



Friends of the Great Swamp



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A Walk On The Wild Side



Photo by Susan Morse. ©Susan Morse

Tracking—A Walk On The Wild Side

by Judy Kelley-Moberg

If only the native plants and animals could talk and tell us about their needs and concerns! Since preserving habitat pressured by suburban sprawl has been the goal of all the partners in the NAWCA grant as well as concerned citizens in the Hudson Highlands it's time we listen to the wildlife in order to understand how our needs and theirs can coexist. Where are the wildlife travel corridors and core habitats? How will potential development and transportation routes fragment animal habitat? What about the loss of biodiversity or the lack of it? What are the threats to rare or endangered plant populations? Unless we know what's there, how can we develop strategies to protect it?



Photo by Susan Morse. ©Susan Morse

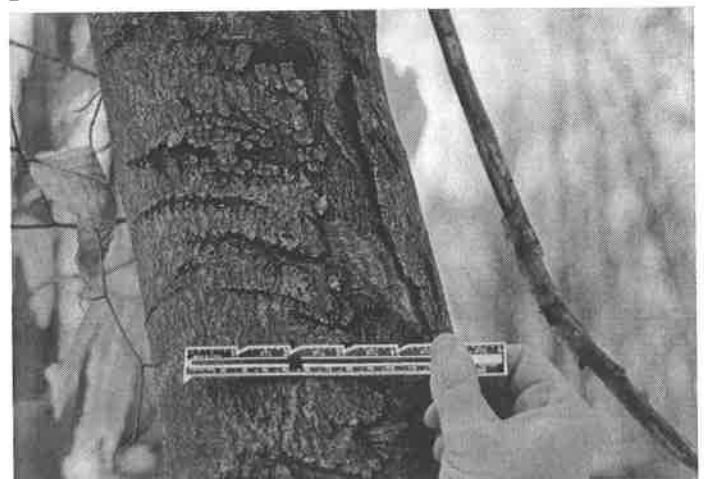
Susan Morse is passionate about wildlife. For more than 30 years she's observed and collected data on animal behavior and their use of habitat. She realized that to save wildlife habitat, the community needed to share her wildlife experience and develop a passion for the land and its wild inhabitants. Sue also knew it was essential to back up field observations by gathering reliable scientific data that could stand up under public scrutiny. In 1994 she founded KEEPING TRACK a non-profit organization based in the Green Mountains of Vermont. The organization's mission is to inspire community participation in the long-term stewardship of wildlife habitat by training concerned citizens to monitor selected mammal species.

A typical training program brings together 15-20 people from diverse backgrounds that care about wildlife. They spend 6 full days in the

field learning to look for animal signs. In our area carnivores like bear, bobcat, otter, and mink are considered focal species. They need a large core habitat of interconnected, bio-diverse territory to provide enough food and shelter to support effective breeding populations. The consistent yearly presence of these focal species in an area, tells us that the habitat has a healthy diversity of plant and animal species.



In 1999, FrOGS members participated in a Keeping Track training program in the Great Swamp, sponsored by the Wildlife Conservation Society in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy. Sue Morse would frequently stop us in the field and ask, "What do you see?" At first we couldn't see anything at all, but we were amazed at what Sue could see. She found fisher tracks in the snow in Dover and serviceberry trees bent over by bears that had stripped the fruit from their branches. Claw and bite marks on selected trees were bear message posts and scent markers. We put our hands into the marks and wondered if it



was a personal ad left by a young male looking for a mate or a warning to stay away by a female with cubs. On hands and knees we smelled fox scent posts and observed otter twists in the grass. Sue showed us how to measure the stride and straddle of bobcat tracks and to recognize the waddle walk pattern of a raccoon. She gave us lots of easy to remember clues to use in identifying animal tracks and sign in the field.

Once each season we checked three sites along the Great Swamp drainage for the presence of the focal mammal species. The date, time, weather conditions; habitat, GPS coordinates, track measurements, photos and comments for each sign were carefully recorded on standardized data sheets. Our team discovered the travel routes of bobcat, otter and mink along a section of the Muddy Brook drainage. The information was used to develop trails with the least impact on wildlife and also to identify habitat that needed protection.

Keeping Track has recently developed a program called Habitats and Highways, attended by the Maine, NH and Vermont transportation agencies, "to ensure that wildlife and the habitat they depend on are an integral part of highway planning, building and maintenance." For a local

example of how a field study of animal behavior led to a cooperative effort by the community and a public agency to protect wildlife read the newsletter article on Michael Musnick's Turtle Project.

Sue has worked with Defenders of Wildlife to study the Florida panther, documented the presence of jaguar in Arizona, tagged mountain lions in the southwest and studied the habits of moose in New England and Canada. She is an outstanding naturalist, featured in many articles and books as well as being nationally recognized as a gifted wildlife photographer.

We hope that Susan Morse's (free) Friday, March 27th evening program, highlighting her incredible wildlife photography and the mission of Keeping Track and the field walk (fee) with Sue on Saturday, March 28th will create an interest in monitoring wildlife and threatened plant communities in our local area. We need to look for programs like Keeping Track that will train citizens to gather information on amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds, insects, mammals and native plants in order to make informed decisions about protecting habitat and sharing the land with wildlife. Well-documented data, gathered over a period of time, can help us develop strategies to conserve critical habitats.

A Short History of the Patterson Environmental Park

by Richard Saracelli

The Patterson Environmental Park was created in 1975 as a project of the Patterson Environmental Conservation Commission, hence the name. With the full support of the Patterson Town Board and the Patterson Highway Department the first piece of preserved land in the heart of the Great Swamp became a town park.



The original 22 acres of land that became the park had been through two very different uses in the previous 84 years. In 1891 The Beech Island Marble Company was formed by Ezra Hayt to quarry marble. Beech Island, which now is the center of the park, is an island in the swamp similar to Pine Island. Pine Island is a half mile south and is quartzite and gneiss, not marble. Beech Island, a marble outcropping, is so named after the beech trees that grow on it. Large blocks of marble were cut from the ground, some of which remain to this day. Since Beech Island is surrounded by swamp, a causeway was built to connect it to the New York and Harlem Railroad half a mile to the west. Originally a cable-operated narrow gauge railway ran on this causeway to carry the marble blocks out of the swamp.

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A Wood Duck "Jamboree"

The last of "The Heart of the Great Swamp" NAWCA Grant Funds Helps FrOGS Protect an Important Migratory Waterfowl Site.

by Judy Kelley-Moberg

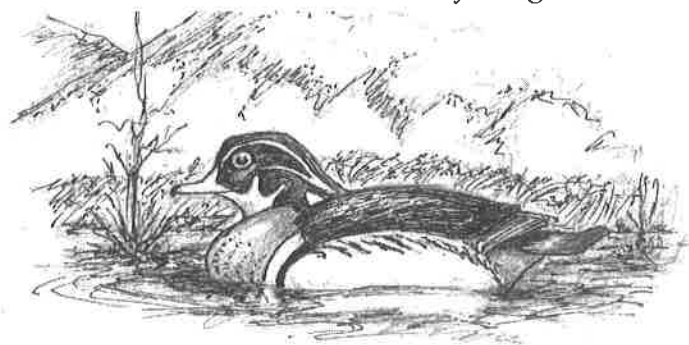
One of the Great Swamp's important values is its ability to provide a wetland corridor for migrating birds east of the Hudson River flyway. This was one of the major factors leading to FrOGS and its many consortium partners having been awarded "The Heart of the Great Swamp" North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant in 2002.



As a result of the NAWCA grant, a chain of protected parcels now runs from the Croton River (J.J.N.C. and Keasbey) up over the wooded ridge to Turtle Pond (Sterling Farm, Luschinsky, Hamilton "Laurel Ledges", and Plunkett) to the beaver flooded wetlands at the corner of Farm to Market Road and Route 164 (Zanti). The last of the grant monies along with a substantial contribution from FrOGS added another link to this chain of bio-diverse preserves. In December we acquired a 22-acre portion of the Cifu property on the west side of Farm to Market Road. The 22-acre L-shaped preserve contains a large wetland that runs up to the old Maybrook railbed and a fringe of upland forest along Farm to Market Road. The elevated Maybrook tracks (currently inactive) pass through the middle of the Muddy Brook drainage from Ice Pond to Route 311 and are part of the proposed "rail trail" from Dutchess to Westchester County. The Putnam County Land Trust, one of our partners in the NAWCA grant, will own and manage the new Cifu Preserve. They will continue to work on developing a trail network that connects all the preserves from the Croton River to Ice Pond.

A spring fed stream flows out of the "Zanti Preserve" on the east through a pipe under Farm to Market Road to the Cifu parcel, where it forms a wide wetland blocked by the elevated Maybrook rail bed and an old beaver dam. The old dam has been breached in several places allowing the overflow to join Muddy Brook. This pocket of wetlands is nestled among the hills and protected from the north wind. Cattails and reeds rim the wooded uplands on its eastern edge while most of the area is an extensive shallow pond sprinkled with sedge hummocks crowned with shrubs or stunted red maple saplings. The abandoned beaver lodge, now only a "bird's nest" of sticks, is still visible in the center of the wetlands.

At dusk on a mild night in early October, Jim Utter and I walked south from Route 164 along the Maybrook tracks to identify and count the number of migrating waterfowl stopping over for the night. As the light faded, groups of 10 to 25 fast moving "woodies" began to fly in from the north, sailing below tree line on whistling wings before they hit their spot in the swamp. The light from a gibbous moon outlined more groups coming in from the south. Counting the arrivals and the crowd already there we figured at least 1000 wood ducks had chosen to gather in the pocket of wetlands on the Cifu parcel. What we hadn't expected was the noise level. The wood ducks were making an incredible racket! They were talking all at once in fluty, loon-like bursts and warbles. It sounded like we were in the middle of a rookery. This cacophony of sound was occasionally punctuated by the baritone quack... quack... quack of a mallard or black duck. Jim was amazed at the vocalization of the wood ducks and said he had never heard anything like it.



In less than two hours the heavy flow of wood ducks dropped off and things quieted down as they settled in for the night. Moonlight illuminated our path back along the rail-bed to the trestle bridge and got us safely down the steep embankment to Route 164. We calculated that at least a thousand wood ducks a night must rest here during the height of fall migration. The walk was such a magical experience we hope to invite members to share it with us next year and this time we'll remember to bring a flashlight!

In the 1960's Anne and her husband Dr. Robert Cifu, bought the property as their country place. They loved the gardens and the old farmhouse tucked between the hill and the wetlands. Their water originally came from a spring located in a springhouse across the driveway.

The farmhouse and outbuildings appear on the 1854, 1867, and 1876 maps of Patterson and are not part of the preserve parcel. A photo taken in the early 1900's shows a landscape of treeless pastures and stonewalls surrounding the house. Kay Brandon Plunkett remembers her family's dairy cows grazing in the fields. Anne said, "The farm was called "Mulberry Hill" in honor of a century old mulberry tree that was lost several years ago in a storm". Anne, her husband, and their son Adam, always felt a strong attachment to the land and enjoyed sunset walks to the wetlands and watching the beaver. The 22-acre "Cifu Wetland Preserve" is the legacy of a family interested in celebrating the history and values of the land, not only for the protection of its wildlife, but for future generations to enjoy.

A Short History of the Patterson Environmental Park

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The Beech Island Marble Company was operated for several years. However, it was not profitable and was closed. At some point in the 20th century, the 22 acres became the property of the Town of Patterson when the defunct quarry no longer paid taxes.

In the 1940's and 50's, at a time when people didn't understand the value of wetlands, the land along the south side of the causeway became an open garbage dump. Bottles, cans, household goods, junk cars and other refuse of that period was dumped along the causeway and left uncovered. This was the condition of the 22 acres when the park was created in 1975.

The Patterson Highway Department and the Patterson Environmental Conservation Commission supplied men and heavy equipment to remediate the garbage dump. Large items were hauled away and the remaining garbage was graded level and clean soil was used as backfill and the area was seeded with grass. In 1980 the town received a CETA grant from the federal government and further work was done.

In the 28 years since 1980 more improvements have been made to the park. With the help of FrOGS, The Nature Conservancy facilitated the purchase of 63 acres to the south of the original 22 acres which was added to the park in 2004. Ongoing improvements provided by the Patterson Highway Department have made the causeway an all-weather road providing Croton River access to hundreds of recreational boaters every year. In winter, when the swamp is frozen, cross-country skiing, ice skating and snowshoeing provide recreational opportunities. The Town Board remains committed to the ongoing maintenance and improvements to the park.

Today a network of trails exists for visitors to explore Beech Island and the Great Swamp. Wildflowers bloom in the spring and swamp flora and fauna are to be seen at all times of the year. River otter, beaver, deer, turkey, mink, opossum, raccoons, bobcats and coyotes are some of the large animals that make their home in the Great Swamp. Come and share your recreational experience with them.

Wood Turtle Project Update

Article by Judy Kelley-Moberg, Photos by Roger Ericksen and Michael Musnick

Michael Musnick has been monitoring the activity of wood turtles at three different locations for several years. The northern site is located in Dover, the middle site in Pawling, and the southern site is in Patterson. Michael indicated that without the use of radio-telemetry, what he's been able to discover would not be possible since, "Wood turtles are a well camouflaged secretive species generally hiding on the ground surrounded by grasses and other forbs (herbaceous plants)." FrOGS has been supporting the wood turtle research project by providing the funds for the radio transmitters needed to track the turtles.

Michael is interested in discovering the answers to three main questions. 1. Where do the turtles nest? 2. Where do they aestivate? Aestivation is a semi-dormant state in mid-summer when the turtles hide in the grasses and nestle down in the soil to avoid the heat. 3. Where do the turtles go when they hibernate?

Most of the turtles being tracked are females. The tiny radio transmitters glued to their shells send out a signal that Michael picks up with a hand held antenna. For further identification, Michael also incises a notch code on the edge of the shell and photographs the turtles' belly plates or plastron. Each adult turtle has a unique blotchy black pattern on its yellow plastron.

Wood turtles are generally 5 to 10 inches long with distinctive "red legs". Their rough-looking gray-brown shells are covered with large pyramid-shaped scutes. They are thought to be fairly intelligent (for a turtle) and long-lived. Male turtles mate with females in the streams some time after they emerge from hibernation in April. The females usually dig their nests between May 20th and June 20th. An average of 10 flexible-shelled, elliptical eggs per nest, were counted in the study

areas. The hatchlings dig their way to the surface in late August and September. Wood turtles wander along woodland streams, through swamps, and wet meadows in a core area (range) during the summer.

A wood turtle's diet consists of worms, slugs, snails, insects and fruit. Michael observed a group of turtles gorging themselves in a raspberry patch and found they eat lots of tiny thin-shelled land snails. In mid-October the turtles return to the streams to hibernate. They submerge themselves in a tangle somewhere along the streambed where the water temperature remains above freezing.



With the aid of the transmitters, Michael has been able to locate turtle nesting sites. Volunteers place a wooden frame fitted with a screen called an "excluder" over the nests to prevent predation from skunks and raccoons. The same volunteers return at hatching time to remove the screens and check on the hatchlings. Nesting areas are usually found in sandy soils or gravel areas near streams and wetlands. Female turtles have been tracked moving 1500 and one as much as 2500 feet from their "core area" (hibernation/aestivation area) to nest. Michael has developed a series of maps that show the seasonal movements of individual turtles at the 3 sites.



Tracking the wood turtles has uncovered some of the causes of turtle mortality. Several have been run over on the road, but an unusual mortality threat was also identified. Turtles are attracted to wetlands and often have to cross railroad tracks to get from one wetland to another. They also find the gravel railroad track embankments excellent nesting sites. Michael found that turtles were getting caught between the rails on the tracks and were unable to climb out. The exhausted turtles overheated and died. Empty turtle shells found in the middle of the old Maybrook Railroad tracks indicate that this is a universal problem. Michael contacted Karen Timco,

the director of Environmental Compliance Services for Metro-North and told her about the death trap between the rails. Ralph Ciampaglione, Assistant Director of Track Maintenance of Metro-North, agreed to build gravel ramps (escapes) at intervals along the inside of the rails that crossed the wetlands where the turtles were active. The "turtle escapes" were a simple solution to the problem and we applaud Metro-North for their response and concern for protecting wildlife.

Michael fitted 17 wood turtles with radio transmitters this past season and intends to continue his work in 2009. Michael's wood turtle web site is www.woodturtlesite.com

2009 SPRING CANOE TRIP

Saturday and Sunday:

May 16 & 17 And June 6 & 7

8:15am, 10:00am, 12:45pm and 2:45pm



Cost: \$20 adult members \$11 child (6-14 years)
\$24 adult non-members \$15 child (6-14 years)
(children must be 6 years or older)

FrOGS Naturalists will guide you through this beautiful section of the Great Swamp, one of the largest wetlands in New York State, with the assistance of Green Chimney's licensed lifeguards. Join us at Green Chimney's beach off Doanesburg Road (formerly Putnam Lake Road). All level paddlers are welcome (rated moderately strenuous).

We will provide, canoes, paddles, life jackets (bring your own if you wish). We canoe rain or shine. Reservations are a must and space is limited, so, make your reservation early and join FrOGS as we visit and view this unique and complex eco-system which is also home to many species that visit or live there; you will likely get to meet some of them.

Call Evelyn at 845-877-6498 for reservations and details.