal experience that drivers tend to not appreciate sweaty, stinky hikers in their cars. Getting a ride from a trail angel may be safer for your Uber rating.

The Massachusetts section features two major river crossings. Depending on the water level, the Westfield River is occasionally passable by foot. I opted to contact a trail manager who frequently helps hikers in the area. She shuttled me across the river and showed me where she planned several improvements to her trail section. She sent me on my way better hydrated and more knowledgeable about the trail. Further north, the NET reaches the Connecticut River at a boat launch in Northampton. Most hikers choose a rideshare app, although those seeking a novel adventure may “hitchhike” across by fishing boat.

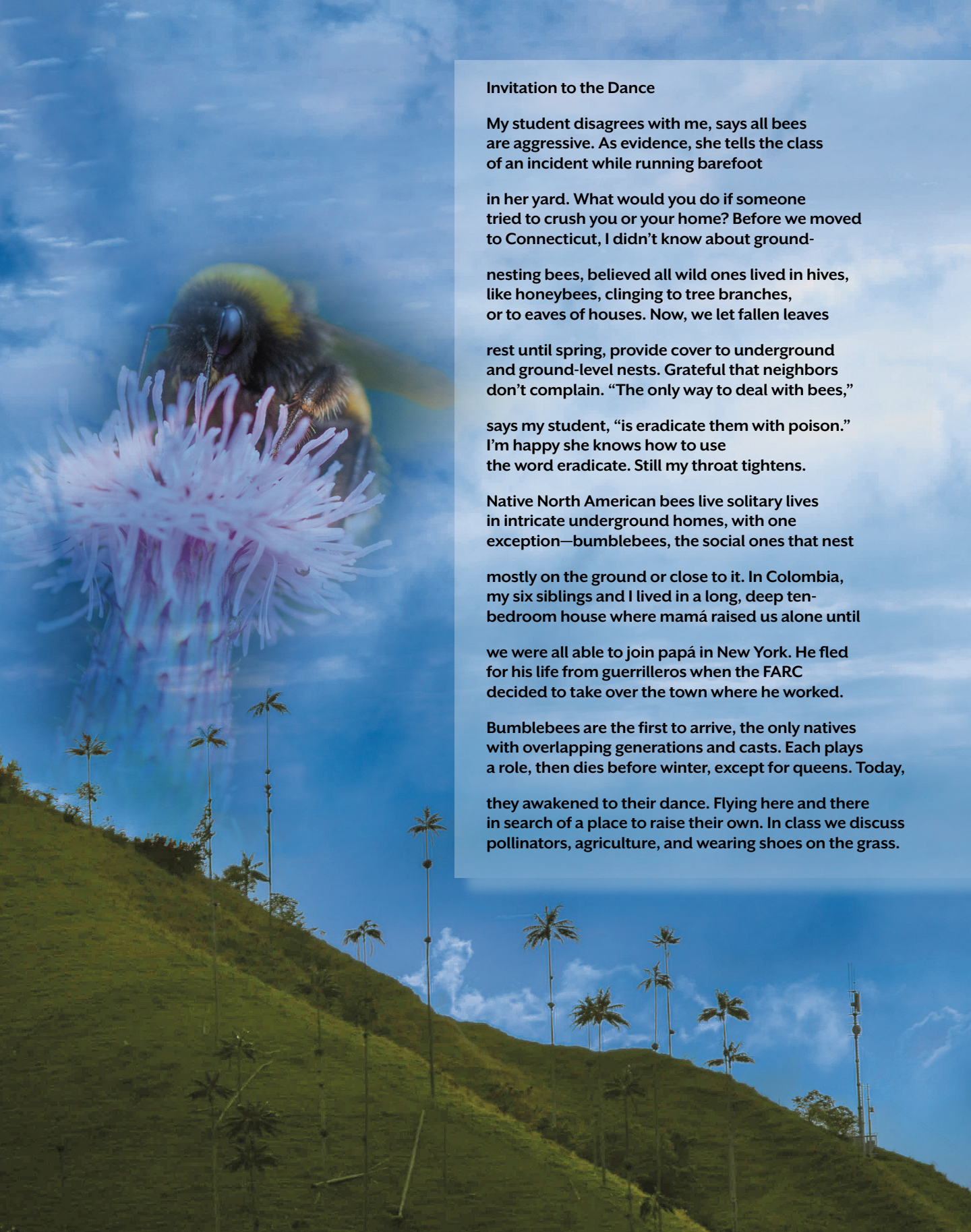
Regardless of the trail, every thru-hiker needs to plan how they’ll get home at the end of their hike. While southbound

hikers will have an easier time finding local help along the more densely populated Connecticut shoreline, there is no cell reception or public transportation at the northern terminus of the NET, so hikers must arrange a ride. As I neared Royalston, where a friend had agreed to meet me, I had only one thing on my mind: a pair of fresh socks. I had been hiking in wet boots for days and my feet were covered in painful blisters. It was an enormous relief to see my friend’s car in the parking lot, and an even bigger relief to put on those clean socks. Her assistance not only gave me the morale boost I needed to finish the last mile, but she also made the entire hike possible by driving me home.

Now that I’ve completed the NET, I’ve chosen to return the favors paid to me by serving as a trail angel for others. Most

people contact me through a small Facebook group dedicated to hiking the NET. While I was lucky to hike during the spring when water is plentiful, with the recent years of severe drought, the most common request I get is for help locating potable water. I make note of natural water sources while hiking, and when streams and ponds dry up, I meet thirsty hikers at road crossings to deliver water. I also occasionally get requests for rides along the spur or for local information about cheap motels, navigating trail closures or relocations, or activities to do on rest days.

*When streams
and ponds dry up,
I meet thirsty hikers
at road crossings
to deliver water.*



Invitation to the Dance

My student disagrees with me, says all bees are aggressive. As evidence, she tells the class of an incident while running barefoot

in her yard. What would you do if someone tried to crush you or your home? Before we moved to Connecticut, I didn't know about ground-

nesting bees, believed all wild ones lived in hives, like honeybees, clinging to tree branches, or to eaves of houses. Now, we let fallen leaves

rest until spring, provide cover to underground and ground-level nests. Grateful that neighbors don't complain. "The only way to deal with bees,"

says my student, "is eradicate them with poison." I'm happy she knows how to use the word eradicate. Still my throat tightens.

Native North American bees live solitary lives in intricate underground homes, with one exception—bumblebees, the social ones that nest

mostly on the ground or close to it. In Colombia, my six siblings and I lived in a long, deep ten-bedroom house where mamá raised us alone until

we were all able to join papá in New York. He fled for his life from guerrilleros when the FARC decided to take over the town where he worked.

Bumblebees are the first to arrive, the only natives with overlapping generations and casts. Each plays a role, then dies before winter, except for queens. Today,

they awakened to their dance. Flying here and there in search of a place to raise their own. In class we discuss pollinators, agriculture, and wearing shoes on the grass.

Luisa Caycedo-Kimura is a Colombian-born writer, translator, educator, and the author of *All Were Limones* (The Word Works, 2025), winner of the Hillary Tham Capital Collection competition. Other honors include a Connecticut Office of the Arts Emerging Recognition Award, a John K. Walsh Residency Fellowship at the Anderson Center, an Adrienne Reiner Hochstadt Fellowship at Ragdale, and a Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship in Poetry.



Fighting for Food Justice

A Bridgeport resident is changing the conversation around food security in Connecticut.

By Timothy Brown
Photos by Reggy Saint Fortcolin

Reggy Saint Fortcolin's passion for environmental education, food sovereignty, and land justice is contagious. He is the founder of Fridgeport, a community food assistance program located in Bridgeport's Hollow neighborhood, a founding member of the Liberated Land Cooperative, which supports Black and brown farmers in Connecticut, and the founder and executive director of the Sovereign Land Trust, which is advancing Black land ownership in the state.

HIS WORK IS NECESSARY AND URGENT. Food prices spiked by more than 20% during the pandemic and have remained high since, with food costs expected to rise another 3.3% this year. Across Connecticut, one out of eight people are considered food insecure, meaning they don't have access to enough safe and nutritious food; for the Black community, that number rises to one out of every four. And across the state more than 112,000 kids—living in both urban and rural settings—don't have enough food for healthy development.

We sat down with Saint Fortcolin to learn about his vision for a more equitable and just food system. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Connecticut Woodlands: How did you get interested in food justice and, more generally, the outdoors?

Reggie Saint Fortcolin: I was raised in a Christian household and doing food drives was part of that. And when I was a kid, I did Soundwaters in Stamford, an afterschool program that taught me about Long Island Sound.

CW: Do you have a background in farming?

RSF: No, I have no interest in being a farmer. I don't think everything should be wrapped in labor. You don't have to have the most grueling job in the world to be Black outside. I do blueberry walks, I do bird walks, I do activities about vernal pools. I respect farming, but it's not for me. Getting people to kayak, go bird watching, do their own version of Soundwaters, that's more my interest.

CW: What inspired you to create Fridgeport?

RSF: It came from thinking about a more efficient way to solve hunger. In 2019, I was doing Bridgeport Mutual Aid, which was 20 or so people driving around Bridgeport giving out groceries. It was very inefficient; maybe we'd help 20 or 40 people. It's more efficient to put a fridge here and figure out a way to get food. When I tell people about the fridge, I say it's more of a billboard than a Band-Aid. I could have three fridges, I could have a thousand fridges, and it's not going to solve food insecurity. I'm cognizant of the fact that the fridge is bright and quirky, so it brings people in to talk about food security. It's all about getting community together, building them up, figuring out what the



systematic issues are and then working toward that. This is just a means to an end. We get a real number; 1,000 people a week (access the fridge); that's part of the solution. But the other part is to get the government to increase SNAP, create labels, teach people about farming.

CW: Describe what you mean when you say, "mutual aid"?

RSF: When I talk about mutual aid, it's solidarity, not charity; creating opportunities where people can rely on each other as opposed to institutions. Some people are afraid to put their names on forms. There's a good portion of the immigrant community

that's starving but they can't go anywhere for help because they're scared of ICE. So, the systems that worked four months ago don't work now. What if you have a system where it's just neighbor helping neighbor, where you rely on your community? We're creating systems where people work together.

CW: How does this model apply to the Liberated Land Cooperative?

RSF: Very directly. We're trying to figure out some kind of mutual aid where your purchase (of a farm share) helps another person who's hungry. We're a year in now and trying to figure out succession plans, like doing Safe Serve certification, farming classes, cottage food licenses, etc. Strong people don't need strong leaders; we're just trying to elevate people. We envision a world where everyone can rely on everyone else.

CW: Talk about the Sovereign Land Trust.

RSF: Less than 2% of Black and brown people own land (in the U.S.). The Sovereign Land Trust is trying to build a structure where people have ownership of their land. And again, we're trying to do this so it's not all wrapped up in labor. If you have land, you can make hiking paths, kayaking paths.

More times than not when I'm in nature I'm the only person of color outside. It's never comfortable being the only person of something, so we're trying to make more safe spaces. We want to do three things: one, create land ownership for farmers; two, create spaces where you can hike and ride bikes and kayak, or tap trees for maple syrup, with people who look like you so you feel safer; and three, education. I'm working



**When I talk about mutual aid,
it's solidarity,
not charity.**

on some educational materials, trying to create a pathway and more access for people of color to become naturalists.

CW: How do you address issues of equity and inclusion in a way that empowers the people you're trying to serve?

RSF: By being very forward about it. Historically, we've had nothing; you can't take anything from nothing. I'm going to speak the truth. You can change all the words you want but the work's going to be the same. It's about being transparent and trying to be a rock in the community; being both a buffer and a blowhorn, blocking people from injustice, but also being able to amplify voices.

We're attacking racist systems by providing alternatives. We're trying to create other systems—safe spaces, farming opportunities, education opportunities, hiking opportunities, places where you're not judged, or feel like an outcast, or you're one of something, or disregarded. It's saying, "Hey, you want to do this, here's something different."

We're creating alternatives, creating options, creating pathways for other people to take on the fight. It's not a fight I'm going to win, but hopefully the next generation will. Compounding knowledge, compounding actions will hopefully lead to a better future.

CW: You've helped to establish community fridges in New Haven and other cities, but you're also drafting food policy at the statehouse. Are elected officials listening?

RSF: They listen because food security is just not a Bridgeport issue. There are farm towns with 10,000 people that don't have a grocery store. Farmers are food insecure. It's not as if this conversation is exclusive to urban areas. Outside of housing, it's the number

two issue in Connecticut; people can't afford housing and people can't afford food. We're just trying to move toward a solution day by day.

Right now, a bill I am fronting, SB 1418: An Act Reducing Barriers to Food, is being debated. The bill focuses on expanding food assistance programs, improving access to fresh and local foods, and supporting infrastructure like food hubs and mobile markets. It's another step toward making sure that regardless of zip code, people can reliably get food. But like everything in policy, it's a fight; there are always hurdles, and we have to keep pushing to make sure these programs stay in place.

Everything is getting a little harder by the day. Prices are going up, access is going down, supermarkets are closing left and right, land is way too expensive to farm. We're trying to create some safety barriers, especially in a world where the federal government is planning on taking away funds for all these programs. School meals for all would really help kids. Every dollar spent saves three dollars, and kids who eat breakfast do better in school.

CW: How do you define success?

RSF: I find value in building up other people. I find success in seeing other people do the stuff I'm doing. You build a strong boat and then you test it in rocky waters. And right now, we have some strong headwinds and are seeing if it works. The world's problems aren't short term, neither are the solutions. So, being very intentional, moving at the speed of comfort, moving at the speed of community, making sure that we're all in the same space. Knowing who you're working with and being very intentional that this is not a short-term thing.

CW: What inspires you to keep up this work?

RSF: It's fun, simple as that. I enjoy the people I'm working with. I just like the education behind it. Passion, that's what keeps me going, wanting to learn more.

CW: What is something readers can do to help end hunger and food insecurity?

RSF: Build the community around you. Talking to a guy in Bridgeport when you live in Putnam doesn't make sense. Talk to *your* community, reach out to *your* community, build *your* community up. Sure, I'll reply to an email, but it's better for you to send that email to someone in your neighborhood. The work is building local and then expanding out from that.



Trail Magic, continued from page 16

I love meeting thru-hikers as a trail angel. Although most people are eager to get back on the trail, I enjoy spending a few minutes hearing about their journey and answering their questions about what lies ahead. One hiker to whom I provided water several times during a severe drought sent me regular updates her entire way north, giving me the sense that I was with her on the trail. Other hikers have sent me photos when they reach Royalston Falls. While every hiker's accomplishments are theirs alone, I'm proud to have contributed in some small way to their success.

Completing a long trail invokes a strange blend of relief, exhaustion, and elation, followed by sadness that the adventure is over. It can be difficult to return to normal life with all its complications after weeks of focusing on your basic needs. Part of the magic of the trail is making connections with others, whether through quick conversations as you cross paths or by relying on a stranger for a life-saving resource like water. Serving as a trail angel is one way to hold onto that experience and contribute to another's journey. Each small favor—from a bottle of water to a dry pair of socks—adds up over the course of a hike to create that unforgettable experience.

Greg Gregory is a Certified Master Naturalist and Blue-Blazed Hiking Challenge 800-Miler. He is a volunteer trail manager on the NET. His favorite trails are the Metacomet and Housatonic Range Trail.

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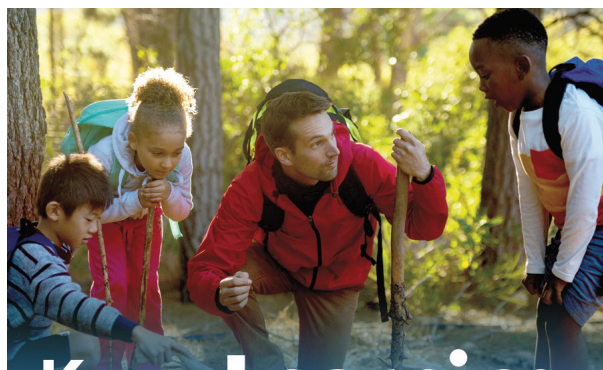
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Pathways

ALTHOUGH BOLTON NOTCH is a small state park spanning just 95 acres, it has much to offer—from hiking and biking to rock climbing and caving—thanks to its unique geological history. Geologists believe that the Notch, which cuts a path through stratified rock layers formed at the end of the Ordovician period more than 444 million years ago, was created by a stream or river prior to the last Ice Age. For thousands of years, it served Mohegan, Podunk, and other local Indigenous peoples as the main route between the Connecticut River to places further east, intersecting with the Nipmuck Trail to the north, and the Pequot and Mohegan trails to the south. Early European colonists also used this ancient trail for trading with local tribes.

In 1809, a quarry was established near the present-day state park. Teams of oxen hauled heavy stones, including schist and marble, through the Notch from Quarryville (near Bolton) to Hartford. In 1849, the trail was widened to create a railroad, which replaced the oxen, carrying both people and stone and propelling the region's growth. A century later, in 1956, a major hurricane washed away a railroad bridge in nearby Putnam, effectively silencing the trains and marking the beginning of the end for the quarry in Bolton Notch.

Today, hikers to Bolton Notch State Park can explore several different trails, including the popular Hop River Trail, now part of the East Coast Greenway which stretches from Maine to the Florida Keys; a footpath which has served travelers for millennia.



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