



Avalonia Trails

P.O. Box 49
Old Mystic, CT 06372

...preserving natural habitats in southeastern Connecticut by acquiring and protecting lands and by communicating the value of these irreplaceable resources

WINTER 2013-2014

Avalonia Hosts Fall Gathering

by Janice Parker



*President Michele Fitzpatrick addresses a packed house at the LaGrua Center.
Photo by Jim Sullivan*

what it takes in practical terms to acquire and steward land: the acquisition process, working with donors and granting agencies, and the critical importance of fundraising both for acquisition and for appropriate stewardship in perpetuity. Special mention was made of Avalonia's current fundraising efforts directed toward acquisition of Babcock Ridge (see page 3 for an update). This property, which connects two existing preserves (Erisman Woodlands and the Donald R. Henne Memorial Tract of the Shunock River Preserve) to create a wildlife corridor of approximately 220 acres, is a prime example of Avalonia's emerging commitment to strategic conservation; the targeted acquisition of those properties most deserving of preservation.

These presentations were followed by a question and answer session during which a number of members of the audience asked insightful questions and expressed their appreciation both for the presentations and for Avalonia's conservation efforts. The educational portion of the event was followed by a reception at which wine and light appetizers were served and guests were able to mingle and talk with each other and Avalonia Board members. This reception was made possible by the generosity of a number of corporate sponsors. Please turn to page 3 for a full listing of their names. We would like to make special mention of Russ Burgess of Charles Schwab who, although a new business in town, contributed early and with exceptional generosity. Please thank and support all our sponsors and let them know that you appreciate their support of Avalonia.

The success of this gathering was such that we plan to make it an annual event, visiting different topics and locations. See you next year!

Janice Parker is the editor of "Avalonia Trails."

On September 29th, 2013 Avalonia hosted a Fall Gathering at the LaGrua Center in Stonington. The event, which was free and open to the public was entitled "The Land Conservation Process: from Acquisition to Stewardship" and was designed to educate members and the general public about the business of land conservation.

The event was extremely well attended; both floor-level and balcony seats were filled. The first speaker was Maureen Dewire, Avalonia's Vice President and Secretary, who communicated with infectious enthusiasm WHY we do what we do, explaining, with the aid of stunning photographs of our preserves, the natural history and science behind our conservation and preservation efforts. She emphasized the importance of our effort, the unique value of the habitats with which we are entrusted, and our goal of preserving habitats of ecological significance by creating greenways of connected open space.

The presentation that followed, by Avalonia President Michele Fitzpatrick, explained HOW we do what we do, and

Michele Fitzpatrick, explained HOW we do what we do, and



*Vice-President Maureen Dewire.
Photo by Jim Sullivan.*

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Nominating Committee

A Nominating Committee comprising Binti Ackley, Dick Conant, Michele Fitzpatrick, Gerry Stefon and Mac Turner has been formed to identify candidates to fill currently vacant positions on the Board of Directors, and to replace those whose terms will expire in 2014.

Currently, we are without a Treasurer and the positions of Secretary and Vice-President are being filled by a single individual. There are, in addition, current Board vacancies to be filled, as well as turnover to be provided for. If you are interested in possibly serving as an officer or as a member of the Board, please get in touch so we can discuss this further with you. The Committee also welcomes suggestions of qualified individuals.

President's Note

Hi everyone, I hope you are enjoying the winter weather.

As you are likely aware, it is time for Avalonia's Annual Appeal. We ask for financial support to continue our mission of preserving natural habitats. Avalonia continues to grow as an organization, both in the number of acres of land we are responsible for and the people who are helping to do the work. Our members, donors, and volunteers play a key role in this growth, and I thank you for your contributions, whatever form they take. In addition to the usual options for donations, we are asking specifically for assistance with our purchase of the Babcock Ridge property. You can read about our progress towards this acquisition on page 3.

I want to welcome Heather Milardo as our new Executive Director. Heather comes to us with an impressive background in not-for-profit organizational work, including administration, volunteer and staff resource management, donor relations and gift processing, event planning, and data management. Heather will be looking for opportunities to meet members and donors as she becomes acclimated in our sole staff position. I am looking forward to working with her as Avalonia continues to expand and grow.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Janice Parker as she completes her time as Avalonia's Executive Director. Janice served as a member of the Board of Directors for several years before undertaking the paid staff position when it was created five years ago. She grew the position into what it is today. She has been an extremely valuable asset for Avalonia and I will miss her guidance and assistance. Please thank Janice for her service when you see her. She will continue as newsletter editor, at least for a while. She has been doing this work as a volunteer for several years, and I thank her for that as well.

Thanks again to all of you for your support and have a wonderful New Year!

Michele Fitzpatrick

Report from the Executive Director by Heather Milardo

I've had such a lovely welcome from everyone that I have met so far and I'm looking forward to meeting the rest of you who have such a positive impact on Avalonia. As Michele mentioned, my background is in development, event planning, volunteer management, administration, and database management. I have primarily worked in healthcare in the past, however, given the increasing need for conservation and protection of our natural resources, I am very eager for this new role in helping to do that. I know that you all will share your passion for land conservancy with me as we work together to preserve the beauty of Southeastern Connecticut.



To give you a little personal background on me, I grew up in a rural area of Western Pennsylvania, north of Pittsburgh, so nature and open space have always been important parts of my life. As a child, while other families were headed to the beach for family vacation, my family typically headed into the woods to go camping and hiking. Those memories remain some of my most cherished. I am now happily sharing that joy with my son. We love The Preserve in Old Saybrook, which abuts our neighborhood, and applaud the Trust for Public Land's efforts to preserve it. Most summer afternoons you can find us in the woods hiking and exploring. Now I can't wait to introduce him to Avalonia's beautiful preserves!

Heather Milardo

Our Sincere and Wholehearted Thanks to All the Corporate Sponsors Who Made Our Fall Gathering Possible!

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Babcock Ridge update

by Janice Parker

Fundraising toward the purchase of Babcock Ridge is in full swing. We are happy to report that the Fields Pond Foundation has granted us \$10,000 towards this project, bringing our total grant income to \$152,500. As a result of the sterling efforts of Dick Conant, we have an additional nine grants pending with the Bafflin and Bodenwein Foundations, the Clark Charitable Trust, the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, the Larsen Fund, the Norcross Wildlife Foundation, the Cornell Douglas Foundation, the William P. Wharton Trust, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. While if all these were funded we would have more than enough to complete the purchase, experience teaches us that only about 20 to 30% of grant applications are funded, so we will continue to prepare grants and solicit individual and corporate donations.

Our Annual Appeal is underway

By now our Annual Appeal letter will have reached your mailbox. We are heavily dependent on the proceeds of this appeal to meet our operating and acquisition expenses, so please give as generously as you are able. Typically, our annual appeal represents 30-40% of our operating income for the year and for the past couple of years we have struggled to balance our budget. As our land holdings grow, so do our stewardship obligations and their associated expenses.

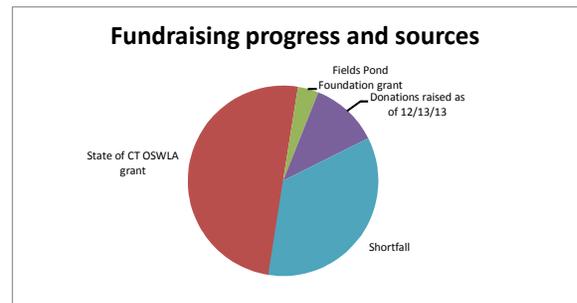
This year we have an additional challenge in that we concurrently fundraising to purchase Babcock Ridge. If you have already given toward that acquisition we thank you for that additional support.

You can donate by check using the envelope provided with the mailing, or by credit card at our website.

Your contribution will be acknowledged in our April newsletter and in our Annual Report, so please let us know how you would like your name to appear, or if you would prefer to remain anonymous.

We thank you in anticipation for your contribution. Avalonia is **your** land trust and we can execute our mission of conservation only with **your** help.

Thank you!



Thus far we have raised \$33,123.48 in donations, ranging from two crumpled dollar bills contributed by a very young man at a North Stonington outreach event, to a check for \$10,000 from one very generous individual. A Dine-Out for a Cause event held at the Ninety-Nine Restaurant in Groton raised over \$100. Another such fundraiser is planned for the Dog Watch Cafe in Stonington for Wednesday, January 15th (details page 6) and we hope that with more advance publicity there will be a corresponding increase in proceeds. Plan to join us!

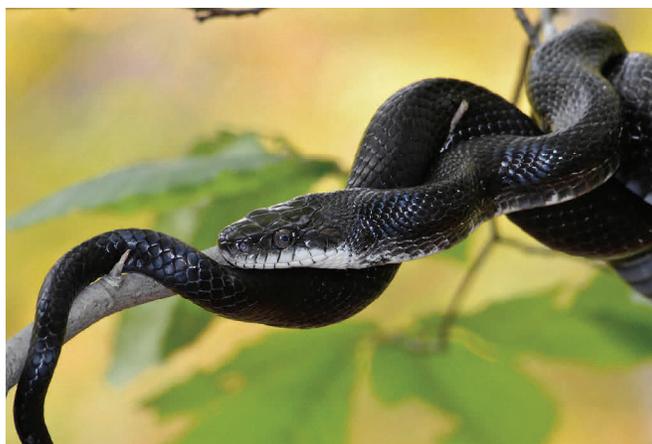
Mac Turner and Bruce Fellman have been leading hikes of Babcock Ridge to increase public awareness over the fall and winter and report they have been well attended. The best turnout was for the November 24th hike, when it was 28°F and the wind was howling!

Babcock's Tree-Climbing Serpents

by Bruce Fellman

This past autumn, Mac Turner, Director for North Stonington, and I co-led a series of guided walks to explore Babcock Ridge, which, will become the newest jewel in a crown (or necklace) currently made up of the Donald R. Henne Memorial and Erisman Woodlands preserves as soon as fundraising is complete. Mac is an expert in the human history of Babcock, while my expertise is in natural history, particularly vernal pools and other fresh-water wetlands. So our group might, I warned them in advance, wind up getting their feet wet.

However, the worst autumn drought in years kept everything dry. Even so, on our October 19 trek, we uncovered Two-lined Salamanders that were hiding underneath logs, and we observed Spring Peepers and Wood Frogs that were in transit to winter headquarters. But the star of the autumn vernal pools show, the Marbled Salamander, a kind of clairvoyant amphibian that lays its eggs in a dry hole that will soon fill with water, was nowhere to be found.



Black rat snake (*Pantherophis obsoletus*).

Photo by Bruce Fellman

Any disappointment was short lived. After a brisk hike up the steep slope to the ridgetop, Groton Director Dick Conant wondered aloud what that dark shape might be about 10 feet up a beech tree. The first guess was some kind of fungus, but a closer look revealed a tightly coiled ball of Black Rat Snake. It was, everyone, even the serpent-phobes in the group who kept their distance, agreed, "Incredibly cool."

Connecticut's longest snake—these reptiles can reach six feet, although this one was probably more on the order of three feet—is a skilled climber that often raids the nests of birds for eggs, hatchlings, and even adults. More typically, it preys on small rodents, which the constrictor kills by suffocation. We don't know how many more snakes call Babcock Ridge home, but almost certainly this one and any others in the area will find shelter from the winter in dens underneath the ridge's numerous glacier-hewn boulders. Their young, who emerged from eggs in late summer, are probably already in hiding. Next spring, after the warm rains have woken the vernal pool amphibians, I'll be scanning the rocks and trees for snakes. Company is always welcome.

Avalonia member Bruce Fellman is a naturalist and nature writer.

Making helpful connections

by Beth Sullivan

Over the last several years, we have tried to make and maintain connections with other environmental educational organizations and groups. Part of Avalonia's mission is to encourage academic exploration for the purpose of improving the understanding of the habitats we protect.

During this past year we met Cameron Douglass, a post-doctoral fellow in Environmental Science from Trinity College who was working along with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) studying the outcomes of the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) eradication effort at Dodge Paddock. In addition to *Phragmites*, he became curious about the other invasives on the site, especially black swallow-wort (*Cynanchum louiseae*). He wanted more. Boy...did we have swallow-wort to share! I am not sure he knew what he got himself into when we introduced him to Knox Preserve. Over the last 6 months, he and a team of undergraduate students have worked at Knox and explored ways to control invasives, and help to restore areas to health sufficient to support native growth.

Together with DEEP they marked along several walls, set up test plots, did stem counts, determined biomass in given quadrants, and documented conditions before and after treatment. The DEEP treated along the specified walls and as the plants responded, by dying, they are going back in to test the soil and will continue to monitor increasingly large areas over the next years. Our volunteers have gone back and removed all woody growth and the dead invasive vines. The walls look spectacular.

Another student is collating all the bird banding data collected over the years and will investigate any correspondence between types of birds using the property and the mass of invasives that took over in the last several years. With support from a Rotary Club of the Stoningtons Grant, she will design informational signs describing the habitats and wildlife usage.

The next portion of Cameron's study involves testing the soils in the fields, and ultimately even into the shrub land portion of Knox. For 2 long days his team and Avalonia volunteers collected over 600 plug samples of the soil in the North Field. These will be tested for salinity, since that field was flooded by Superstorm Sandy. They will also test for organic matter, nutrients, residual chemicals and fertilizers from years of use as an agricultural field.

These are just baselines, the beginnings of what we hope will be a long-term effort to understand a little better how this unique preserve functions and help us with its management over the next decades.

We are grateful for their efforts!



Cleared walls at Knox Preserve.

Photo by Beth Sullivan.

Beth Sullivan chairs Avalonia's Stonington Town Committee

New Hiking Trail Signs in Groton

by Joellen Anderson

Avalonia's trailed properties in Groton have new public hiking trail signs. Both the Moore Woodlands and Town's End trails are sporting new green and white GROTON TRAIL signs in an effort to raise public awareness of all



Dick Conant, Groton Director, and Mark Berry, Director, Town of Groton Parks & Recreation Department.

Photo by Joellen Anderson

hiking trails in Groton whether they are owned by the State of CT, the Town of Groton or land trusts such as Avalonia Land Conservancy, Inc. or Groton Open Space Association. You will now be able to locate new Avalonia trail maps in Groton on the town's new interactive trail website; groton-rec.com/Trails.asp . There is also a matrix guide on the town's website for permitted trail usage. Individual property owners determine what activities are permitted, so please remember that most of Avalonia's properties are managed as nature preserves, which means passive recreation activities such as walking, bird watching, photography, only. Also, land trust property is maintained by volunteer stewards, so consider volunteering for trail maintenance



Town's End Preserve in Groton.

Photo by Joellen Anderson

nance activities.

Put on your hiking boots, explore all those trails with new trail maps and walk your way to better health.

Members of Avalonia's Groton Town Committee have been participating in an initiative to highlight public hiking trails in the Town of Groton. Mark Berry, Groton's new Director of the Parks & Recreation Department established a Trails Coordinating Task Force last fall; meetings are held monthly.

Joellen Anderson chairs Avalonia's Groton Town Committee.

Groton Fall Festival

by Dick Conant

Avalonia was well represented at the annual Groton Fall Festival held this past October 12 at Poquonnock Plains Park. Our President, Michele Fitzpatrick and Groton Town Committee members, Dick Conant and Charlie Boos, braved the crisp fall weather and gusty winds to set up the Avalonia tent with our new Avalonia tri-fold billboard and the Babcock Ridge property acquisition poster board. A helpful hint for those planning similar outdoor events in the future - Bring plenty of duct tape to keep things in place!

The fair went from 10 a.m. until 4 in the afternoon and was a perfect venue for Avalonia since it was geared to local businesses and non-profit agencies and was well attended by the general public. We had the Groton Open Space Association and the Cross Town Trails Association as neighbors to give us a critical mass of land conservancy groups. Michele, Dick and Charlie greeted and talked to at least 30 fair-goers visiting the Avalonia tent bestowed free memberships on the 10 most interested visitors.

This is definitely an event on the Groton Town Committee's calendar for next year. We hope other town committees can identify similar venues in their areas to help get the word out about Avalonia. The investment of a few hours on a weekend can be great PR for Avalonia and help us grow our name recognition and membership.

Dick Conant represents Groton on the Board of Directors.

Avalonia welcomes new and renewing members!



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www.avalonialandconservancy.org

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AVALONIA LAND CONSERVANCY, INC.

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Avalonia has a Facebook page:



Upcoming Events

Saturday, January 11, 2014, 1 to 3 p.m.. Barrett Preserve Hike. (Snow date: Sunday, January 12, 2014.) This hike is sponsored by the Ledyard Libraries as part of their Winter Family Fitness Series. Please call the library to register, 860-464-6943. Refreshments will be served on site after the walk. Join Tom Worthley, UCONN extension forester, and Avalonia volunteers, as they share their knowledge about healthy forest ecosystems. Learn why Avalonia has decided to clear some trees on 6 acres in this woodland. Come separate facts from fiction regarding this often misunderstood forest regeneration treatment.



Wednesday January 15, 2014, 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Dog Watch Café Fundraiser. Eat lunch or dinner at the Dog Watch Café in Stonington and if you tell your waitstaff you are there for Avalonia, the generous proprietors will donate 15% of your check to Avalonia, no coupons needed. Dog Watch is open from 11:30 a.m.to 9 p.m. Order dessert; it's for a good cause!



Sunday, January 19, 2014 at 1p.m. Explore local woodlands in winter. Hike Avalonia's Moore Woodlands and the Town of Groton's Beebe Pond trail in Mystic. Meet at Moore Woodlands Capstan Avenue cul-de-sac entrance. Hike difficulty is medium to difficult depending on weather and trail conditions: some level ground, but also a stream crossing, additional wet areas and boulder fields. Time: 1.5-2 hours. Dress appropriately for weather conditions. Inclement weather or difficult trail conditions cancels. Bring water. Refreshments and conversation at hike's end. Call 860-445-2563 to register.