

Littleton Conservation Trust



Newsletter

Spring 2009

Dr. Ed Bell Forum - A Regional Environmental Forum

Today's Farmers and How Local Communities Benefit A New Era for Locally Grown Food

Featuring Cris Coffin
New England Director, American Farmland Trust

Tuesday, April 28 - 7:00 PM
Indian Hill Music Center
36 King Street, Littleton, MA

Light refreshments - Free admission



Who are today's farmers? What do they need to thrive? Recently, the number of farms in Massachusetts has grown. With renewed interest in fresh and safe food that is locally grown, farmers are taking advantage of direct marketing to quality restaurants, nearby urban markets, and educated consumers. Local farms as "working landscapes" provide green jobs, preserve scenic lands, and reduce demand on community services (such as police, fire, roads, and schools). Our presenter will address these topics, reveal some emerging trends, and give a brief update on some of the many tools to preserve local farms and agricultural lands.

Cris Coffin leads American Farmland Trust's (AFT) efforts in the New England region to promote farmland protection, farm viability, and farm conservation practices through research, outreach, advocacy, and policy development at the municipal, state, and federal level.

Cris has a strong background in federal agricultural and environmental policy. Before joining AFT in 2001, she worked for many years in Washington, D.C., starting as a lobbyist with the Wilderness Society and leaving as Chief of Staff to U.S. Senator Herb Kohl. She served on the staff of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry under the chairmanship of Senator Patrick Leahy, specializing in conservation and forestry issues, and is a veteran of several federal farm bill reauthorizations.

Cris holds a law degree from Georgetown University and a

B.A. in Geography from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She has been a consultant to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and toured county fairs with the Vermont Department of Agriculture's Seal of Quality exhibit. Raised on a horse farm on Long Island, New York, Cris has also run a family cider operation. She sits on the board of the Franklin Land Trust (a land conservation trust operating within Franklin County), and is a member of the Franklin Regional Planning Board and her local school committee. Cris lives with her family in the farming community of Whately.

For additional information on the AFT's activities, go to www.farmland.org. AFT is a national, not-for-profit organization working at the federal, state, and local levels to protect America's farmland and promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. AFT's slogans "Saving the Land that Sustains Us" and "No Farms No Food" epitomize their mission.

The LCT gives special thanks to the Indian Hill Music Center for this support of this community event. Indian Hill Music is a non-profit regional center for music education and performance located in Littleton, Massachusetts. For more information see www.IndianHillMusic.org. ■

LCT Recommends No Zoning Change
see Page 4 for details



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The Littleton Conservation Trust (LCT), distinct from the Town's Conservation Commission, is a private land trust formed in 1962 to promote Littleton's rural character; to preserve its water, plant, and wildlife resources and its unique views; and to provide environmental education. The LCT is caretaker of over 300 acres of property (all gifted from far-sighted residents) on which we manage a system of trails for public use.

The Exceptional Pine Siskin

by Grant Marley

For those of us who are backyard birders in Littleton, one of the joys of the changing seasons is to watch migrants come and go. Spring is an especially good time to see the changing of the avian guard. Almost overnight it seems that the winter birds are leaving and their spring replacements are taking their places at our feeders. This year there's an exception.

A small finch from the north has decided to, perhaps, stick around. The Pine Siskin is the size of a Goldfinch but much leaner with a striped chest, thin bill, and two distinct yellow-buffy bars on its wings. Siskins are eruptive birds of the far north that sporadically make their way south, in great numbers. They flock to feeders, sometimes in the dozens, to eat both thistle and sunflower.

This year has seen one of the greatest southward seasonal expansions in years. There have been many reports in Massachusetts, including the Littleton area, of Siskins singing their distinctive courtship song. There has also been one confirmed nesting. On their wintering feeding grounds, Siskins do a very distinctive VREEP that goes up the chromatic scale. The spring song is

completely different. A series of jumbled, slightly harsh notes are made easily recognizable by the VREEP at the end or beginning of every song.

If you have had these birds at your feeders, you should be noticing fewer of them. Look for pairs that feed together. The males are slightly more colorful than the females. As their name implies, Pine Siskins prefer conifer for nesting sites but may nest in smaller deciduous trees as well.

If you suspect that you have paired or nesting Siskins nearby, please contact me at my e-mail buteo99@verizon.net or 978-952-8151. ■



Littleton Conservation Trust Membership Form – 2009

New Renewal

Date: ____/____/____
(Date determines year of tax deduction)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual: \$25 | <input type="checkbox"/> Family: \$40 |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Patron: \$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor: \$1,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: \$ _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gift to Permanent Fund: \$ _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Please send me information about how to preserve my own land. | |

(Provide your email address if you want to receive notification of upcoming walks and conservation-related events.)

Please cut out this form and send it to:

Kathy Stevens, Treasurer
Littleton Conservation Trust
PO Box 594
Littleton, MA 01460



Witch Hazel— A Common Woodland Shrub with Uncommon Characteristics

by Art Lazarus

Littleton is in a woodland transition zone between the central coastal hardwoods and the northern coniferous forests. This results in a wide variety of plants and trees in our area, including witch hazel.

Witch hazel is a tall shrub (up to 20 feet high) that grows in our woodlands as an understory to larger trees. It particularly loves moist areas near brooks and wetlands. The leaves and shape of this shrub are not distinctive. It is easy to confuse witch hazel with hobblebush and other low-growing woody plants.

An unusual feature of witch hazel is that it flowers in the late fall and early winter, with four stringy petals. It is my understanding that this is the only shrub or tree that flowers late in the year. Another unusual feature is its habit of ejecting an elliptical seed capsule up to 30 feet distant from the source shrub.

In colonial days, a paste made from witch hazel was used to stop bleeding and alleviate itching. Native Americans, who used the bark and twigs for therapeutic applications, passed their knowledge to early settlers. The aromatic leaf, bark, and twig extract from witch hazel has been, and is being, used as a mild astringent lotion. The Dickinson Brands Corporation, located in East Hampton, Connecticut, has been making and selling Witch Hazel since 1866. Their product is still available in most drug stores.

When dowsing (a mystical way of locating underground water supplies) was popular, dowsers would use a forked witch hazel branch to locate water wells. They would walk and hold the branch horizontally and when it pulled down by itself, it was an indication that it was a good location for digging a well.

The witch hazel story is only one of many that involve the common trees and shrubs that we pass by each day.



Lucy's Land Update

by Rick Findlay

After our announcement of the availability of Lucy's Land in the Fall 2008 LCT newsletter, the Littleton Board of Selectmen embraced the project and the Town has been moving rapidly forward ever since.

We established that Cell Tower and CPA bonding would fund the purchase without additional taxes. A matching grant opportunity created a flurry of activity as committees formed to strategize and update the Open Space Plan (a requirement). Appraisals were put out to bid and Sudbury Valley Trustees offered to write the grant application. Miraculously, everything came together and we are now negotiating with the Yapp family over the purchase price. If we cannot come to an agreement, the Town will hopefully have a second opportunity to match a legitimate offer through the Chapter 61 process.

In the mean time, there has been nothing but enthusiasm for the project. It has become clear to many that this parcel has multiple values that will likely never be matched by any future land acquisition opportunity.

The LCT appreciates all who have worked hard to bring us to this point. ■

The Littleton Conservation Trust recommends no zoning change for the former Nashobaside Farm / current day “Fletcher Lands” at the town’s eastern gateway on Great Road.

The location of Nashobaside Farm was no accident. These active farmlands have been under cultivation for centuries, as attested to by the adjacent 1700’s farm house. The rich soils at Littleton’s Great Road eastern gateway spans three farms bisected by the road. These soils aren’t something one could just pick up at an Agway store. The dirt was delivered by a glacier and, over centuries, developed into high quality soils. Such high quality soils are rated as USDA Prime Agricultural Soils and this area is highlighted on the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) maps. This is precisely why these lands remain in cultivation today.

Zoned continuously for residential/agricultural use, these lands were speculatively acquired in the last several years. The town’s plans and desires to retain these farmlands with scenic vistas and under cultivation is well-recorded in town planning documents – the Master Plan, decades of Open Space and Recreation Plan Reports, and in the zoning itself. Now the new owner is petitioning the town to change the zoning to allow business use, to permit commercial buildings and extensive parking. Town Meeting gets to decide if the land gets rezoned because zoning belongs to the town’s people, not the property owner.

The last rezoning vote was for farmland next to Donelan’s. With a selectman’s reassurance that our local post office wanted to relocate there, Town Meeting approved the rezoning for business use. The results and impact were startling. The post office never intended to move there! With the zoning change, developers sued the town when objections were raised about their overbuilt plans. The rezoned land was flipped to Bob Moran Development which replaced the farmland with an oversized car dealership in the heart of Littleton. The result is obvious: unsightly sprawl stealing the town’s identity. By necessity, residential neighbors abandoned their abutting home and fled. When zoning changes, it is very difficult to control what happens and unwelcome surprises are the norm.

Zoning, with all its flaws, is the town’s only guarantee to its residents that there is some protection against sudden future changes. Typically valuable assets, such as residential areas and valuable farmland, are protected this way. Many argue compellingly that any zoning changes are detrimental.

Changing the zoning of the current day “Fletcher Lands” from agricultural to business would bring windfall commercial profits to the speculative buyer, while significantly adding to the sprawl and traffic congestion from Acton in the East and Littleton’s last zoning change mishap in the West. At the same



time, it would remove this historic farmland and landscape vista previously protected by the town through its planning documents and town-wide consensus approval.

As farmland, this land has great value. Other farmers, both from Littleton and beyond, have expressed interest in continuing its active cultivation, if given a chance. Creative farmers such as Verrill Farms in Concord, the Herb Lyceum at Gilson’s in

Groton, and Davis Farm in Sterling have diversified much to the demand and delight of their many consumers. Verrill Farms provides fresh produce to dozens of Metropolitan Boston’s finest restaurants, sells produce and flowers directly to all of its community members, and provides a wide variety of gourmet foods incidental to its farming operations. Gilson specializes

in herbs and gourmet dinners. Davis Farm is famous for its elaborate corn mazes and family activities. Outdoor activities could include the currently popular winter activities of down hill skiing and snow tubing, while introducing cross country skiing, along with corn mazes and a mountain zip line. Combining agricultural operations, with direct marketing to the community, along with all season outdoor recreation is a compatible land use mix providing year round activities, steady income, and economic viability.

There are many financial incentives (federal and state tax incentives) as well as farm assistance programs to protect agricultural land and help farmers (for example, Agricultural Protection Restriction easement or Farm Viability Grants among others). The Mass Commissioner of Agriculture, Mass Ag Planners, NRCS, and American Farmland Trust staffs have all offered to provide advice and help. There are many viable economic alternatives within the current zoning. Outdoor recreation and summer time agriculture can complement themselves very well.

Recent zoning changes in Westford, adjacent to an industrial area and the Nashoba Valley Ski Area, can accommodate the owner’s desire for more retail while being clustered more appropriately with other current commercial buildings. Development there can accommodate multiple interests.

The USDA Prime Agricultural Soils and scenic landscapes at Littleton’s eastern gateway along the Great Road are unique. Once it is gone, it is gone forever. Just drive by our new car dealership and associated mall. Try to recall the farmland. ■

When zoning changes,
it is very difficult to
control what happens. . .

Preserve Littleton’s farmland
Vote NO on rezoning

This is the tenth in a series of articles intended to alert the Littleton community to the growing threat of invasive plants to our precious New England landscape. Plant populations that have been stable, sometimes for centuries, are now spreading uncontrollably. For additional information visit:

http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp//invasive_plants/weeds/index.shtm

Previous articles covered and posted on www.littletonconservationtrust.org include:

- Japanese Knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*)
- Burning Bush (*Euonymus alatus*)
- Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbicullatus*)
- Japanese and European Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii* and *vulgaris*)
- Glossy and Common Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus* and *Rhamnus cathartica*)
- Multiflora Rose (*Rosa multiflora*)
- Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*)
- Shrub Honeysuckles (*Lonicera tatarica*, *morrowii*, *maakii* and the hybrid know as *L. x bella*)
- Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellate*)

This article focuses on Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*).

Future articles will highlight the following species:

- Black and Pale Swallow-wort (*Cynanchum louiseae* and *rossicum*)
- Porcelain Berry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*)

All of these plants are alien or exotic to this region. They have few natural enemies to keep them in check, and most spread at a prodigious rate, often by birds. All can colonize to the exclusion of native flora, and some are extremely persistent and resistant to control.

Our goal is to make readers aware of the problem and to encourage them to participate in a solution by cleaning up their own properties and helping out in their neighborhoods. Littleton has an opportunity to set back the onslaught of invasive plants by acting now to reduce seed output. If we do not, we risk losing local biodiversity and the very ‘nature’ we take for granted.

As homeowners, vigilance early can save us unimagined energy and money later.



Garlic Mustard is a biennial. Its first year is spent as a rosette of green, scalloped leaves. In its second year, it flowers on two to three foot stalks, drops hundreds of small seeds, and then dies. Alas, that is not the end. One plant’s seed will soon commandeer a roadside ditch, and then the land nearby. A weed virtually unknown in Littleton a few years ago, Garlic Mustard has become a major nuisance for residents and land stewards, and a major threat to local wildflowers, insects, and forest ecosystems.

As a steward of Conant Park I was surprised to see Garlic Mustard covering a large area just off White Street. I was well familiar with the plant and shocked by its stealth and/or my own inattention. After three years of pulling and Roundup applications, I believe it is gone, but with seed viable for up to five years, I may well be in for another surprise.

Once established, control can be achieved by constant pulling for several years, but failure to stop a single plant from going to seed can start the process again. Rise to the challenge! ■

If you’d like advance notice of Littleton Conservation Trust events emailed to you, please send your email address to:
danmorse@yahoo.com

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The Book Corner

These and other books donated by the LCT are available at the Reuben Hoar Public Library

***Girls Who Looked Under Rocks:
The Lives of Six Pioneering Naturalists***
By Jeanne Atkins, Illustrated by Paula Conner

Girls Who Looked Under Rocks is a short book for young readers that offers a good introduction to the lives of six women, going back several centuries, who became award-winning scientists and writers, all focused on the natural world. The six women include: Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717); Anna Botsford Comstock (1854-1930); Frances Hamerstrom (1907-1998); Rachel Carson (1907-1964); Mariam Rothschild (1908-); and Jane Goodall (1934-).

A brief biography of each naturalist is accompanied by nicely-drawn black and white illustrations. There is also a recommended reading list for those interested in finding out more about these women and other naturalists. This book offers a great launching point for student research. It also offers inspiration to young people who are curious about studying the natural world. ■

Salamander Rain: A Lake & Pond Journal
Written and Illustrated by Kristin Joy Pratt-Serafina

Another book written for children, *Salamander Rain* is a visually exciting book that features the entries of a kid's journal as he becomes a "Planet Scout" and explores four types of wetland habitats: marshes and swamps, bogs and fens, lakes and ponds, and rivers and streams. Alongside the journal entries are facts about the various habitats and tidbits about many of the plants and animals found there. Every page is covered with vivid hand-drawn illustrations. The result resembles a colorful scrapbook that children will find both intriguing and engaging. This book also includes tips for kids on how to get involved and help keep wetland habitats clean. There is a lot of good information presented here in a fun way that allows children to find excitement in those "wet and messy" places. ■



Reviews by Kathy Stevens