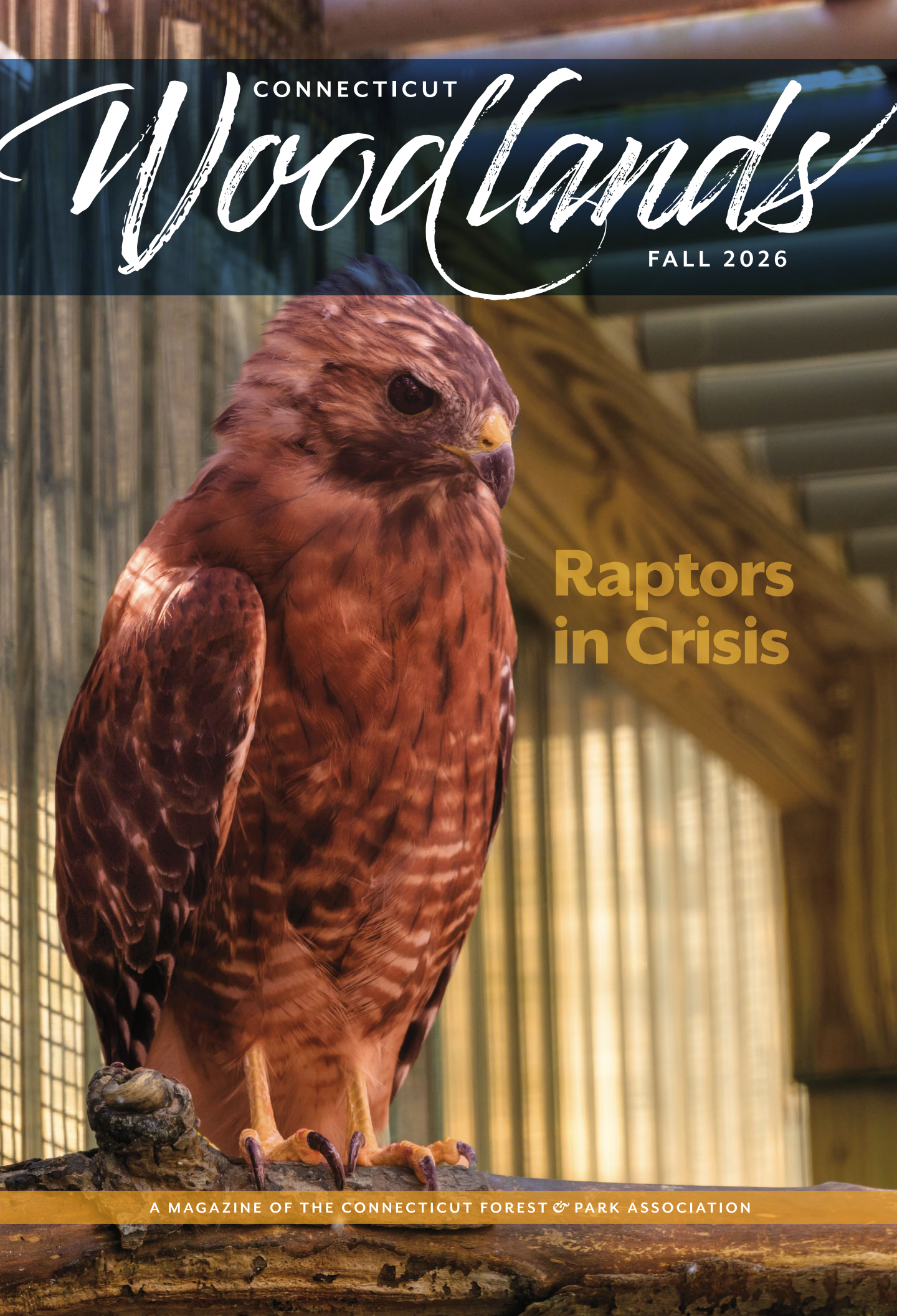
CONNECTICUT
Woodlands
FALL 2026



Raptors in Crisis

A MAGAZINE OF THE CONNECTICUT FOREST & PARK ASSOCIATION



Land Acknowledgment Statement

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CONTRIBUTOR *Spotlight*

In a story layered with years of legislation, advocacy, and personal sacrifice, writer **Colby Galliher** takes readers into the fight to protect birds of prey from rodenticide poisoning. We caught up with Colby to learn more about his work and his first story for CT Woodlands.

What kinds of stories are you most drawn to as a writer? The stories I find compelling to write interrogate the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, particularly those that showcase how we can act as a positive force in the biosphere. So much of our species' history has been about dominating the natural world to advance human interests—and that mindset, I would argue, is the driving force behind most environmental crises, including climate change and biodiversity loss. I love talking to people who are expanding our moral universe to include wildlife and the land itself.

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On the cover: Jupiter, an adult female red-shouldered hawk is a resident of A Place Called Hope. Red-shouldered hawks are one of many raptors at risk of ingesting rodenticides when they hunt rodents in the wild. Photo by Steven Kornfeld.

You've been working on this story for over a year—what inspired you to stick with it?
It is Christine Cummings' tireless dedication to Connecticut's birds of prey that inspired the story and motivated me to pursue it. Christine is on the frontlines of the effort to ban second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides and has exhibited incredible fortitude and selflessness in leading this fight without sacrificing the vital work she does at her rehabilitation center, A Place Called Hope. Beyond that, I am constantly reminded of the rodenticides issue by the omnipresent black bait boxes I see everywhere.

Did Christine's work influence how you think about your own work in addressing urgent issues like conservation and climate change?
One of the most impressive parts of Christine's journey is how she embraced advocacy so successfully. As a writer, I consider telling stories like Christine's as my contribution to the wider endeavor of bringing humanity into a more respectful relationship with wildlife and the planet, in the hope that these stories urge others to act, whether through charitable giving, voting, or volunteering. Christine's pivot into advocacy has underscored that none of us needs to be a one-trick pony; her example has helped me to view other hobbies—like gardening with native plants at my home to support pollinators and wildlife—as just as meaningful as my writing.

What surprised you most in reporting this piece?
I was amazed to learn that captive pairs of red-tailed hawks and other birds will foster orphaned chicks of the same species. Christine places the orphan in the pair's enclosure and, over time, the pair will begin feeding and caring for the orphaned chick until it's ready to return to the wild. Even as someone who believes that we constantly underestimate the intelligence of nonhuman species, I was dumbfounded by the adaptability and behavioral complexity of birds of prey.

Editor's Note

The word "wilderness," comes up a lot when I'm working on stories for Connecticut Woodlands. It's a useful word when speaking broadly about natural landscapes and habitats that have been minimally disrupted by humans. But I often get hung up on trying to define "wilderness" without drawing false lines between humans and the natural world.

On a map, a forest is marked in green, a color-coded wild space. But the red-tailed hawk who frequents my neighborhood does not see that line. Their wilderness extends into the highway corridor where they find open skies for flying; it weaves through a patchwork of backyards where rodents and rabbits are easy to spot. In this issue, Colby Galliher writes about anticoagulant rodenticides placed around homes and businesses to kill rodents. A homeowner might be thrilled by the hawk who circles overhead, even though the mouse is unwelcome. But then the hawk eats the poisoned mouse or carries it off to the forest to feed a nest full of hatchlings. A death by anticoagulant rodenticides is slow and painful for both species. These lines we try to enforce leave cracks in all directions.

In Erica Cirino's story about the wildland urban interface of Connecticut, we can see the overlap of our built environment and wilderness in maps meant to illustrate wildfire risk. These maps make one thing very clear: Every environment overlaps with another.

The blurry nature of "wilderness" can be daunting; everything we do might have unintended consequences for other living things. But this awareness can be empowering, too. When we consider all the ways our lives overlap with the millions of species that call this planet home, the importance of protecting wild places becomes clear. Humans are inextricably part of the natural world. In working to protect and conserve wilderness, we are making the planet better for us, too.

Just as the migrating monarch butterfly flits between gardens, highways, and meadows, searching for milkweed and nectar, I invite you to look for sustenance in the overlap. In reading this issue, I hope you consider all the ways that "wilderness," and "home" might be one and the same.



Britany Robinson
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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The Forest We Are Becoming

On a walk with a forester, I found myself listening more closely than I usually do.

Birdsong became something to pause over. With help from the Merlin app, we could connect the sounds around us to the birds that made them. Trees became opportunities to look more carefully, learn their names, and understand something about the landscape we were walking through.

Alongside us was the forester's grandson. As we walked, I watched his grandfather share knowledge and offer guidance, passing along ways of noticing and understanding the woods. It was a quiet, personal expression of something central to conservation: helping another generation learn to care.

I came away with a deeper appreciation for how much there is to discover when we walk with someone whose experience differs from our own. The forest had more to offer than I knew to look for. Someone else helped me see it.

That experience is with me as CFPA begins shaping its next strategic plan.

In my previous column, I reflected on the responsibility we inherit from those who came before us. Now I find myself considering a related question: How do we decide what to carry forward, what to strengthen, and where to make room for something new?

For me, that work begins with listening.

Since joining CFPA, I have spent time with members, volunteers, donors, staff, conservation partners, and community leaders. These conversations have helped me understand the dedication behind our work and the different ways people connect with it. Each person brings a perspective shaped by the places they know, the experiences they have had, and the possibilities they can imagine.

Together, those perspectives are helping me see more of CFPA.

Our staff has also been contemplating our future: protecting the quality and permanence of our trails, expanding opportunities for education, strengthening communications, and ensuring we have the people and resources to sustain our work. These discussions are beginning to give shape to the choices ahead. Community input will help us understand where our efforts can make the greatest difference.

A strategic plan carries real responsibilities. It guides how we spend our time, invest our resources, and measure our progress. It asks us to make thoughtful choices about what we can accomplish and what it will take to get there.

It also gives us an opportunity to imagine. What might become possible if more people felt connected to Connecticut's forests and trails? What knowledge could we help pass along? What would we hope a young person walking these woods today will find here decades from now?

I think again of the forester and his grandson. In their exchange, care for the future was already taking shape through attention, curiosity, and time spent together. At CFPA, we have an opportunity to extend that invitation across a much larger community.

You are part of that community, and I hope you will help us see what we might otherwise miss.

Please take a few minutes to complete our community survey using the QR code accompanying this column. Whether you have supported CFPA for decades or are just getting to know us, your perspective can help shape our priorities.

That walk reminded me that even familiar woods hold more than we first recognize. I approach CFPA's future with that same curiosity and with confidence in what we can discover and accomplish together.

The forest we are becoming is one we all have a part in shaping.

Joey Listro is CFPA's Executive Director.

Help Shape CFPA's Future

Share your perspective through our community survey. It takes less than five minutes, and you can participate anonymously.

You may also choose to enter a drawing for a CFPA swag bag.

Scan the QR code to participate.









The Henry Buck Trail

Words and photos by Faith Antion

When people learn that I've hiked the Henry Buck Trail once per week for most of the past year, they often surmise that I must get bored of "the same place." But my time on this trail has taught me that I can never return to the same forest twice.

I've been visiting this trail in the American Legion State Forest (Barkhamsted) since 2014, but it predates my presence by nearly a century. Dedicated in 1935, the trail was named for Henry R. Buck, who served as vice president of CFPA between 1928 and 1930 and later oversaw construction of the trail by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The trail climbs for approximately 1.8 miles through a mature mixed forest. Meticulously placed stone steps break up the steep ascent, which passes alongside a brook and the remnants of an early 1800s cheese box mill. Rocky ledges lead to an overlook of the Farmington River Valley before the trail descends sharply. Its dual trailheads on West River Road are connected by a beautiful 0.3-mile walk on the bank of the Wild and Scenic Farmington River.

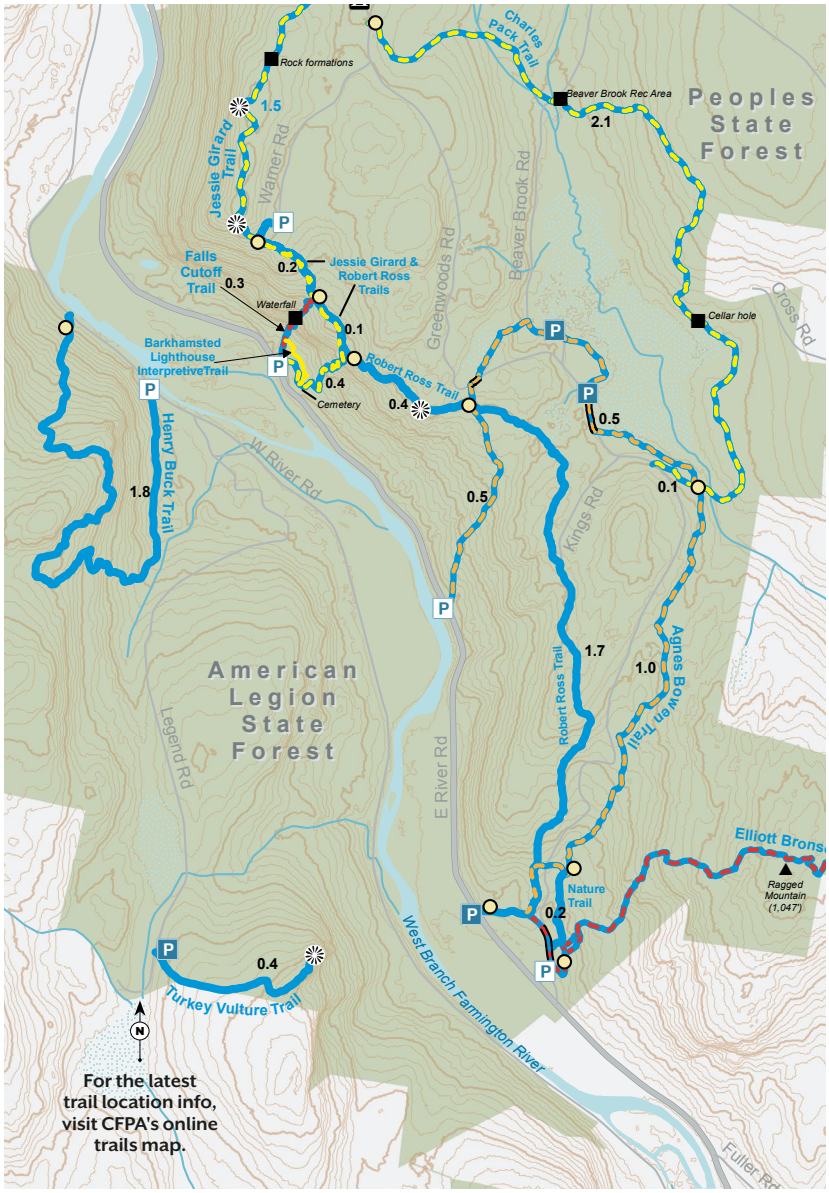
After hiking the trail through multiple seasons, I became aware of work I rarely witnessed but frequently benefited from—the efforts of all those who steward our beloved outdoor spaces. Fallen trees that blocked the trail after a storm would be cleared by my next visit. Trail blazes were freshly maintained, and bog bridges appeared where they were needed. I wanted to meet the people behind the trail work. In 2020, I joined the Friends of American Legion and Peoples State Forests (FALPS), an organization of passionate members and volunteers who partner with CFPA, CT DEEP, and other local organizations to help advocate for and encourage the responsible use of our forests. In FALPS, I found a community of people eager to share their knowledge of biology, forestry, and conservation, and my hikes on the Henry Buck Trail became grounded in a deeper sense of purpose.

In 2025, I was privileged to enroll in the James L. Goodwin Connecticut Master Naturalist program, sponsored by the

Friends of Goodwin Forest and CFPA. The year-long program includes completion of a Phenology project, in which students select one outdoor space to return to approximately once a week for an entire year while making detailed observations about the environment. For me, the choice of place was obvious—the Henry Buck Trail is a wonderful place to observe biodiversity in Connecticut, as well as the ways human activity is impacting natural seasonal and cyclical patterns over time.

The sights, sounds, scents, and textures of American Legion State Forest are ever-changing. Numerous species of migratory and non-migratory birds can be overheard, if not always seen, among trees, shrubs, and snags, while nurse logs sustain abundant life in mosses, lichens, fungi, and insects. From April to May, so many spring ephemerals can be found within a few steps of the road that I have spent hours traversing no more than half a mile. As the season warms, I scan the trail for flashes of orange—juvenile Eastern Newts, or Red Efts, on their way back to obscurement between duff and leaf litter. When summer hints at a transition to fall, the berries of plants and shrubs such as False Solomon's Seal, Elderberry, and Viburnum herald the changes ahead for deciduous trees. Even in the harshest of winters, evidence of life can be found in trails and tunnels in the subnivean layer and in animal tracks above. After experiencing the trail in all weather and seasons, I'm still observing plants, animals, and fungi that are new to me.

There are other notable differences between the forest I first visited more than a decade ago and the one I hike in today. I miss the striking translucence of American Beech leaves against the winter sun, devastated as they are now by beech bark and beech leaf disease. On each visit, I pass between sawn-off sections of white ash trees that succumbed to the invasive emerald ash borer, I and pay my respects to the trees that endure. I remind myself that nature is nothing if not resilient, and that there is hope to be found here, too.

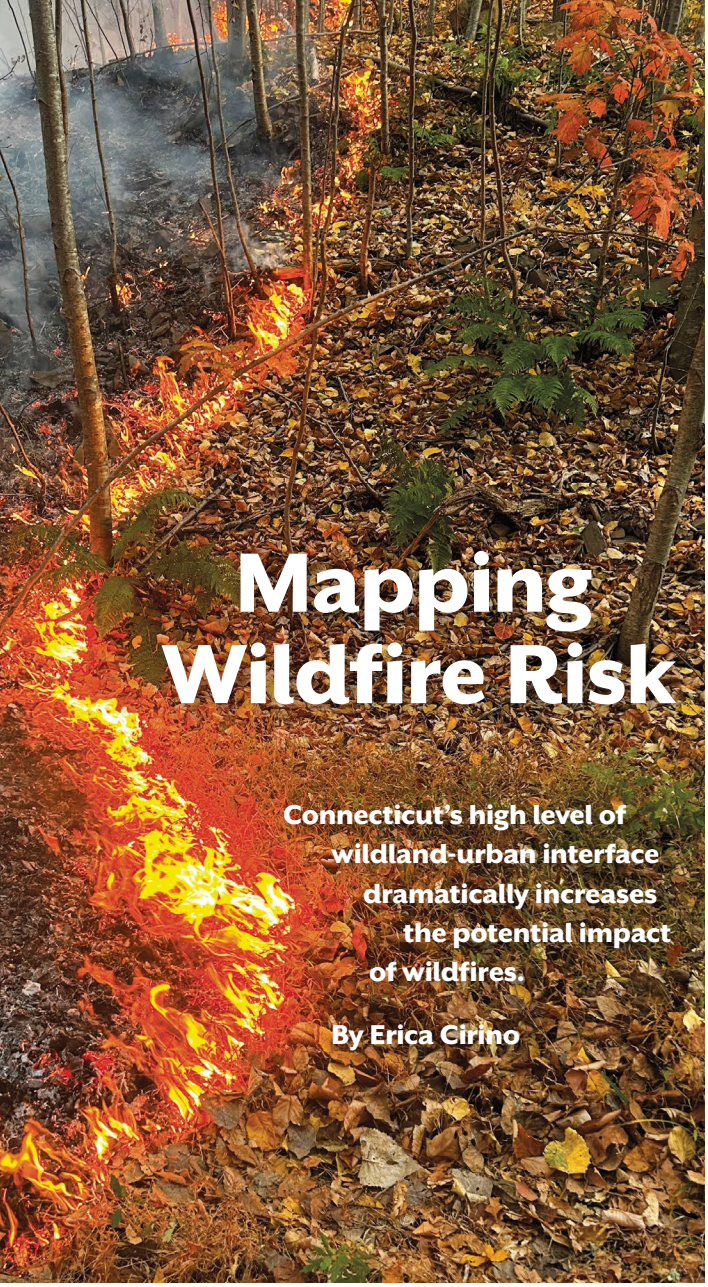


2027 will mark the 100th anniversary of the establishment of American Legion State Forest. The Henry Buck Trail is a wonderful way to experience all the forest has to offer, and to witness why so many are working to ensure its survival for generations to come. I'm grateful for the gifts the forest has given me—among them, the joy I find in its details and in curiosity itself. I look forward to returning as many times as I'm able, to the trail and my roots in the natural world.



Photo by Robert Reynolds

Faith Antion is a naturalist, photographer, and avid hiker. She's passionate about helping people experience the restorative power of nature through inclusive access to outdoor spaces. You'll likely find her in a forest, contorted into a position her spine can't support while attempting to observe the numinous wonders of nature.



Mapping Wildfire Risk

Connecticut's high level of wildland-urban interface dramatically increases the potential impact of wildfires.

By Erica Cirino

This summer, skies in Connecticut turned hazy and orange with smoke drifting over the border from massive fires in Canada. For weeks, more than 100 million people across the Northeast and Midwest states experienced unhealthy or hazardous air quality. Meanwhile, the American West saw a brutal wildfire season, too, with nearly 8 million acres burning. Wildfires are becoming larger and more frequent, particularly in places where drought and warming temperatures are igniting fires that spread far and fast over vast swaths of wilderness. But another factor is fueling the destructiveness of wildfires, and it's one experts are paying close attention to here in Connecticut.

The wildland-urban interface/intermix (WUI or "wooey") refers to the proximity of wild and developed places. These are places where forest grows close to homes, businesses, and other developed places, where wildfires can quickly spread to populated centers. Connecticut has more WUI than California, Colorado, Idaho, Tennessee, and Montana combined.

WUIs are measured by assessing a region's population and development within and proximal to forested areas, according to Christopher Martin, Connecticut State Forester at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. "Connecticut has 1.8 million acres of forest, three million people, and is the 13th most forested state in the nation," said Martin. "This creates a very high WUI index, and high wildfire risk."

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Connecticut saw large wildfires burning 15,000 to more than 100,000 acres annually. As Connecticut's population grew and spread out, wildlands became more fragmented. Along with greater fire suppression efforts, wildfires have generally shrunk in size and frequency. Yet a continuously growing population in and around Connecticut's forested areas has significantly expanded the state's WUI, and a growing number of people are now at risk of being affected by wildfires. Wildfire smoke may cause as many as 71,000 additional deaths per year in the U.S. by the year 2050. Mapping the WUI is helping fire researchers understand what's driving wildfires and where risk is greatest.

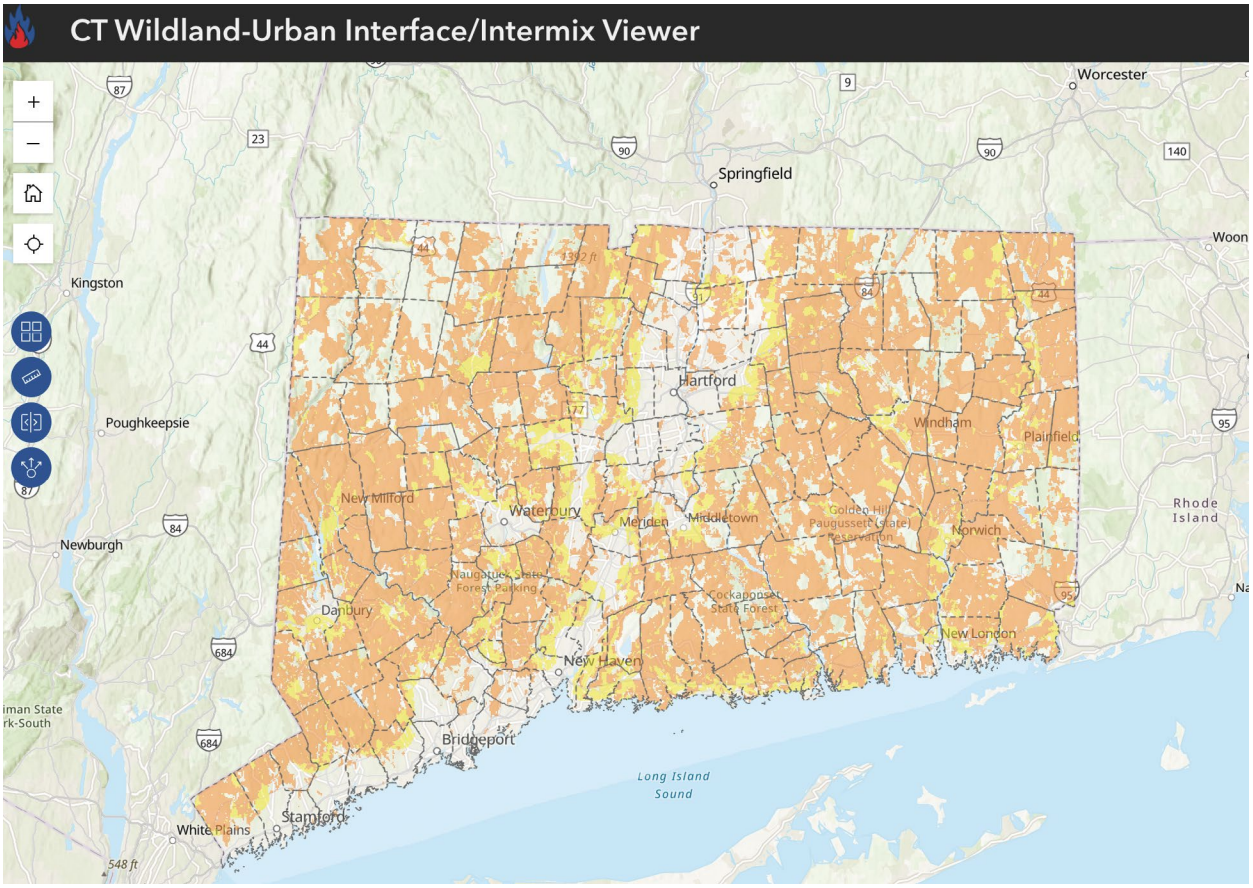
"In order for wildfires to start, there is a required spark in the ideal balance of heat, oxygen, and fuel," said UConn Fire Chief Christopher Renshaw, a leading expert on wildfires. His research shows Connecticut's last hundred years of infrequent fires has built up flammable detritus on forest floors. Forest health has also diminished, providing even more fuel. Lightning accounts for only about 15% of wildfires in the U.S. these days, while human-caused sources, like campfires and controlled burns make up the rest. "Today we have both ignition and abundant fuel, and hotter and drier conditions in which wildfire can proliferate."

Renshaw and Emily Wilson, Geospatial Educator at UConn's Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR), have developed the Connecticut WUI Viewer and Wildfire in Connecticut Story Map. The viewer provides visual layers of wildfire risk, including types and causes of forest damage, historic fire locations, homes and buildings, and WUI index scores. The story map connects the dots by offering a full history of wildfire in Connecticut and the rapidly changing risks.

Wildfires are a normal part of forest cycles, a fact highlighted in Renshaw and Wilson's story map. Fire clears dead trees and thick underbrush, returning crucial nutrients like calcium and potassium to soil. Some plants, such as the scrub oaks found in Connecticut's sand barrens, benefit from periodic fire, which top-kills shrubs but kickstarts new growth in their expansive underground root systems. In healthy forests, many trees and animals survive natural wildfires.

But a wildfire with benefits for a forest ecosystem can still be treacherous to human life.

Left: Lamentation Mountain, taken by UConn Fire Chief Chris Renshaw. Right: Lamentation Mountain from a distance, photo by Greg Balicki.





“In Connecticut, we carve our communities into the forest.”

The CT Wildland-Urban Interface/Intermix Viewer displays a map of Connecticut with various layers to view or hide. In this view, orange and yellow show the wildland urban interface from 2020 with orange and yellow designations. Orange is intermix value 1, defined as lower-density housing mingled with undeveloped wildland vegetation. Yellow is high-density development adjacent to undeveloped wildland vegetation.

”Because of Connecticut’s high WUI index, even small fires can have an intense impact on people,” said Martin.

Connecticut’s 2024 fall wildfire season was one of the worst in recent history, with the now-infamous Hawthorne fire on Lamentation Mountain taking weeks to contain. Tragically, one firefighter lost his life trying to quell the blaze. That year, the state saw its driest September and October in 120 years and experienced almost five times the average number of brushfires. One residential building and seven other structures were destroyed.

“The climate has changed, and is changing,” said Matthew Troy, a filmmaker and volunteer firefighter and EMT based in Bethel, Connecticut. “The Hawthorne fire was an eye-opening event.”

Martin at DEEP compared the “perfect storm” conditions precipitating the 2024 fire season to the conditions that led to catastrophic wildfires in Maui in 2023. Like Connecticut, the island of Maui has a high WUI index. In 2023, Maui faced hotter, drier weather, coupled with ongoing changes in forest dynamics like those documented by Renshaw and Wilson in Connecticut, including diseased and downed trees and the spread of fast-burning invasive vegetation.

Another major factor driving dangerous wildfires at the WUI today is the proliferation of plastics. Modern homes are full of plastic, from the building materials (vinyl siding, plastic lumber decks, polyethylene pipes) to the furniture they’re filled with. These plastics and synthetic materials are much more flammable than traditional construction materials, like wood and metal.

Prescribed fires—or intentionally burned, lower-intensity fires—eliminate significant fuel sources like fallen trees and brush while returning nutrients to soils.

"Plastic is a solid form of oil so it burns incredibly hot, volatile, and very fast," said Troy. "They say that in a home [built] before the 1970s, you have half an hour to escape, and in homes built today you have 90 seconds."

Renshaw and other experts emphasize that we must reduce fuel availability, especially in regions where WUI is highest. Prescribed fires—or intentionally burned, lower-intensity fires—eliminate fuel sources like fallen trees and brush while returning nutrients to soils.

Across New England, Indigenous peoples who preceded European settlements routinely burned forestland in a controlled manner to make it healthier and more habitable. In fact, there are many places in Connecticut with Indigenous names that mean "cleared land," such as Poquannoc (Windsor) and Pequonnock (Bridgeport). This practice increased grassland and attracted game animals, boosted growth of berries and other food plants, and reduced plant pests.

After Europeans settlers seized Indigenous lands, their fire management strategy focused on fire suppression and property protection. While this strategy has persisted in the U.S. over the last several hundred years, experts are now recognizing the importance of periodic, low-intensity fires.

"Complete prevention leads to increased fuel availability and the likelihood of severe fire which—over the long run—may risk lives, property, and native populations of vegetation, and wildlife, counteracting the benefits of immediate life safety protection and property conservation," said Renshaw. "It is truly a balancing act."

When major fires break out, preparation is key. Fire departments can improve firefighters' safety by spreading awareness about the safest gear to wear when battling wildfires, which is not the same gear they would wear when fighting a building fire. In wildfire scenarios, firefighters should wear 100% cotton or wool long sleeves and long pants, steel-toed boots, helmet, eye protection, and gloves, as opposed to heavy structural turnout gear, which can cause injuries in the wildland environment. For the general public, experts hope to spread information on how to make homes and properties more fire-resistant.

"In Connecticut, we carve our communities into the forest. People love their tree-canopy driveways and putting mulch beds and beautiful plants alongside their home," said Troy.



More than 120 acres of wildlife burned on Lamentation Mountain in October 2024. Photo by Fire Chief Christopher Renshaw.

But embers from wildfires are much less likely to leap to your home if there's at least a 10-foot buffer between vegetation and structures.

In a video produced by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, Troy shares how new homes in Southern California are built and maintained with fire-resistant features, like stucco facades, steel fencing and gutters, and less-flammable plantings spaced away from homes. Updated building codes requiring fire-safe materials in construction can help make fire resilience widespread. Troy also said having an evacuation plan, working smoke detectors, and heeding evacuation orders can save both your life and firefighters' lives.

Research on the WUI has helped establish a better understanding of a region's risk of fire occurrence that is dangerous to life and property. Experts in Connecticut hope that informational tools like the Connecticut WUI Viewer and Wildfire in Connecticut Story Map can help communities, decisionmakers, firefighters and other first responders better manage these risks and develop policies to reduce harm.

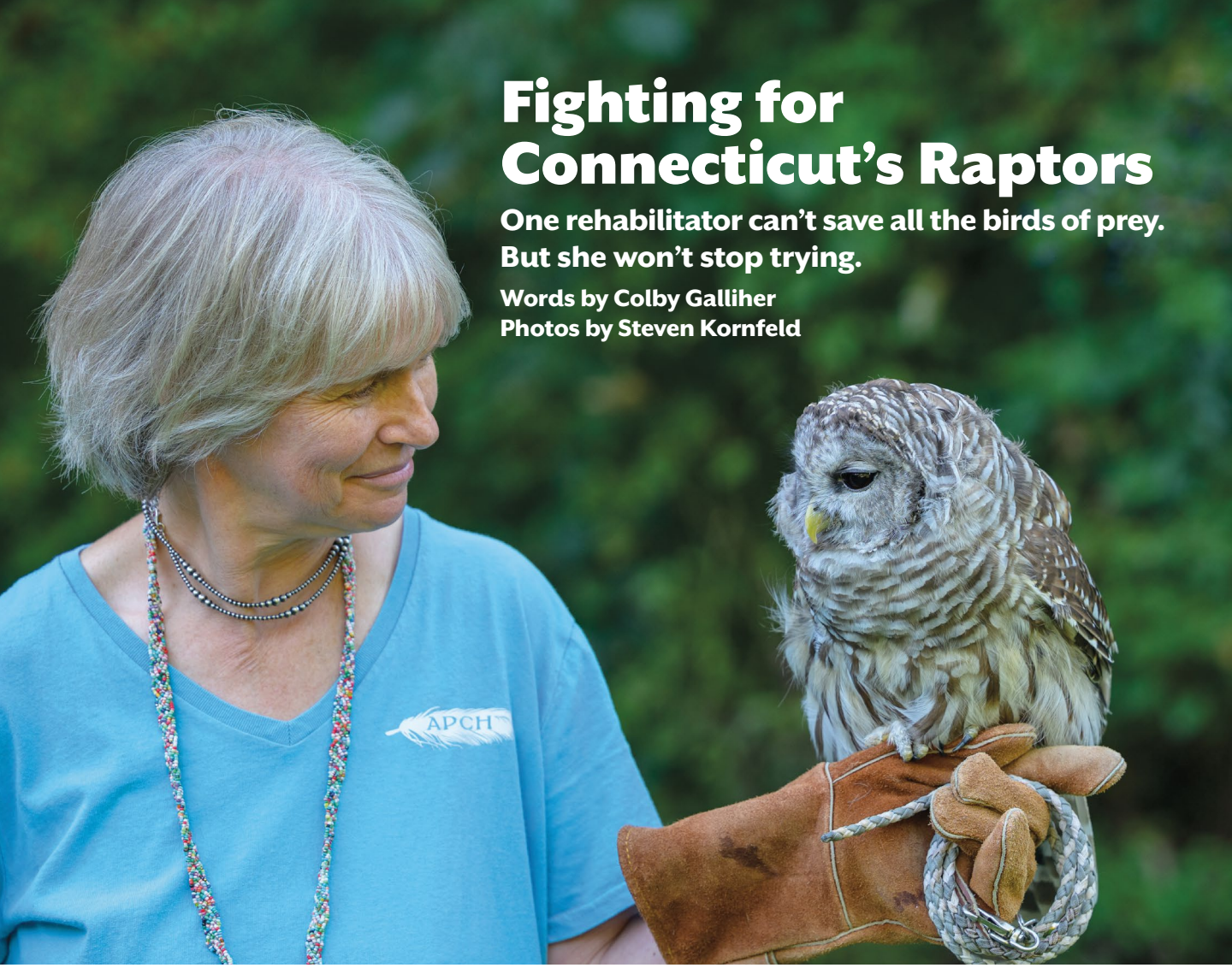
"In July of 2024, it rained nearly every day, yet the September through November fire season in Connecticut was one of the worst on record," said Renshaw. "We must be ready for this."

Erica Cirino is a writer and artist who explores the intersection of the human and more-than-human worlds. She serves as communications manager at the nonprofit Plastic Pollution Coalition and is best known for her widely published photojournalistic works, including her award-winning book, Thicker Than Water: The Quest for Solutions to the Plastic Crisis.

Fighting for Connecticut's Raptors

One rehabilitator can't save all the birds of prey. But she won't stop trying.

Words by Colby Galliher
Photos by Steven Kornfeld



AT A PLACE CALLED HOPE, a rehabilitation clinic for birds of prey in Killingworth, Connecticut, Christine Cummings leads me through the aviary. She pauses at each enclosure, telling me in detail about the owls, hawks, and other species in her care. Today, which began for Cummings at sunrise and will end at 10:30 p.m., she and her staff received five raptor chicks and one juvenile turkey vulture in the morning. Some of these new arrivals, as well as a number of the birds watching us from behind wire screens, will soon return to the wild; others, because of permanent disabilities, will always be captive.

Cummings, who opened the sanctuary in 2007 with her husband and fellow rehabilitator Todd Secki, rattles off the reasons a sick or injured bird comes to A Place Called Hope: vehicle strike; electrocution; exposure to chemicals; and, in some cases, plain human cruelty. Cummings shows remarkable composure when explaining what these birds have been through. She's had no choice but to grow a thick skin; losing birds is part of her job.

But when Cummings tells me about the raptors killed by second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), anger and exasperation knuckle into her voice. Over the past decade, the number of birds that arrive at A Place Called Hope poisoned by SGARs has ballooned, with grim consequences. There are no victims of second-generation anticoagulants convalescing in the aviary. Most don't survive the first 24 hours.

Among the many cases involving SGARs, one in particular haunts Cummings. In 2023, she received a call about a dead Great-Horned Owl in Guilford. In a tree near where she died, Cummings discovered a nest with two owlets, a male and a female, clinging to life. She took them in, nursed them back to health, and released them near A Place Called Hope. A few weeks later, Cummings, who has an uncanny ability to

There are no victims of second-generation anticoagulants convalescing in the aviary. Most don't survive the first 24 hours.

Above: Christine Cummings holds Otsi, a resident snowy owl whose right wing was amputated below the elbow after a vehicle strike in 2022. He is now an ambassador bird Cummings brings to programs meant to educate the public on raptors and their conservation. Snowy owls, like other owl species, ingest rodenticides when they prey on mice and rats.

remember specific birds, found the female on the ground near the aviary. Blood was pooling in her abdomen, turning it into one ghastly bruise. She died hours later in Cummings' arms.

When Cummings founded A Place Called Hope, she was confident that rehabilitation was her calling within the wider world of avian conservation. But this type of avoidable suffering catapulted her into a journey she never envisioned.

AN ALARMING SHIFT

Anticoagulant rodenticides have been used for nearly a century to kill rats, mice, and other animals deemed pests by humans. The chemicals deplete Vitamin K, a natural blood-clotting agent. A rodent eats the bait, exits the bait box, and several days later, dies from internal bleeding.

Before succumbing to the poison, many of those rodents are consumed by birds of prey. After a bird has consumed one or more poisoned rodents, a normally innocuous scratch or bruise can trigger fatal internal bleeding. Rodenticides also have sub-lethal impacts on birds, inhibiting their hunting abilities, immune system performance, body temperature regulation, and more.

Anticoagulant rodenticides used today are either "first-" or "second-generation." Cummings has dealt with poisonings by the former for many years. She knows the symptoms like the back of her hand. Affected birds come to her with massive hemorrhages, blood accumulating in their bellies or leaking from their beaks.



A bait box outside the writer's apartment in Washington, D.C. A small passage runs along the back of the container, allowing rats, mice, and any organism small enough to enter the box and feed on the bait housed within.

These cases were alarming, but Cummings could save most birds poisoned by first-generation anticoagulants. A regimen of Vitamin K stopped the bleeding. "From 2007 to 2015, when we would get suspected first-generation rodenticides cases, they were treatable," says Cummings. "We fixed them and sent them back to freedom."

Around 2015, treatment stopped working. "I started to have more birds coming in with the same symptoms but they couldn't be saved," Cummings recalled. Red-tailed hawks and great-horned owls were hit particularly hard, but untreatable poisoning cases of all raptors and scavengers that feed on rodents—owls, hawks, ravens, and crows—were on a troubling rise.

By 2016, as poisoned raptors continued to die in her arms, she was fed up. "That's when I started to speak out about what was happening."

Online, she found a community of rehabilitators, conservationists, and bird advocates who were noticing the same disturbing trend. But there was little meaningful collaboration to address the problem. Cummings described what she was seeing in written communications to Connecticut's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There was no response.

THE "BAIT-BOX FRENZY"

Through conversations with other rehabilitators and conservationists, Cummings soon realized that a more potent class of rodenticides was to blame for the surge in untreatable cases: second-generation anticoagulants.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) summarizes the functional distinction between the two generations of rodenticides and their impact on targeted rodents: "The first-generation anticoagulants require several days of consecutive feedings to deliver a lethal dose, whereas SGARs can deliver a lethal dose in only one night of feeding, although with either type of anticoagulant, death does not occur until 5-7 days after the feeding."

The Agency continues, describing why SGARs are particularly dangerous to non-target wildlife like birds of prey:

"The second-generation anticoagulants are more likely to be toxic in a single feeding than earlier products, but since time-to-death is several days, rodents can feed multiple times before death, leading to carcasses containing residues that may be many times the lethal dose."

Cummings soon realized that a more potent class of rodenticides was to blame for the surge in untreatable cases: second-generation anticoagulants.

Cummings had her culprit. But the discovery gave rise to another vexing question. Second-generation anticoagulants have been around since the 1970s, when rodents began developing resistance to the first generation. Why did Cummings see such a surge in their ubiquity and lethality beginning in 2015?

She and her colleagues have a theory. In 2008, the EPA discouraged direct-to-consumer sales of SGARs by only allowing these products to be sold in bulk quantities that homeowners or property managers were unlikely to purchase. Then, in 2014, one year before SGAR poisonings exploded at A Place Called Hope, the EPA forced Reckitt Benckiser, the manufacturer of the popular "d-CON" rat-and-mouse poisons, to take 12 d-CON products off consumer shelves. The Agency stated that two-thirds of the canceled products "contain second-generation anticoagulant pesticides that pose unacceptable risks to non-target wildlife," violating the 2008 decision.

Neither measure, however, did much to steer pest-control companies and agricultural producers away from indiscriminate use of SGARs, which, as stipulated by the 2008 rule, must be housed within bait boxes when deployed on the landscape. (Pest Control Technology, an industry group, summarized the 2008 decision as "favorable for the pest-control industry.")

Cummings and her associates believe the result of this half-measure regulatory approach simply allowed the pest-management companies to corner the market, offering a product that individuals now couldn't get themselves. "It became the black-bait-box frenzy," Cummings says.

Dismayed by inaction at the federal level, and drained by five years of carnage, Cummings realized in 2020 that she had to do more. Running A Place Called Hope is more than a full-time job. Still, she felt no choice but to take the jump into political advocacy.

"It's terrifying to me," she says. "Put a bird on my arm and I'm fine. But stand [me] up before a whole bunch of legislators and speak? No thank you."

Despite her hesitation, she forged ahead. Cummings connected with other raptor advocates who were training their sights on statehouses. But she knew that any argument for a ban on SGARs was dead in the water without data.

To obtain hard evidence, she needed lab-quality liver necropsies that could confirm the presence of SGARs in dead birds' livers. The tests are expensive ($200/specimen), and the state wildlife agency in Connecticut does not pay for them. So, Cummings started fundraising via social media and outreach to the sanctuary's preexisting supporters to send suspected victims of SGAR poisoning to specialized facilities.

Between 2020 and 2026, Cummings has 102 deceased birds tested, and 79 had one or more SGAR ingredients in their livers. There was now no question, in Cummings' view, that SGARs were a population-level threat to the state's owls, hawks, ravens, and crows.

"This is not just me saying, 'I don't like it when an animal dies.' It's me showing that this is happening at a rapid pace. And we can't keep up with it. There are times of year when it's one after another, when I have to euthanize poisoned birds before they drown in their own blood."

SHIFTING WINDS

Rep. Joseph Gresko of the Connecticut House of Representatives was familiar with second-generation anticoagulants and their impact. "I saw stories in the news about how these rodenticides are reminiscent of DDT," he says. It's a comparison that Cummings often makes.

But it was Gresko's visit to A Place Called Hope that drove him to take up the torch for Cummings and her partners in the Connecticut statehouse. "Going out to see Christine's facility and taking a look at the data from the necropsies—that was irrefutable."

State Senators Christine Cohen and Bob Duff also made trips to the sanctuary at Cummings' invitation. Both soon became champions for the cause.

In 2024, Gresko convened several working groups before the legislative session commenced, bringing together Cummings and other wildlife advocates, officials from DEEP, and representatives from the pest-control industry. In February 2024, he introduced their bill to ban SGARs, then numbered H.B. 5217.

Cummings provided testimony in support of the bill. "When I started showing pictures and video clips of birds dying, they started paying attention," she recalls.

The bill sailed out of the Environment Committee with bipartisan support from 34 out of 35 committee members. And the bill's language remained strong. The draft law declared: "No person shall engage in the use in this state of any second-generation anticoagulant rodenticide."

The campaign had dedicated legislative champions, compelling testimony, and undeniable evidence of the problem's scope. But now the bill would need to withstand the scrutiny of the full lower chamber, where most members had not toured A Place Called Hope or heard from Cummings.

INCREMENTAL PROGRESS

The momentum coming into May 1, 2024 was palpable. It was the first time a near-total ban on second-generation anticoagulants had made it to the full floor of the Connecticut House.

But as the assembled legislators began deliberating, the tide turned. Lawmakers voiced doubts, many laced with misinformation. One legislator said they read that California was being overrun with rodents after placing a moratorium on most uses of second-generation anticoagulants. (It is not.) Another cited bald eagle populations, which are on the rise in Connecticut, as proof that birds of prey are doing just fine. (Bald eagles

primarily eat fish, so they are not often victims of SGAR poisoning.)

Cummings, who watched a livestream of the deliberations from home, seethed. "It was so frustrating that the legislators in opposition didn't have enough information. They didn't understand what they were saying."

The deluge of opposition proved too much. Many of the lawmakers who conveyed skepticism about an SGAR ban represent urban and rural districts: the former for fear of rats running amok in their constituents' homes and apartment buildings, and the latter for the alleged implications for agricultural producers whose harvests are attractive to rodents. When it became clear that the rodenticides amendment could tank the entire bill to which it was attached, Gresko reluctantly pulled it from consideration. Connecticut, at least that year, would not become the first state in the nation to institute a near-total ban on second-generation anticoagulants.

The 2025 legislative session saw hard-fought progress on SGARs that still fell short of Cummings and her colleagues' ultimate goal. State Bill 9, which was signed into law by Governor Lamont in June of last year, designated second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides as "restricted use." In order to use SGARs, you must now apply for and receive a permit from DEEP. The law goes further than the EPA regulation by codifying restrictions geared toward homeowners and retail consumers, but it still allows continued usage—with few guardrails—by licensed applicators like pest-control companies.

Cummings and her legislative champions decided to let the statehouse effort rest in 2026, anticipating a dearth of political will. But she is unbowed. "We are not done," she says.

Moving forward, she says education will be key. "People need to understand that second-generation anticoagulants aren't the solution. They've never addressed the core of the issue. And they still don't." Cummings and others believe that fertility control, a non-toxic method that controls rodent populations by stymieing reproduction, is a safer, more humane alternative that also eliminates the threat to raptors and other non-target species.

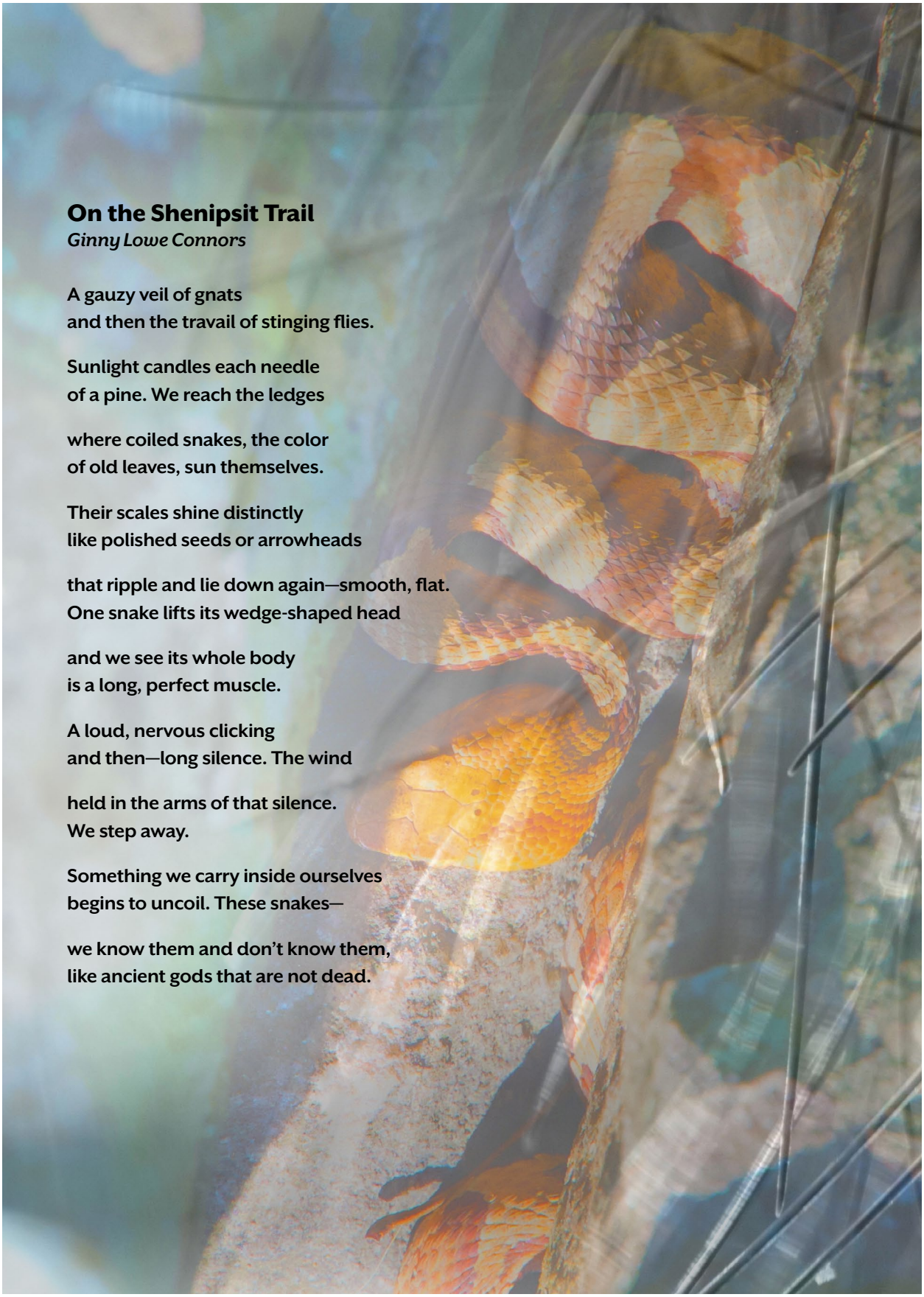


"People need to understand that second-generation anticoagulants aren't the solution. They've never addressed the core of the issue. And they still don't."

Her "Think Outside the Bait Box" series, which she debuted in 2024, takes her and her colleagues to libraries and town halls across Connecticut where she gives presentations on the ravages of SGARs and the availability of non-lethal alternatives.

What excites her most as she gears up for the next state legislative push is the burgeoning movement to ban SGARs at the municipal level. She helped Newtown become the first town in Connecticut to ban SGARs on public property in April of this year. Southbury followed suit in May.

Still, Cummings' goal remains statewide prohibition. She believes it's only a matter of time until states wake up to SGARs and take action. "[A ban] is going to happen all around us" she tells me with a smile, optimism flashing in her eyes. "Let's do it first."



On the Shenipsit Trail

Ginny Lowe Connors

A gauzy veil of gnats
and then the travail of stinging flies.

Sunlight candles each needle
of a pine. We reach the ledges

where coiled snakes, the color
of old leaves, sun themselves.

Their scales shine distinctly
like polished seeds or arrowheads

that ripple and lie down again—smooth, flat.
One snake lifts its wedge-shaped head

and we see its whole body
is a long, perfect muscle.

A loud, nervous clicking
and then—long silence. The wind

held in the arms of that silence.
We step away.

Something we carry inside ourselves
begins to uncoil. These snakes—

we know them and don't know them,
like ancient gods that are not dead.

Ginny Lowe Connors is an award-winning poet and the author of six poetry collections, the most recent of which is White Sail at Midnight. She is Poet Laureate Emerita of West Hartford, Connecticut. She holds an MFA in poetry from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Connors runs a small poetry press (Grayson Books) and is a Board Member of the Connecticut Poetry Society. She is also Managing Editor of Connecticut River Review.

Paddling to Possibilities

By Angela Legg

My favorite place to camp in Connecticut is a tiny island in the Connecticut River, ringed with quiet sandy beaches. It's where I go when I need to sit with my thoughts and reset. I can't tell you the exact location, but I can tell you what it takes to get there.

I first discovered this island more than a decade ago when a friend invited me camping. We went out on their boat, fished, explored the surrounding nature preserves, and watched the sunset from the water. We even caught a bluefish. I remember thinking how incredible it was that this place existed right here in Connecticut, in the state where I grew up. Over the next decade, I visited ten or so times. But the thing that made the island so magical also made it difficult to reach. As the years passed, friendships shifted and life changed. And then a year went by with no island trip. Two years passed—then three and four. I kept talking about how much I wanted to go back there, but my desire was always followed by reasonable excuses for why I couldn't.



I don't have my own kayak.

I don't have a vehicle that could carry one.

I don't have the gear.

So, I stayed home.

At the beginning of 2026, after two difficult years of personal and professional challenges, something shifted. Suddenly, I felt motivated to start looking for the pieces of myself that had gone missing. I started trying new things, saying yes to what scared me. I stepped into work I had always dreamed of doing. I put myself in situations that were uncomfortable at first but then made me feel more like myself. I started hiking. I tried rock climbing. I remembered the peace I found in nature.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone started to feel like the most natural thing. By trying new things, I found familiar parts of myself, lit up by new experiences. I stopped making excuses. It was time to get back to the island. But I didn't have so much as a blow-up raft to get there.

While messaging with a friend one day, I said, "I want a kayak so bad."

I was just complaining. I never expected him to have a solution.

"Take mine," he said.

"You have a kayak?!"

Never in all the years I'd known this person had he mentioned kayaking.

"Use it until you find your own," he said.

The following Friday, I went to his house, picked up the kayak, strapped it to my roof, and off I went. I arrived at the boat launch as rain clouds gathered, on a Friday afternoon when those who know about this place arrive early for limited parking. I was late, but I lucked out and snagged the last spot.

While unloading my supplies, two men approached who were also gearing up to head out. After some friendly introductions, one of them looked at me curiously. He then told me that in all his years kayaking here, he'd never seen a Black woman heading out to camp alone. He and his friends wanted to know my story. The more we talked, it became clear that we actually had a lot in common. Mostly, we were all thrilled to be exactly where we were. They invited me to join their camp.

Saying yes had brought me this far. So I trusted my intuition and agreed to join them.

They waited patiently while I got situated in the water, then we paddled to the island, where they had already set up camp. I met the other camper in their group, a woman, and we all started getting to know each other. The sun was still shining while it softly rained. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, one of the guys asked: "Do you have room for a 17-foot kayak?"

I live in a one-bedroom, third-floor walk-up. No, I definitely did not have room. But as soon as I said so, something felt off.

A few minutes passed. "Wait—why?" I asked, prepared for a sales pitch on why I should buy this much too-big boat.

Turns out, he had a kayak that he wanted to give away. But not just to anyone. The kayak had been his daughter's first, and he just wanted to find someone who would appreciate it. He thought that person might be me.

Of course, my answer changed. Yes to the kayak. Yes to this stranger who was becoming a friend. Yes to figuring out how the hell I would get a 17-foot kayak up three sets of stairs and make space for it in my apartment. Yes to being someone who drives an hour away from their city life on a Friday to slip across the water and sleep beneath the stars. Yes to new friends who share my passion for this place I've loved for years.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone started to feel like the most natural thing.

Over the weekend, they taught me about wakes, currents, wind, and safety. They shared their expertise, while making space for me to develop my own. They stayed close while I practiced. The second evening, we sat around the campsite as the sun painted the sky pink and orange. The water was still. A sliver of the moon was just visible as hundreds of swallows gathered overhead in pulsing streaks of murmuration. I marveled at the swallows moving together, each flying on their own but depending on each other, too.

After an incredible weekend with my new kayak friends, it was time to pick up my gift. When I finally saw it, I felt like I'd won the lottery. It was seventeen feet of bright sunshine yellow—it stood out, unapologetically, just like me! I loved it.

The truth is, standing out can be exhausting and sometimes, I find myself just wanting to fit in. But every time that brilliant yellow kayak hits the water, I know I'm just where I need to be.

There are so many islands out there. So many special places where you can feel a unique connection to nature and to yourself. I can't tell you the exact location of this one special spot, but I can tell you that saying yes to whatever lights you up will always lead you in the right direction.

Angela Legg is a Connecticut adventurer and storyteller. Whether she's kayaking the Connecticut River, camping off-grid in the Adirondacks, hiking, or fishing, she finds freedom, connection, and perspective in the outdoors. Instagram: @itsangielegg

A Beloved

A massive effort to save monarch butterflies connects people from Canada to Mexico, with paths of milkweed and data along the way.

By Britany Robinson



The first time I see one, I gasp. A tiny caterpillar is stretched out on a long green leaf. It has black and yellow stripes, like it was painted with a pin tip. Crouching to look closer, I can see its tiny mouth opening and closing at the edge of the leaf, mechanically carving a bite mark many times bigger than its body.

In the book I read to my daughter almost every night, The Very Hungry Caterpillar eats many things, including a slice of chocolate cake and a pickle. But this caterpillar is a monarch so it only eats milkweed. I planted this milkweed in May along with a dozen or so other native plants. I wanted to make our backyard a little friendlier to pollinators, and I knew milkweed was critical to monarchs, who lay their eggs on the leaves. When the eggs hatch, the caterpillars plump up on milkweed, which also gives them a superpower, making them toxic to predators.

Planting milkweed is a simple act that can make a big difference in supporting a pollinator population in decline. Since the 1990s, the number of monarch butterflies has declined over 80%. Much of that decline is due to habitat loss. The midwestern United States once supported a vast breeding ground with swaths of wild milkweed, but pesticide use and the adoption of pesticide-resistant crops decimated wild growth. Widespread herbicide application and mowing along highways have also torn through milkweed habitat.

Despite weighing just 0.0095 to 0.026 ounces, monarch butterflies are incredibly resilient. We see this in their annual migration. Once a year, a super-generation of butterflies in the northern states and Canada travel over 3,000 miles to reach Mexico, where they spend the winter hibernating in oyamel fir forests.

On the spring journey north, monarchs are part of a multi-generational relay, living for only a few weeks before laying eggs and dying. The next generation continues further north, and it takes three or four generations for them to reach their northern breeding grounds. But the super-generation, born in the northern states and Canada, will live about nine months, completing the entire southern journey back to their overwintering habitat in Mexico. The caterpillar that emerged from an egg in my garden in August is part of the super generation.

The monarch butterfly migration has always been full of obstacles, from bad weather to natural predators. But the journey keeps getting harder. Traffic on busy highways presents frequent danger, as do developed areas stripped of milkweed and native flowers that monarch butterflies rely on for fuel. Then comes climate change, which is causing bigger and more frequent storms that can blow monarchs off course, making it impossible to reach their destination.

In short, my backyard friend had a daunting journey ahead. But also, this caterpillar was born into a good year for monarch butterflies. In March, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) of Mexico released a report documenting a 64% increase in the hibernating population, as documented last winter. Researchers have noted that

Monarch



In my backyard, seeing one caterpillar was a thrill. And then three and four! A week later, my little swamp milkweed was home to ten hungry caterpillars, chomping away and growing fast.



populations fluctuate every year, and one good year is not indicative of an upward trend. But it is a sign of hope.

Jenn Farrell, a zoo educator at Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo, says she's seen noticeably more butterflies this fall. Farrell helps run the Monarch Watch training program, which she brought to Beardsley in 2020. The virtual training sessions support Monarch Watch, a keystone program of monarch conservation, started at the University of Kansas in 1992. Monarch Watch partners with dozens of organizations to track monarchs on their annual journey from Canada to Mexico, using tiny round stickers with unique codes so that volunteers can track their routes. The Monarch Watch training sessions instruct participants on how to safely catch and apply tracking stickers to a monarch butterfly's wing. All you need is a butterfly net, the tracking stickers (which you can order from shop.monarchwatch.org) and a data sheet to record certain details, which they'll send you with the stickers. Farrell says some people feel comfortable catching and tagging after the online session, while others like to come by the zoo for some in-person training. Monarchs are not as delicate as they might seem, but it's still important to attend the training, to learn how to catch, tag, and release them without causing unnecessary harm.

Researchers in Mexico then seek out those sticker-wearing butterflies to confirm the completion of their migration.



Monarch butterflies (Danaus plexippus) resting on a tree branch in their winter nesting area.

"We learn a lot about the monarch population based on where, when, and how many monarchs are being tagged by community scientists," says Director of Monarch Watch Dr. Kristen Baum. Monarch Watch sends out thousands of these tags each year, and over 3 million butterflies have been tagged by community scientists since the program started.

Baum says this year is a big one from a data perspective. In late 2025, radio tagging was implemented for the first time, making it possible to follow monarchs along their entire route. The BlūMorpho tags, developed by Cellular Tracking Technologies (CTT) in collaboration with the Cape May Point Arts & Science Center (CMPASC), are a major innovation in lightweight solar technology, allowing researchers (and anyone who is interested) to track individual monarchs in real time. Hundreds of these tags were deployed this year. Together, Monarch Watch stickers and The BlūMorpho tags are accumulating an enormous amount of data to help scientists understand migration patterns and how we can better support this pollinator species along the way.

"One of the nice things about monarchs from the conservation perspective is that there is something that everyone can do," says Baum. "Some people may focus on providing habitat [like] milkweed and nectar plants, while others may focus on contributing data to community science projects or educating people about monarchs and their conservation needs."

Farrell says she meets a lot of people at the zoo who are inspired by the bigger animals they see there, many of which face habitat loss and population decline. But when they ask how they can help, Farrell always tells them the same thing: "Look to your backyard, first."

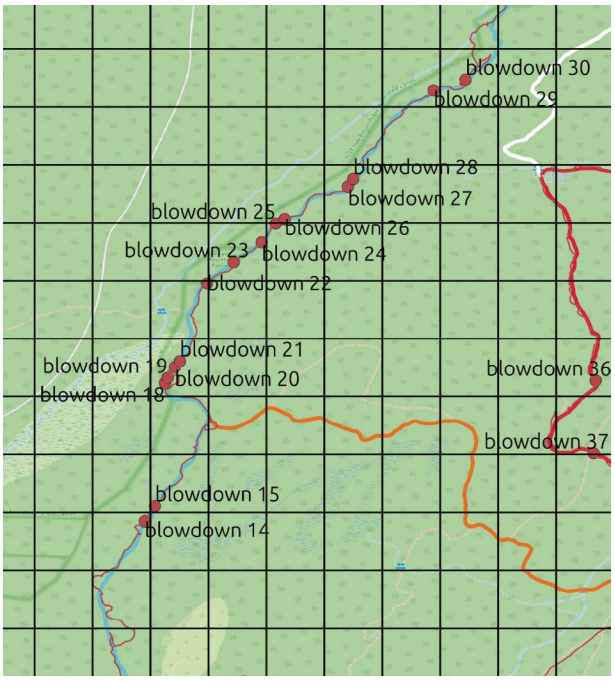
In my backyard, seeing one caterpillar was a thrill. And then three and four! A week later, my little swamp milkweed was home to ten hungry caterpillars, chomping away and growing fast.

I was looking forward to watching these caterpillars pupate and emerge as butterflies—to bid them farewell on their epic journeys. But nature is never so simple. One morning in mid-September, I walked through the dew-soaked grass, coffee in hand, to check on them as I'd done every morning for weeks. But on this day, they were gone. I searched and searched—no caterpillars. It's possible they were eaten; despite their toxicity, certain ants, spiders, and birds can still make them a meal.

I can't know what became of the caterpillars in my yard, and we can't know what next year will bring for monarch butterfly populations. But it does help to know how many people are out there, tagging and recording, planting more milkweed and native flowers, just wanting to help. There are so many unknowns, but a network of people across North America are collaborating to ensure future generations continue on this epic journey back and forth, visiting many of us along the way. Next year, I'll plant more milkweed and hope for the best. I hope you will, too.







Major Blowdowns Cleared by Volunteers

The trails at Ragged Mountain Preserve are officially open! Over July 4th weekend, a microburst tore through the Preserve, dropping hundreds of trees and leaving the Metacomet/New England National Scenic Trail blocked by stacked, storm-felled timber. CFPA-trained and certified sawyers and volunteers logged over 315 hours across 12 work parties, clearing 70 major blowdowns and blockages to reopen the corridor. Thank you to our extraordinary community of volunteers who made it possible for people to enjoy these trails again, and to the donors whose support makes fast responses like this possible.



New Perspectives and Resources for MWM

The Master Woodland Manager (MWM) Program kicks off its sixth year this fall with greater enthusiasm and the largest cohort yet. New this year, thanks to a generous grant, CFPA awarded scholarships to 25 underserved landowners—including members of federally recognized tribes and those who, in the past decade, acquired woodlands or obtained veteran status—to improve equitable access to woodland education and stewardship resources, and to join the growing network of Master Woodland Managers statewide. In addition, four new workshops are being added to the curriculum this year to bring new perspectives and resources into the program. These new programs, including "Beginning Landowners 101" and "Indigenous Perspectives in Land Management", will support the needs of underserved landowners alongside foundational coursework in forest ecology, climate resilience, forest health, wildlife, and management practices.

Funding for this Program is provided by the U.S.D.A Forest Service through the Forest Stewardship Program, as administered by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Division of Forestry.

Fall Hiking and Hunting

Cooling temperatures and changing leaves make fall one of the best times to hike. Before you head out, keep a few things in mind. Hunting season is underway, and many of the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails cross through state forests, state parks, and private lands where hunting is legally permitted. To stay safe, wear blaze orange, be aware of hunting seasons, and keep pets on a leash. For more info, visit CT DEEP's website at ct.gov/deep.

Please also practice Leave No Trace to promote conservation and reduce impact: stay on the trail, pack out what you bring in, leave nature as you found it, be considerate of other hikers, and give wildlife plenty of space. As always, if you spot a problem on the trail, let us know using our "Report a Problem" form on our website. Happy hiking!

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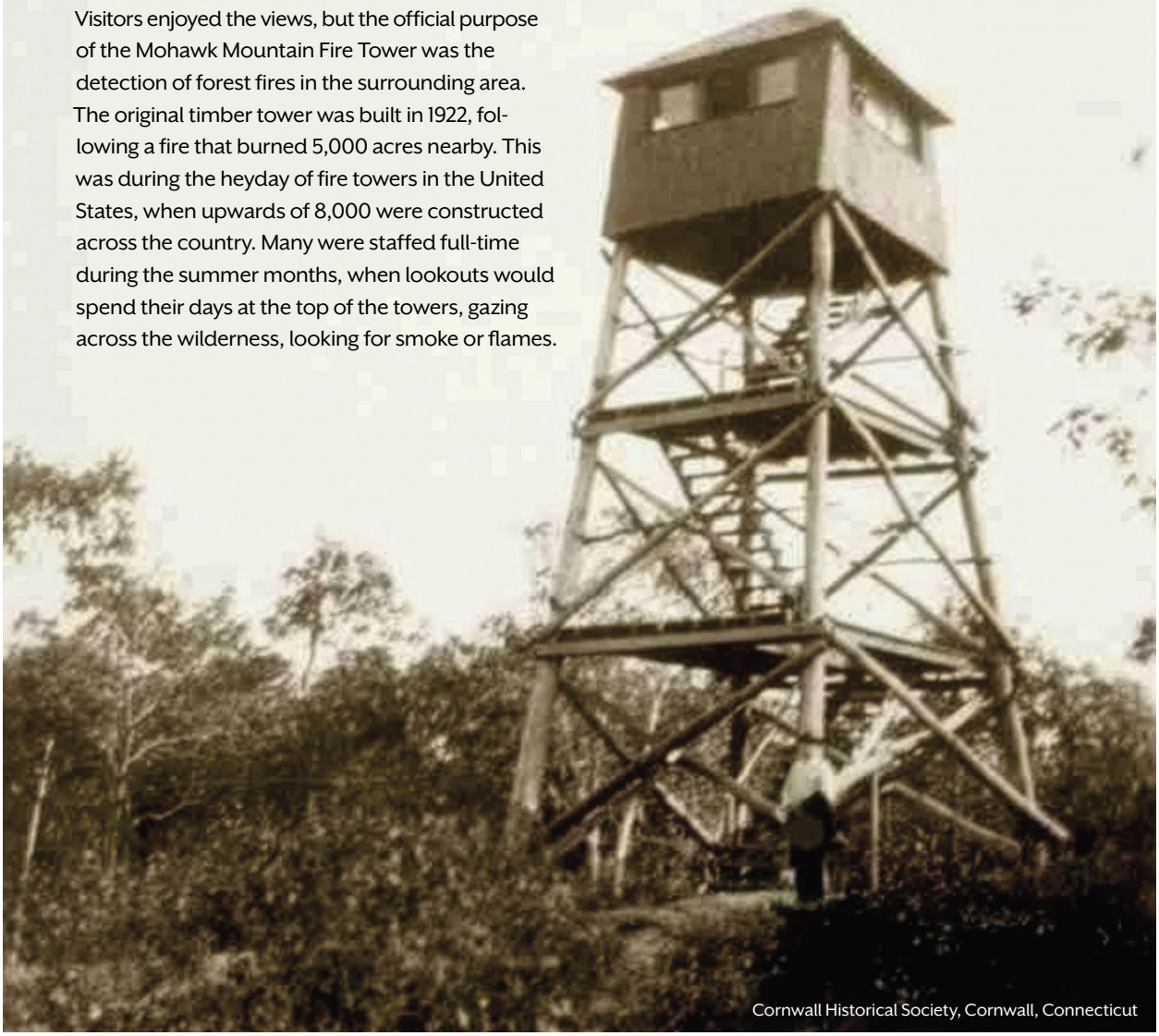
Hikers and drivers climb to the 1,683-foot peak of Mohawk Mountain in Cornwall for sweeping views of northwestern Connecticut. On clear days, you can see all the way to the Taconic Mountains, the Berkshires, and the Catskills. A 35-foot fire tower once made it possible to see even further. A 1929 column in the Hartford Courant on Connecticut vacation spots describes the scenery from the top of the Mohawk Mountain Fire Tower:

"The tower clears the tree-tops and in every direction the landscape sweeps away in waves of forest-clad hills. Lying between them are many fertile valleys dotted by villages and towns, and inlaid here and there by the silvery sheen of green-bordered lakes."

Visitors enjoyed the views, but the official purpose of the Mohawk Mountain Fire Tower was the detection of forest fires in the surrounding area. The original timber tower was built in 1922, following a fire that burned 5,000 acres nearby. This was during the heyday of fire towers in the United States, when upwards of 8,000 were constructed across the country. Many were staffed full-time during the summer months, when lookouts would spend their days at the top of the towers, gazing across the wilderness, looking for smoke or flames.

For years following its construction, Cornwall's first fire warden, Henry J. Bouteiller, hiked to the Mohawk Mountain fire tower daily during fire season, according to the Cornwall Historical Society.

Connecticut was at once home to 44 fire towers. By the 1960s, only 14 remained in the state, as modern technology became cheaper than staffing the towers full-time. Mohawk was the last operational fire tower in Connecticut, decommissioned in 1988. What remains of the tower is no longer open to the public. But the views from the mountain are still fantastic. Hop on the blue-blazed Mohawk Trail just off CT Rte 4 for a six-mile out-and-back hike to the summit.



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