



# Friends of the Great Swamp



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Volume 6, Issue 3  
Fall 2005  
www.frogs-ny.org

## “HEART of the GREAT SWAMP”

*Saving a Little of the Last Great Places*

NAWCA Grant update



Photo of the “Heart of the Swamp” by Norman McGrath

Two years ago FrOGS and a coalition of Fourteen partners received a North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) Grant to acquire lands and conservation easements in the widest and most vulnerable part of the Great Swamp—the “Heart”.

Working against time and skyrocketing land Prices, FrOGS, the Nature Conservancy, The State of New York DEC, The Town of Patterson and the Putnam County Land Trust have acquired 471 new acres and easements on additional 112 acres more.

The willingness of many landowners, Steve and Rebecca Kessman, Fred Buechel, George Buechel, John Lundelius, Bill and Sheila Hamilton to share the heritage of their lands in the Swamp in working with the NAWCA partners to preserve it and the generous donations of Mort and Gloria Dykeman and Florian Havir and previous donors of lands to PCLT, Mildred Luchinsky , Helen Sprague, Elena Hill and others have created a core of preserved lands. NAWCA partners are moving forward to work to preserve addition acreage.

*Continued on page 2*

# SAVING the "HEART"

(Continued from Cover)

The Great Swamp encompasses 6700 acres and stretches for over 20 miles from Dover Plains to Southeast. The goal of our NAWCA proposal was to protect the widest corridor and the most significant block of forest wetland in the Swamp with sufficient upland to protect the wildlife values and the integrity of the wetlands.

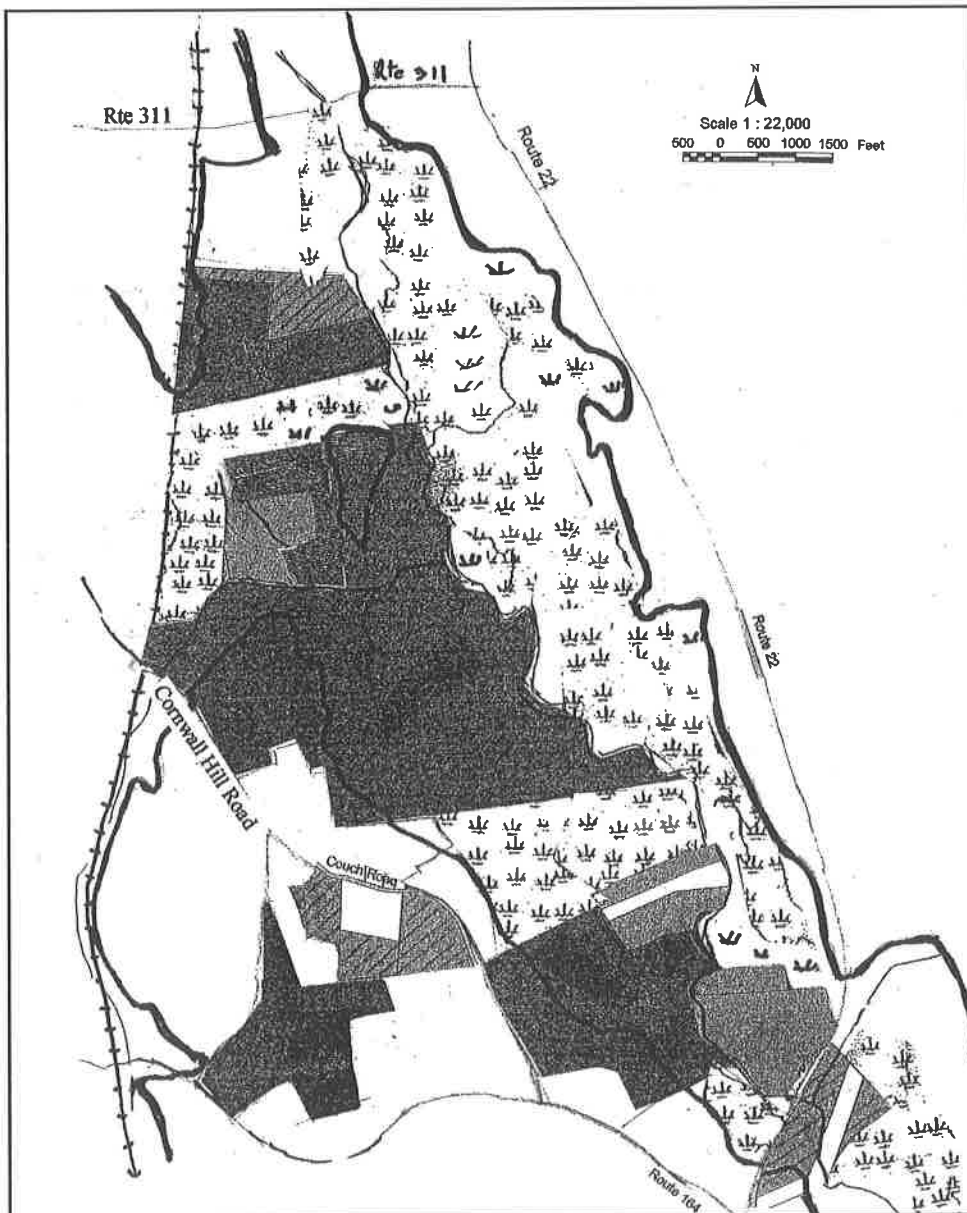
Because of the great width and the river's meandering course through the broad flood plain, this section is the most important in protecting the breeding habitat of over 80 bird species and migration habitat for over 150 species of waterfowl and other birds. The North

American Wetlands Conservation Act and Partners in Flight chose this parcel to fund because of its importance in conserving this essential bird habitat.





The "Heart" contains the largest and highest quality intact tract of riparian red maple hardwood swamp and flood plain forest in the State of New York. This rare biotic community is enhanced by 1) the underlying calcareous bedrock that affects the water chemistry and biodiversity of the swamp and 2) the inclusion of Pine Island, a hemlock draped, rocky prominence in the middle of the swamp which has long been regarded as a local landmark.

The NAWCA protected lands preserve floodplain forest, a continuously declining wetland class as well as additional shrub swamp, emergent marsh and wet meadow habitats. The upland border habitat will buffer the wetlands. Wood duck, mallard, solitary sandpiper and other wetland dependant birds as well as wetland associated birds breeding on the site or migrating through will benefit from the swamp's protection.

*Continued on next page*



## Key to Map

-  Great Swamp boundaries
-  NAWCA Grant or match
-  Putnam County owned lands
-  Previously Protected

# “Heart” of the Swamp

River otter, mink, beaver, wood turtle, bog turtle and blue-spotted salamander will benefit from this landscape protection.

The map on the opposite page locates the lands the NAWCA partners have preserved to date and some additional lands previously preserved in the area.

Acreage preserved includes:

- 40 acres of Flood Plain Forest
- 342 acres of Red Maple Swamp Forest
- 5 acres of freshwater marsh
- 30 acres, pond
- 168 acres of adjoining uplands



A section of River Flood Plain Forest, Photo provided by TNC Mark King

## Flood Plain Forest

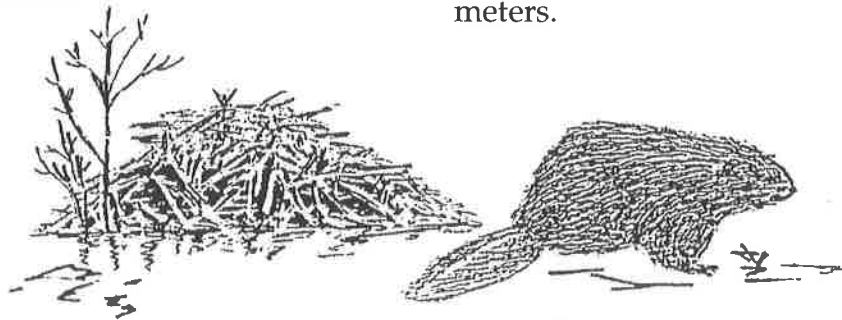
The Flood Plain Forests of the Great Swamp are reminiscent of those of southern swamplands. Tall, many-trunked silver maples stand as silent sentinels along the flooded river.

The East Branch Croton River continuously flows throughout this section providing bottomland forests and wet meadows in spring, exposed mudflats and beds of herbaceous forbs (e.g. arrow arum, smartweed and lizards tail) in summer and isolation in winter.

This is the area of highest wood duck counts in the Swamp. When FrOGS toured the area with federal Fish and Wildlife personnel in preparation for the NAWCA Grant application, we flushed over a dozen wood ducks. They said that they not seen a “bottomland” swamp like this north of the Carolinas.

The American black duck, which is only native to the eastern U.S., is in trouble because of loss of habitat. Blacks breed further north, but migrate through in spring and fall and sometimes over winter. They need this key “resting stop” and this is one of the reasons that NAWCA grant monies were awarded to this project.

The solitary sandpiper is also a spring migrant-feeding along the edges of the river and the pools of water left behind when the spring floodwaters recede. Other birds found here include black-billed cuckoos, acadian flycatchers and yellow-throated vireo. This vireo is an area-sensitive species and has been recorded in the Swamp most frequently where the forested corridor width is greater than 100-150 meters.



# Red-Maple Swamp Forest

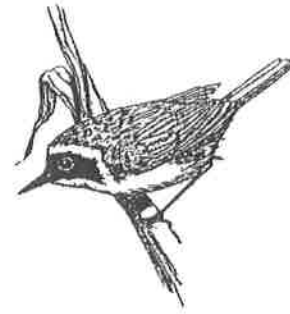
The Red Maple Swamp Forest portion of the "Heart " of the swamp is the largest and highest quality intact tract of red maple swamp forest in New York State.

The maples are the dominant tree-type but the understory vegetation is very dense here. Shrubs such as silky dogwood, spicebush and sweet-pepper bush abound. Ferns and skunk cabbage carpet the ground level.



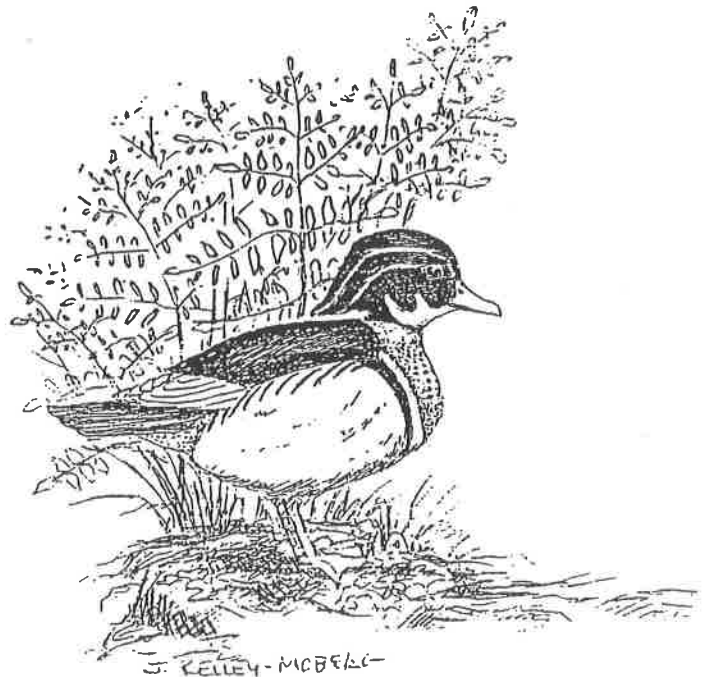
Red Maple Swamp Forest on the Dykeman parcel

This section of the Swamp supports a wide variety of breeding songbirds many of which are threatened. FrOGS studies indicate these area-sensitive migrating bird species require a forest corridor to be 150-200 meters wide for successful breeding and to maintain a viable population. The core area of our NAWCA proposal including the 290 acre JJNC parcel and donations by the Dykemans and Havir stretches over one mile wide at the widest point.



Fifteen of the breeding species in the Swamp are area-sensitive and thrive in this wide corridor. Species found here include veery, wood thrush, yellow-throated vireo, black-billed cuckoo, yellow-billed cuckoo, American woodcock, northern waterthrush, American redstart, blue-winged warbler, yellow warbler, wood peewee and warbling vireo. High priority species identified by Partners in Flight that breed here include wood thrush, prairie warbler, Canada warbler, Blue-winged warbler, chestnut sided warbler, rose-breasted grosbeak, and Baltimore oriole.

Wood Duck is the signature species of the Great Swamp. Its beauty and more secretive, wary nature make it especially appealing. This broad forested area in the Heart of the Swamp with numerous dead trees complete with abandoned woodpecker holes is ideal wood duck habitat. This is the heart of "woodie" country. During spring and fall migration several hundred can be counted. This section of the swamp supports at least 30 breeding pairs.



# Pine Island

Pine Island is the Jewel of the Great Swamp. The island's gnarled lumps of granite rise like a great dark whale out of a sea of red maples. It has served as a hideaway and a haven for wildlife and its human inhabitants. A visual focal point from all sides of the valley, it represents the "heart" of the Great Swamp.

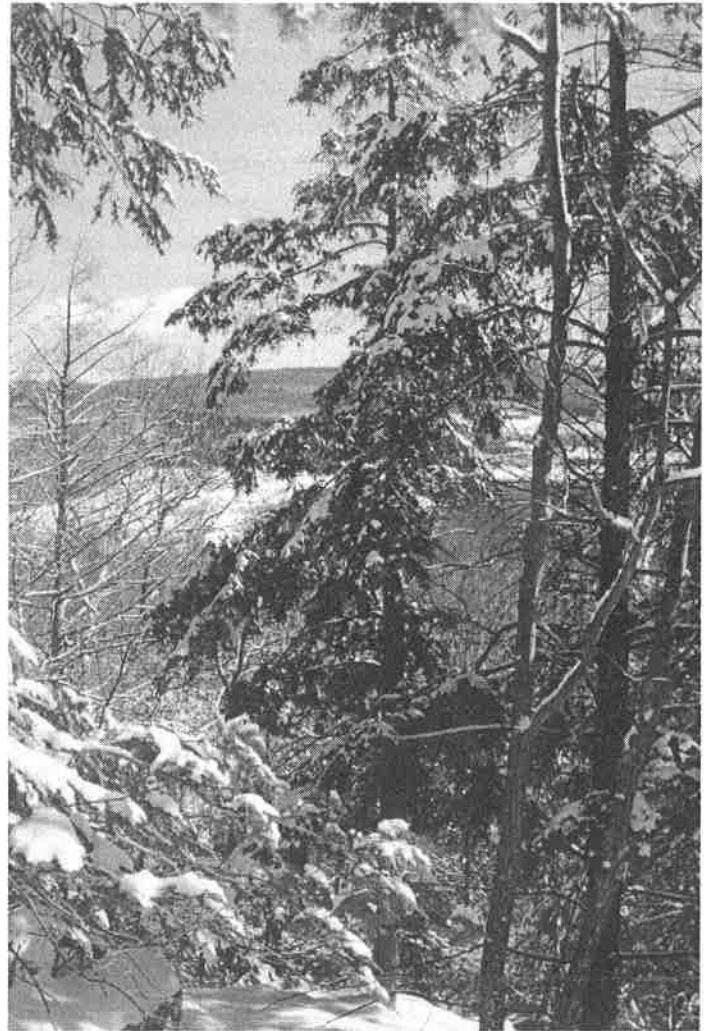
Hemlocks and hardwoods dominate the steep slopes. The evergreens and uplands forest here are sought as nesting sites by many upland songbirds that normally would nest in other areas. As it can only be reached by water, Pine Island retains some of the wild isolation with crags and cliffs covered with ferns and the towering hemlocks. Bobcat, fox and coyote find good den sites while hawks and owls roost in the evergreens. One lone pine can be found on the entire island. At the southern end, Muddy Brook joins the East Branch Croton River.



Bobcat

## Pine Island and History

After the last great ice sheets melted back to Canada about 10,000 years ago, Pine Island must have been surrounded by a shallow lake from Quaker Hill to Cornwall Hill. The swamp and river were filled with fish, beaver, otter and wildfowl of all kinds. The first human



Cliffs and Hemlocks of Pine Island in winter

inhabitants, probably hunters traveling toward the Long Island shell beds left stone tools and pottery shards along all ridgeline travel routes and probably hunted in the Swamp.

More colorful "residents" hid in the Swamp from colonial officials trying to capture them. From 1740 to the 1750's an infamous band of Counterfeiters called the "Oblong Gang" or the "Dover Money Club" used the Piney Swamp as a hideout when hounded by officials from over the border in Connecticut. They passed fake New York, Connecticut and Rhode Island currency back and forth between the various states. After countless captures and amazing escapes, these members, who were related to some of the area's earliest settlers broke up the gang in 1756, and Sullivan, the talented engraver was hanged.



# Upland Woodlands and Meadows

The NAWCA Proposal envisioned acquiring several upland areas adjacent to the wetland to buffer and protect those wetlands. Adjoining upland areas are also essential to wildlife, particularly those species that dwell in the upland portions to breed and return to the wetlands later. Many amphibians use the receding pools left from the flooded swamp areas to breed, then spend the rest of their lives in drier habitat. Amphibians listed on the New York State Special Concern that are found in these areas are the marbled salamander, the Jefferson salamander and the blue-spotted salamander.

The parcel acquired by the Nature Conservancy for the State of New York DEC includes 200 or so acres of wetlands, some fine riparian habitat along Muddy Brook and about ninety areas of old-farm field meadows. The Hamilton parcel and the Luchinsky parcel that adjoin Turtle Pond contain upland oak-hickory forest and many rocky outcroppings. The rocky area providing hiding-places and dening areas for mammals who spend part of their time in the Swamp and part in the uplands.

These upland areas also act as wildlife corridors between the "Heart" of the Swamp and other nearby wetlands or uplands.

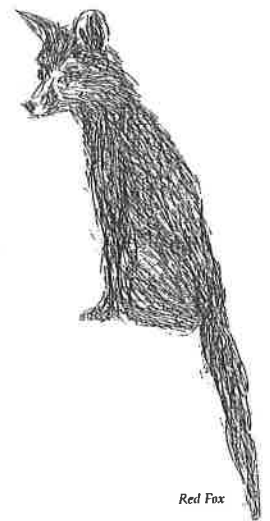
The old-farm field meadow areas that have not been mowed for years create a specialized habitat for many grassland birds that are vanishing from our area. Ground nesting species like bobolink, bobwhite and meadowlark are found here. Bobolink in particular eat tremendous numbers of insects and usually nest on the ground in widespread colonies. With these lands preserved, we can continue to manage these areas for these unique grassland species.

## **New York State to pay taxes On State Owned Lands in Putnam County**

Last year Governor Pataki signed an agreement to pay town and school taxes on State owned lands in Putnam county including lands acquired in the Great Swamp. That facilitates acquiring lands in the Swamp if the State becomes the eventual owner these properties will not come off the tax roles.

## **What's Next for NAWCA and the Great Swamp?**

*Great Swamp in Putnam County—Arms of the "Heart"*



The Great Swamp encompasses over 6700 acres throughout its twenty mile length. Even with the FROGS effort to protect acreage by acquisition and conservation easements, over 90% of the Great Swamp remains in private hands. FrOGS will work with private landowners to encourage good stewardship. There are still some parcels that need more protection both along the East Branch Croton River to the south of the Heart and along the Muddy Brook drainage toward the Ice Pond. FrOGS will continue to work to raise funds to protect key parcels in these areas.

## **North Flow**

The wetland and uplands in the northern extent of the Great Swamp encompasses some of the most pristine and biologically rich habitat in the entire watershed. This area is rich in amphibians, reptiles, butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies as well as birds. Evidence of bears, bobcat, fisher and other large range mammals have been found in this area. The Swamp River is a biologically valuable low-gradient stream with extensive wooded swamp and marsh.

There are over 550 acres of river forest wetlands here too as well as 460 acres of pristine red maple swamp forest and freshwater marsh area, shrub scrub swamp and several rare calcareous fens.

FrOGS is in the process of gathering partners for a new NAWCA Grant application to acquire and obtain conservation easements to protect significant portions of the North Flow area.

# Turtle Pond

This 30-acre pond is an important special sanctuary for waterfowl. It completes a key 100-acre upland forest corridor that bridges Cornwall Hill.

The pond, itself, lined on both the north and south by emergent freshwater marsh is a major spring and fall stopover point for migrating ducks. Spring migration brings ring-necked ducks, black ducks and green-winged teal. These waterfowl rest and feed here and then move on to Canada and the Arctic to breed. In the Fall many of them return and are joined by numerous other species.

Osprey are also often seen, particularly in the spring catch fish in the pond. The most unusual site in the spring is the amazing view of "shore-birds" hopping from lily pad to lily pad on the pond in search of insects to re-fuel for their continuing journey. Both solitary and spotted sandpipers can be observed feeding this way. These birds have traveled from Central and South America to reach here and the solitary sandpipers have a long way to go before reaching their arctic breeding grounds.

Acquiring the pond was a special effort among FrOGS Partners The Nature Conservancy and the Putnam County Land Trust and the landowners, Bill and Sheila Hamilton.



Photo of Turtle Pond by Norman McGrath

## The Great Swamp and Water—What's in it for Me?

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) Grants are administered in conjunction with Partners in Flight and are granted for the acquisition of lands to preserve important migratory bird habitat.

The Great Swamp is a valuable resource for other reasons and water quality is a major attribute of this wetland. For the residents of Patterson and Southeast as well as hundreds of thousands of residents of lower Westchester and New York City, the Swamp is the headwaters of their water supply.

For local residents, the Great Swamp improves water quality by slowing water velocity and facilitating the complex biological processes that naturally filter the water. In times of drought, the Great Swamp recharges the ground water aquifer and buffers the effects of low rainfall levels.

For New York City dwellers, the Swamp is the headwater of The East Branch Croton River system which supplies up to 20% of the City's water. Wetland protection and conservation land use practices in the Great Swamp Watershed are essential to providing this clean water supply.