



A bald eagle takes flight from a fence post at Goodspeed Airport in East Haddam. *Photo by Joene Hendry.*

## The Importance of Open Space and Land Preservation

***Editor's Note:*** In this “Values of Our Land” series, we look at different benefits of open space and land preservation and the effects on people, the environment, and the community.

From bobcats to bullfrogs, creatures both big and small are part of the vibrant mix of life that people share and enjoy.

“Our wildlife is really a litmus test of the health of our environment. We’re all interconnected. Everything is interconnected,” said Amy Blaymore Paterson, executive director of Connecticut Land Conservation Council. “It’s living in the ultimate vacuum to think we can lose our wildlife and not have associated impacts on the human species as well.”

Today, many conservationists across Connecticut, the country, and the globe consider loss of natural habitats — where wildlife survive — as the number one concern, higher even than climate change, though both have become inextricably linked. With continued degradation or outright destruction of the different natural spaces where wildlife find shelter and food and then breed and raise their young, both rare and common creatures could eventually fade from our landscapes.

“To date, the most significant causes of extinctions are habitat loss, introduction of exotic species, and overharvesting,” reports the United Nation’s Convention on Biological Diversity.

Among birds alone, three species once found in Connecticut have become extinct over the last century: Labrador duck, heath hen, and passenger pigeon.

Jason Hawley, a wildlife biologist with Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, worked on a multi-year bobcat project that studied the numbers and locations of bobcat in the state.

“We’ve seen how important even small pieces of land are. Even with tiny corridors connecting batches of land, animals will stay in those corridors,” he said. “It’s amazing how even small batches sustain wildlife.”

Bobcat, he said, are important because, as a top predator in our area, they are elemental to nature’s equilibrium. “We need top predators — bobcats, bears — because they balance out raccoons, squirrels, those down-the-chain animals that might become overpopulated. ... Nature doesn’t make mistakes. An environment with birds, racoons, bears and bobcats, they’re all part” of nature’s pyramid.

Wetlands and water – streams, rivers, lakes, and vernal pools – are as critical to wildlife as land. Some species are born in those waters and stay, some just have their beginnings there, and all need water for sustenance.

Dr. Tracy Rittenhouse is an associate professor at the University of Connecticut in its Department of Natural Resources & the Environment and is principal investigator on the Connecticut Bobcat Project. Much of her research focuses on managing wildlife populations within intermixed ecosystems.

“Open space is the place that people and wildlife share. An important thing about East Haddam is the proximity to the Connecticut River and the Salmon River. Rivers are natural corridors,” she said. “Maintaining open space within the floodplain of the large river maintains connectivity or the ability of animals to travel along the river. ...

“I study wildlife, because I inherently value their presence, so I like living in a state that has a wide range of species, from wood frogs and spotted salamanders near vernal pools to black bears and bobcats. There are people who maybe don’t like having wildlife in their backyard, but, at the end of the day, there are a lot of people who do. There are a lot of people who run to their window when they see a fox or a bobcat. And it’s super exciting to have that connection to nature. If we want to continue living in a place like this into the future, we have to prioritize maintaining open spaces in our neighborhoods.”

Today — along with the Town of East Haddam, The Nature Conservancy, the Eightmile River Wild and Scenic Watershed, and Connecticut State Parks — the independent, nonprofit East Haddam Land Trust exists to preserve the community’s natural environment, often in partnership with others. It works to acquire undeveloped property for the public’s benefit. It currently protects in perpetuity more than 700 acres. Fifteen preserves have hiking trails open to townspeople and others.

Barbara Pokorny, who is on the East Haddam Land Trust board and lives next to Sheepskin Hollow Pond, appreciates daily the variety of life in her surroundings. In the spring and fall, she sees many ducks in stopovers of their seasonal migrations.

Her bird-watching, however, extends beyond the backyard.

“The bird that I’m always looking for in the summer, in the breeding season, and I don’t find every year is the Bobolink,” she said. “[This grassland bird] used to be a pretty common breeder in Connecticut in the days when we had more farmland that went to hay, and it was harvested in the fall. Now it’s more commonly harvested in the middle of the summer. That’s right in the

middle of Bobolink breeding season. So Bobolinks either don't find habitat or find habitat where they can't complete their breeding cycle. They are very hard to find in our part of Connecticut now."

Of about 10,000 species of birds in the world, 957 have been recorded in North America north of Mexico, and 421 are found in Connecticut. There are 175 species that nest in the state, and 55 of them remain through the winter, according to the ornithology department of the Yale Peabody Museum.

"Open space," said Pokorny, "does the same thing for wildlife that it does for human beings. We all need places where we can feel safe, find food, raise our young. The difference with wildlife is they can't generally create their own habitat."

Acknowledging that not everyone shares her enthusiasm for observing birds or considers open-space preservation important, she added, "If everybody felt that way, there won't be any place for wildlife to go in another couple of generations. We need to protect it now so that it's there for our children and our children's children."

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