

Land deal

OSI AND MOHONK PRESERVE ANNOUNCE THE ACQUISITION OF 5.3 ACRES OF LAND



PHOTO BY LAUREN THOMAS

(L-R) Research assistant Shanan Smiley, director of land protection Jennifer Garofalini and director of research Paul Huth inspect a Christmas fern on Mohonk Preserve's recently acquired 5.3 acre parcel of land.

Five-plus acres of land at the end of Cragwood Road in New Paltz—containing wetlands, boulder fields and hemlock forests—has been purchased from George Campbell by the Open Space Institute (OSI) and with the help of two private donors for approximately \$75,000.

The acquisition of land, while purchased by the non-profit OSI, will be managed by Mohonk Preserve and through a specific stewardship strategy will be restored to its original, pristine condition in a two-phase process. The land is a unique combination of a talus bolder field, lying just beneath

Bonticou Crag, which quickly turns into low-lying wetlands with divergent streams and a woodland area.

OSI president Joe Martens noted that “the protection of the Campbell parcel is an excellent example of the steps we take – large and small – everyday to protect important landscapes for people and animals. Conservation partners like the Mohonk Preserve are critical to success. The OSI has protected 24,000 acres of land in and around the Shawangunk Ridge since 1971. Besides its recent acquisition of the Campbell property, it is also working to permeably

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protect more than 100 acres of historical farmland between Huguenot Street and the Walkkill River.

Campbell had originally brought fill into the parcel closest to the roadway and created various trenches to try and divert the water coming off the cliffs away from what he was trying to sell as a residential parcel. Through discussions with Mohonk Preserve and OSI, Campbell worked with them and decided to sell the property to them so that they could keep it in perpetuity rather than continuing to try and create a residential site in a low-lying wetland area.

“Realizing that both the federal and local governments have declared the parcel’s wetlands important and understanding the complexities of developing wetlands as residential sites, I felt that it would be most appropriate for the land to be added to the adjacent Mohonk Preserve,” noted Campbell.

“It was a site that had an early approved sub-division that would never pass today’s zoning standards,” said Jen Garofalino of the Preserve staff. “This was one of the largest, most concentrated sub-divisions approved in this area before planning boards began to recognize the importance of wetlands, their habitats and functions...The owner was really great to work with. And we believe we can remedy whatever damage was done.”

Already, the Preserve research staff has been canvassing the newly acquired parcel for native species, rare and endangered species, as well as invasive species such as *Ailanthus* “Tree of Heaven,” Japanese Barberry and *Rosa* *Flora*.

“The greatest danger of fill being brought into a site like this,” said Paul Huth, the director of the Daniel Smiley Research Center, “is that it can often carry non-native and invasive seeds with it. Or when equipment is used, as it was to dig these deep and wide trenches, the mud on the machinery can often carry non-native and invasive species that otherwise would never find their way here.”

At the same time, all of the native plants that were there naturally establish a “seed base” so that even with the fill being laid on top of them, eventually many of those seedlings will find their way back up.

“As you can see, even with the fill that was dumped here, the area is beginning to restore itself,” said Huth. “There is skunk cabbage, blue-eyed grass and other wetland plants that are re-establishing themselves. Nature will do most of that work herself.”

Although the stewardship strategy will likely have some of the fill lifted out, Huth and his staff will be taking monthly visits [they’ve already conducted two] in an effort to record all of the species they find, particularly those that are invasive on a delicate site like this 5.3-acre cliff-based and wetland-rife parcel.

Several trees were cut down in preparation to sell off a parcel of the land for a residential home. That, according to Huth, allows more light in, which causes different types of habitats to grow. “We’ve found two *Ailanthus*,” he noted, pointing to a six-inch high sapling. “They should be called ‘Trees of Hell.’”

Ailanthus was originally brought to the United States from China and sold widely at nurseries as

ornament trees. The problem is that in one year they can grow up to 16 feet and in doing so release chemicals into the ground that prohibit other trees from growing. “Their root systems are also extensive and with the chemical they release into the ground, the danger is that they can take over an entire woodland area, particularly when other trees have been felled and the canopy is open. If we did nothing to remove these and continually monitor for them, you could come back in ten years and have an entire canopy of *Ailanthus* – no hemlocks, maples, white pines, tulip trees, all of the native, non-invasive species that would naturally created the woodland canopy here.”

Huth pointed to the tiny *Ailanthus* sapling and the surrounding maple saplings around it. “Those maple saplings won’t make it once the chemical is released from *Ailanthus* into the ground. It poisons them.”

On a positive note, Huth and his staff have counted 24 species of birds on the 5.3-acre site, as well as five amphibians and reptiles, three mammals, 120 species of vascular plants, trees and shrubs and ten species of insects. “We’ve seen wild turkeys, deer and raccoons, a red tail hawk with her young that flew from the cliffs overhead, red shoulder hawks and this is where ravens were spotted nesting a few years ago,” he added. “The smallest parcels are sometimes the most critical to the mission of the Preserve. This parcel, because it borders the cliffs and the Crag, is critical to the various hawks and birds that nest there. They need this area to successfully raise their offspring.”

Huth also noted that the Preserve, which has approximately 6,500 continuously protected acres, wants to increase its reserve to allow for animals that need large stomping grounds to survive and thrive like the black bear and the Fisher [one of the largest weasels reaching three-and-a-half feet long.]

According to Huth and Garofalino, this will never be a site that the Preserve would create a trail head at or encourage walking traffic. “It’s a zone-one site,” explained Garofalino. “Those are our most delicate sites and ones that do not lend themselves to heavy foot traffic.”

In fact, this site will become part of what the Preserve calls it’s “Kleine-Bonticou Watershed Area,” a unit of the Preserve land of almost 800 acres where protection of water quality, ecology and habitat are top goals, not recreation.

Glenn Hoagland, executive director of the Mohonk Preserve, said that the long-term stewardship of the Campbell parcel would be a high priority for his staff. “Two generous individual funders, Suzanne Weinstein and an anonymous donor, were instrumental to the conservation of this important wetland and talus slope, leveraging OSI’s purchase and enabling the Preserve to focus its resources and expertise on the essential science and stewardship needed to maintain it in perpetuity,” he said.

Through research and education, Mohonk Preserve aims to safeguard the Ridge forever and to promote a deeper understanding of the value of nature in everyday life.

– Erin Quinn