

# field, forest & fen

Late Summer 2009

## The Nature of Conservation

### Hellbenders

What is particularly unique about the Butternut Valley is that it is one of the few places in New York where you might be fortunate enough to see an Eastern hellbender (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*). This largest of North American native aquatic salamanders may be found among the rocks and detritus of cool, clear streams, scavenging primarily at night for crayfish. Unpolluted streams are important because although hellbenders have lungs, they actually breathe through their skin. Thousands of capillaries at the surface in the many undulating folds of skin along their bodies capture oxygen from the flowing water.

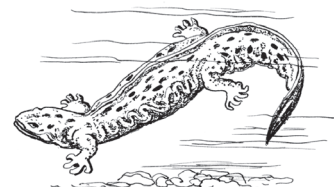
Adult hellbenders are brownish-gray, often with black mottling on the back and sides, have large flattened heads and small beady eyes, and range from 1 to 2.5 feet in length! They are built to survive fast-moving currents, with short, stout legs, and a long, thick tail that functions as a rudder. Mating

occurs in late summer when males hollow out nests under rocks or logs and females come to lay a few hundred marble-sized eggs, connected like beads on a necklace. After external fertilization, the males remain with the eggs until they hatch in about 60 days. Larvae transform in approximately two years and sexual maturity usually occurs at four to six years, although few juveniles survive to maturity due to the abundance of predators, including fish, turtles, and other hellbenders. They can survive for up to 30 years.

Eastern hellbender populations have been dwindling and they are listed as a species of special concern by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Their decline is attributed primarily to siltation which is caused by poor agricultural practices, construction of buildings and roads too close to streams, and poor forestry practices. Siltation negatively impacts hellbender cover and nesting sites as well as their movement. Other factors that may have contributed to hellbender decline include dam construction, collection by the pet trade, killing by fishermen, parasites,

and the presence of endocrine disruptors (chemical pollutants found in streams). The loss of genetic diversity is also a concern as populations become smaller and are unable to migrate.

At a time when amphibian populations in general are declining around the world, safeguarding our streams from siltation and pollution through stream buffering and other conservation measures is now more important than ever to improve the chance of survival of the Eastern hellbender.



Eastern hellbender

Learn more about Eastern hellbenders:  
<http://www.hellbenders.org/abouthellbenders.html>  
<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7160.html>

### Leatherstocking Falls Hike-September 12

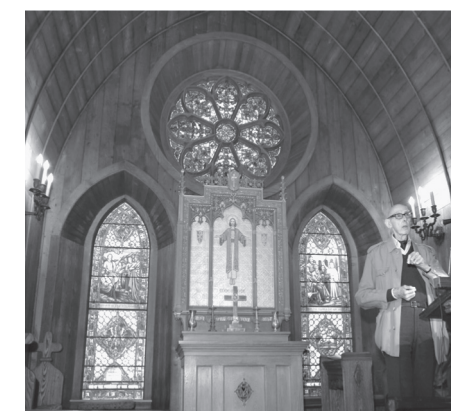
Enjoy the beauty of the Falls. Two walks at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. State Highway 80, West Lake Road. Space is limited. RSVP (607)547-2366 or [connie@otsego-land-trust.org](mailto:connie@otsego-land-trust.org)

## Exploring Dimmock Hollow

On Sunday July 12, Otsego Land Trust, in partnership with the Butternut Valley Alliance, held a History Talk and Nature Walk in Dimmock Hollow, Morris, New York. Dimmock Hollow is a splendid place of natural beauty and culture in the Butternut Valley. Here you will find Morris Manor and the Elms, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century homes of General Jacob Morris, All Saints Chapel and Cemetery, General Jacob Morris State Forest which includes the rocky gorge and forests that envelope Morris Creek, as well as several other historic farms and homesteads.

### History Talk

The event began at All Saints Chapel where Lewis Hall, a former history teacher, spoke to over 140 people about the history of the Morris family, of which he is a sixth generation direct descendant, and about the architecture of All Saints Chapel, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Chapel was built in 1866 and designed by Cooperstown architect G. Pomeroy Keese. It features a wainscot ceiling of chestnut and pews of butternut, with seven saints represented by exquisite stained glass windows.



Lewis Hall addresses crowd in All Saints Chapel  
Photo credit: Lisa Eklund Photography

### Nature Walk

After the talk, the group walked for about one mile along Morris Brook on Dimmock Hollow Road, led by Dr. Les Hasbargen, Assistant Professor of Geology at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, and Joe Richardson, retired Professor of Biology at Franklin and Marshall. Dr. Hasbargen pointed out the rippled sandstone and fossils that indicate that a shallow marine environment once covered the area, approximately 360-400 million years ago. Other highlights of the nature walk included St. Mary's Falls, old-growth hemlock groves, a variety of ferns and wildflowers, and ecologically important stream macroinvertebrates.

### Linking Public and Private Lands

Participants walked along two large farms that are protected under conservation easements by Otsego Land Trust, as well as the General Jacob Morris State Forest, managed by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. In the past 20 years, over 2,200 acres in the Butternut Valley have been permanently protected through public and private conservation efforts.

## Community Matters

Several descendants of the area's founding families attended, recalling their early days growing up in Dimmock Hollow. Cub Scout Pack 3 from Morris also participated, led by Beth Child. After the walk, many enjoyed dinner at the Empire House in Gilbertsville which featured a menu of locally produced food as well as Butternut Valley goat cheese to sample along with New York State wines.



Cub Scouts measure mammoth white pine  
Photo credit: Lisa Eklund Photography

## In Appreciation

On this special occasion the sum of the parts became greater than the whole, as one viewed history woven through architecture, nature, and the human experience. The event would not have been possible without the vision – and diligent effort – of the Hall family, particularly Ben and Carla (Hall) Friedman, and Lewis Hall. We are also grateful to volunteers from the Butternut Valley Alliance, staff of Otsego Land Trust, and several other community naturalists who participated as docents – Scott Fickbohm, Vicki Lentz, Alice Richardson, Beth Child, and Mike Stensland. Thank you all for a very memorable day!



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Otsego Land Trust protects the distinctive rural character of the Otsego County area by securing lands and waters of significant scenic, historic, and ecological value, including forests and farmlands.

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Otsego Land Trust is partially funded by the New York Conservation Partnership Program administered by the Land Trust Alliance Northeast Program with support from the State of New York. A copy of Otsego Land Trust's annual financial report may be obtained upon request from our office or from the New York State Attorney General's Charities Bureau, ATTN: FOIL Officer, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

## Field Notes

With its rich cultural history and diverse array of plants and animals, the Butternut Valley has attracted our attention and our land protection efforts for the past several years. This expansive and enchanting valley in western Otsego County looks largely the same as it has for centuries. The presence of heritage strain brook trout, native freshwater mussels and several amphibians of conservation significance indicate that its streams have remained relatively undisturbed because of sound stewardship on neighboring lands.

Fortunately, several conservation-minded landowners have partnered with Otsego Land Trust to secure land in the Butternut Valley, and recent levels of conservation activity here demonstrate the impact of collaboration and conservation. These landowners are now leading the way to protect this special place with the same pioneering spirit that moved their forefathers to settle here. The conservation actions of these individuals and families help to build upon the conservation legacy of Gilbert Lake — one of the four original state parks established in central New York in 1926.

The Peterson family began partnering with Otsego Land Trust in the 1990's to protect land along the northeastern ridge of Butternut Valley. Their visionary land protection efforts have resulted in the conservation of over 1,200 acres that bridge from the Butternut Valley into the Otego Creek Valley. In 2006, the Hall family and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation created the General Jacob Morris State Forest in Dimmock Hollow, between Morris and Gilbertsville. The Hall family also collaborated with Otsego Land Trust to protect family-owned farmland, as have three other families in the Butternut Valley!

The number of people that explored the cultural sites and natural history of Dimmock Hollow in an outing we recently co-sponsored with the Butternut Valley Alliance demonstrates the broad appeal of our mission and our collaborative efforts to protect land. With over 140 people of all ages participating, this outing set a new record of attendance. This issue of *Field, Forest and Fen* highlights the Butternut Valley and some of our noteworthy findings from this remarkable place.

Despite our relatively young age, Otsego Land Trust is having a growing impact throughout the Otsego Region, which encompasses the Upper Susquehanna River Basin. With guidance from our *Conservation Blueprint* and with your support, we are protecting land from the headwaters of the Unadilla River in southern Herkimer County, to the Butternut Valley in western Otsego County, and to the Charlotte Valley in northern Delaware County.

Fortunately, a generous grant from the New York State Conservation Partnership Program — a joint venture between the Land Trust Alliance and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation — has enabled Otsego Land Trust to create a full-time land protection specialist to step up the pace of our land protection efforts throughout the region. We are pleased to announce that MacKenzie Waro has assumed this position.

At a time when threats continue to mount that may forever impact the places we cherish, your support is now more important than ever. As our work in the Butternut Valley demonstrates, we can have a positive impact by working together to protect land — our heritage and our future.

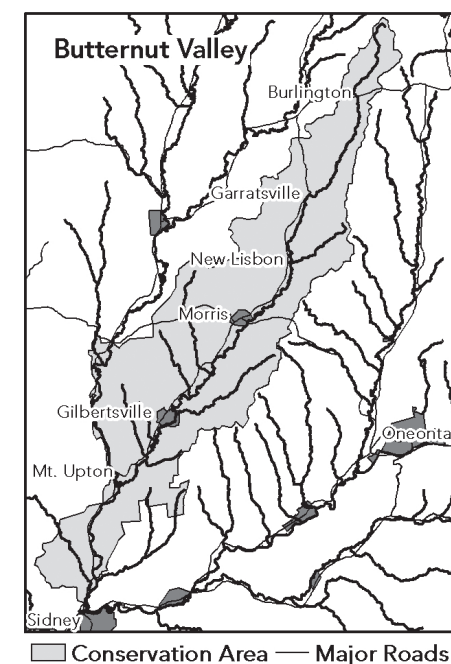
Peter Hujik  
Executive Director

Harry Levine  
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## Conservation Spotlight: Butternut Valley

Comprising 101,380 acres, the Butternut Valley covers almost 10% of Otsego County, and is the second largest conservation area, after the Unadilla River headwaters region, in our *Conservation Blueprint*. Spanning north to south from Burlington to Mount Upton, this valley has impressive natural and cultural resources. Significant wetlands include Cranberry Bog (Town of Burlington), Lake Misery (Morris), and the Black Ash Swamp (Unadilla). Approximately 50% of the streams provide trout spawning habitat, and three threatened New York State birds can be found here: the bald eagle, pied-billed grebe, and the northern harrier. Aquatic species of concern found in the Butternut Valley include the eastern hellbender, the longtail salamander, and two freshwater mollusks, the yellow lamp mussel and the green floater.

Over 60% of the Butternut Valley is forested, predominantly with evergreens, sugar maples, and other hardwoods. Private forests are being



threatened, with about 50 percent expected to be converted from low density development (15 or fewer houses per square mile) to higher density development (16-64 houses per square mile) by 2030\*.

The working farms and historic hamlets of the Butternut Valley remain intact as important cultural landscapes. Over 30,000 acres are currently used for agriculture, with prime soils found in the river valleys. Eight significant historic sites are listed on state and/or national registers: Gilbertsville Historic District, Major's Inn and Gilbert Block, Tianderah, All Saints Chapel and Morris Family Burial Ground, Morris-Lull Farm, The Grove, Zion Episcopal Church and Harmony Cemetery, and the Lunn-Musser Octagon Barn.

\* Forests on the Edge [http://www.fs.fed.us/openspace/fote/national\\_forests\\_on\\_the\\_edge.html](http://www.fs.fed.us/openspace/fote/national_forests_on_the_edge.html)



Luke Nolan, Finn Hodgins, Maya Hodgins & Peter Hujik distributing trees

## Red, White, Blue and GREEN

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Otsego Land Trust participated in the Springfield 4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade for the second year in a row by distributing 400 native hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) tree seedlings. The very receptive crowd snatched them up quickly according to Otsego Land Trust board member Frank Kolbert, who directed several adult and children volunteers in this very popular event. Otsego Land Trust received a third place award!

## The People Behind the Places We Protect

Otsego Land Trust is pleased to announce the appointment of MacKenzie Waro to the position of Land Protection Specialist.



MacKenzie and her champion Corriedale ewe "Punk"

MacKenzie is a graduate of Cornell University and Cooperstown Central Schools, with prior experience at Scenic Hudson Land Trust and New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. She is working closely with Field Representative Joe Homburger and Executive Director Peter Hujik to assist them with land protection and stewardship responsibilities. According to Homburger, "MacKenzie's knowledge of the local farming community and background in easement monitoring and baseline mapping bring much needed help to our organization, which has experienced a 40% growth in its portfolio of conservation lands since 2007" MacKenzie resides in South Hartwick, where, as an active participant in 4-H programs, she continues to raise and show Suffolk sheep and Simmental beef, as well as volunteer as an equine vaulting coach.

The Land Protection Specialist position is made possible with funding from the New York State Conservation Partnership Program administered by the Land Trust Alliance and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.