Great Hollow

Nature Preserve & Ecological Research Center

2025 ANNUAL REVIEW

CONTENTS

Dear Friends and Supporters,

I am proud to introduce this look back at what Great Hollow accomplished in 2025, and I am filled with gratitude for the people who made it all possible. What began nearly a decade ago as an ambitious vision has grown into a thriving center for science, education, and community that continues to reach new milestones each year. None of this happens without the steadfast support of our members, volunteers, collaborators, and friends.

This year we advanced our mission in many exciting ways. On the research front, our team launched a multi-year collaboration to study the effectiveness of a new habitat enhancement technique for the imperiled New England cottontail while also investigating the technique's side-effects on plants, insects, bats, and birds. We continued our Japanese barberry research to provide land managers with the science needed to make informed, evidence-based decisions about invasive plant control. Farther afield, we wrapped up our studies of the habitat associations of a geographically unique population of wood turtles in the Catskills, and the physiological ecology of high-elevation birds in Vermont. We are now preparing both studies for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Along the way we welcomed a new graduate research assistant from Columbia University with whom we will be studying the communication system of the spotted lanternfly, to hopefully develop a novel method of controlling this rapidly spreading insect pest.

Our education and outreach programs continued to flourish and deepen our community impact. Eco-Discovery Camp reached record enrollment, with campers exploring everything from stream ecology to orienteering and wilderness survival. Our experiential, hands-on curriculum gave nearly 100 children the opportunity to practice real science while fostering curiosity and stewardship of the natural world. Community events like Hollow Fest, the Juried Art Show, Kids' Nature Nights, and our many walk and talk programs brought together old friends and new visitors, building connections to the environment and each other.

Behind the scenes, our staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to care for Great Hollow's trails, facilities, and 825 acres of conservation land. Their dedication ensures that our preserve remains a valuable resource for people and wildlife alike.

As we approach our tenth year, we are energized by both how far we have come and how much more can be done. The challenges facing the environment are immense, but so too is the collective power of a community that is committed to conservation. Together, we will continue to advance the science on which effective conservation relies, inspire future generations, and work to protect the natural world that sustains us all. From everyone at Great Hollow, thank you for being part of our journey and for making 2025 another successful year.

Chad Seewagen
Executive Director

Finding the Sweet Spot for New England Cottontails

Great Hollow's executive director Chad Seewagen deploying a bat recorder (top right) and summer research intern Eliza Wein conducting a bird point-count survey (bottom right), to study the responses of bats and birds to habitat management for the imperiled New England cottontail.

This year we kicked off a collaborative study to evaluate whether forest canopy thinning enhances habitat quality for the imperiled New England cottontail, and how it secondarily affects plants, insects, birds, and bats. The New England cottontail, one of only two rabbit species native to the Northeast, has undergone substantial population declines because of extensive losses of dense, early successional habitats, like shrubland and young forest, on which it depends. Although considerable investments in New England cottontail conservation have been made through multi-state and federal partnerships, these efforts have not reversed the downward population trend. The continued decline has prompted a search for alternative management practices that effectively enhance conditions for the New England cottontail without inadvertently benefiting its non-native competitor, the eastern cottontail. Along with partners at the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), University of New Hampshire, and South Dakota State University, we are studying the effectiveness of partially thinning closed-canopy mature forests by about 20 percent and retaining felled tree crowns on the ground to instantly provide dense understory structure for the New England cottontail. Great Hollow is one of the study sites where this treatment was applied by DEEP and USFWS over the winter of 2025-2026.

Great Hollow's additional contribution to the partnership is to investigate how other wildlife is also affected by this habitat management prescription. We spent several weeks over the summer conducting baseline surveys of plants, insects, birds, and bats in six experimental plots at one of the project's other study sites, Housatonic State Forest (Sharon, CT). Great Hollow's field crew, including research intern Eliza Wein, volunteer Dayne Kepler, research fellow Sarah Deckel, and executive director Chad Seewagen counted more than 500 birds of 23 species, recorded more than 200 hours of bat echolocation calls from 5 different species, and collected and weighed thousands of insects and spiders. We also collected baseline data on forest stand composition, basal area, ground-cover density, and understory vegetation composition. In the following years, we and our agency and academic partners will be monitoring the plots for colonization by New England cottontails as well as any changes in the plant, insect, bird, and bat communities in response to the canopy thinning.

Can Mountain Birds Hang on in a Warming World?

This summer we wrapped up field work for our study of how rising temperature trends may affect the delicate balance among mountain bird species that are specially adapted to life in the cold. In collaboration with the Vermont Center for Eco-Studies, we successfully collected a second and final season of data to compare the energetics of a high-elevation specialist, Bicknell's thrush, to a generalist competitor, Swainson's thrush, in relation to temperature and precipitation. Bicknell's thrush is a rare and imperiled migratory songbird that breeds only on the highest peaks of New York, New England, and eastern Canada. Adapted to the cold and wet climate of mountaintops, it benefits from reduced competition where few other bird species occur. However, increasing temperatures are threatening to alter high-elevation habitats and potentially allow lower-elevation species, like Swainson's thrush, to expand upslope. Elucidating the traits that allow Bicknell's thrush to thrive over other species is therefore important for understanding how climate-driven upslope expansion of competitors may threaten the long-term persistence of high-elevation specialists.

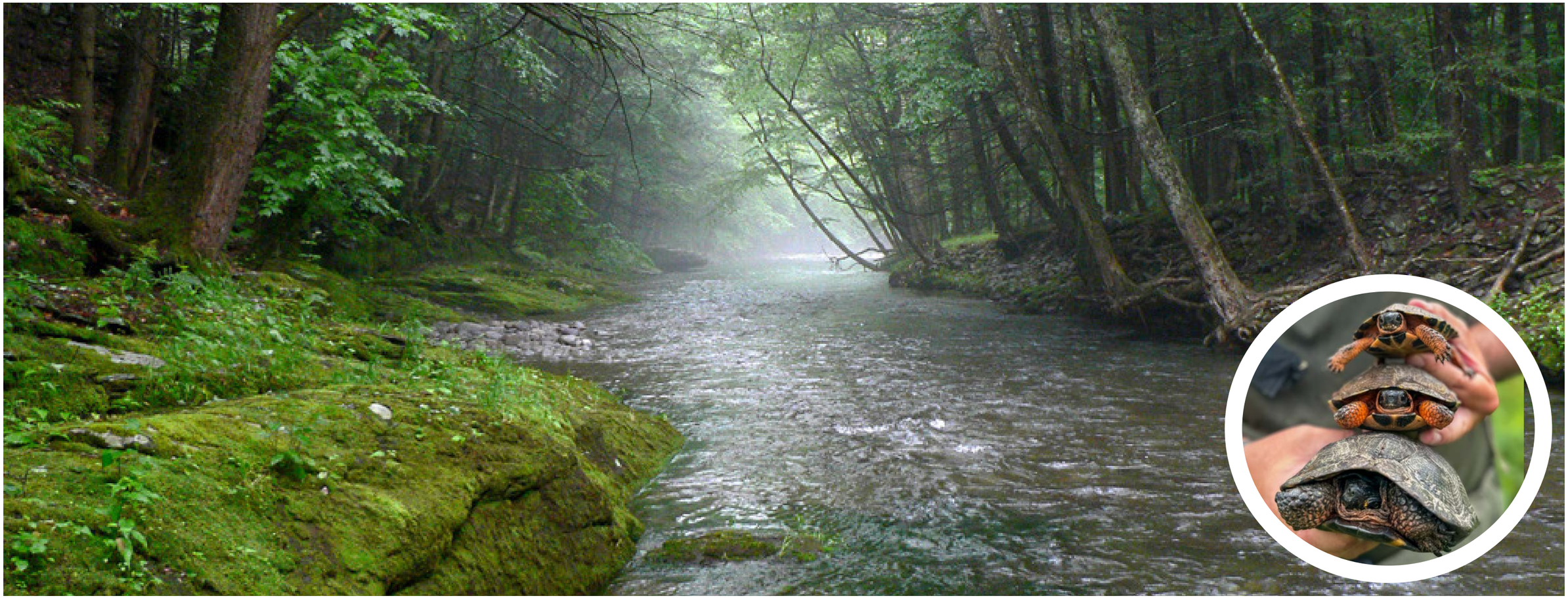
Great Hollow's post-doctoral research fellow, Dr. Sarah Deckel, and research intern, Eliza Wein, spent several early and cold mornings on the top of Vermont's Mount Mansfield in June capturing and releasing Bicknell's and Swainson's thrushes to collect more feathers and blood samples, to boost our sample size from the previous year's efforts. From these samples we can investigate two potential advantages Bicknell's thrush may have over its close relative. The first is whether Bicknell's thrush has greater metabolic efficiency, enabling it to better conserve energy in cold, resource-limited conditions. The second is whether its plumage provides superior insulation and water repellency, reducing energy loss during cold and wet weather. Preliminary results indicate no difference between the two species' feathers, but we are still awaiting lab results from the blood samples, which will tell us how much energy each species burns when faced with the same weather conditions. We expect to have final results and a manuscript submitted for peer review sometime in 2026. In the meantime, we took advantage of an opportunity to use the feather samples for a completely separate purpose, which was to compare the accuracy of two common methods of measuring feather water repellency. Surprisingly, this had never been done before, and our results revealed that one of the methods is flawed and should no longer be used. We published the findings in the Journal of Avian Biology in May, marking Great Hollow's 20th contribution to the peer-reviewed literature.

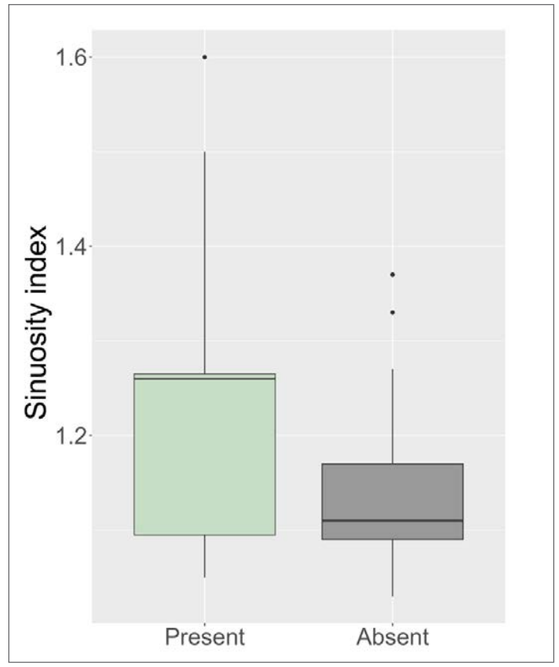
Unraveling the Habitat Requirements of Wood Turtles

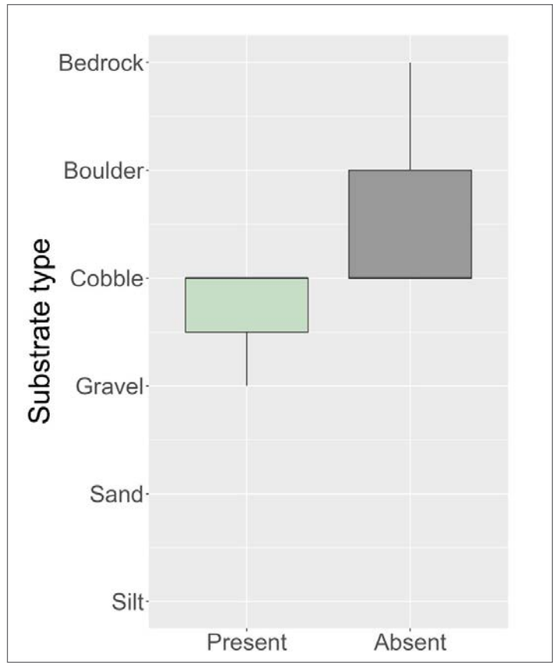
We spent a good part of 2025 analyzing, interpreting, and writing up the results of our study of the habitat associations of wood turtles in New York's Catskill Mountains. The work involved extensive geospatial and statistical analyses of the field data we collected the previous year and culminated in a 137-page report submitted to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) and a manuscript currently undergoing peer review at a scientific journal.

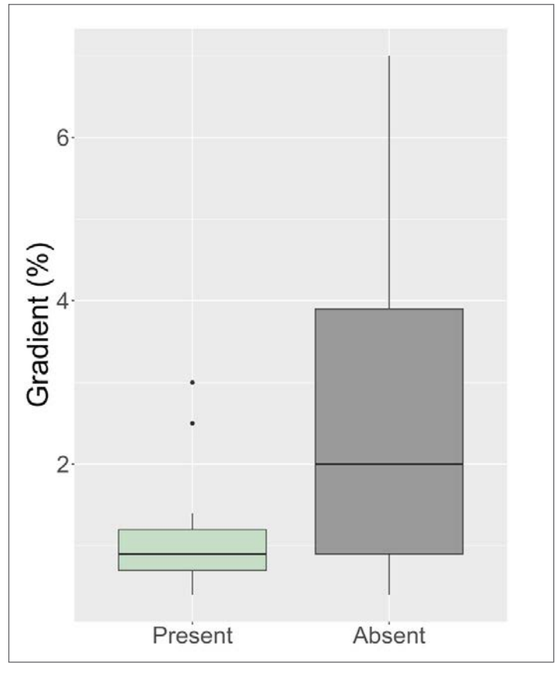
The wood turtle is a highly imperiled, stream-dwelling species that is in urgent need of conservation action to reverse population declines. This will require a better understanding of wood turtle habitat requirements across all regions, landscape contexts, and types of ecosystems in which the species occurs. Wood turtles are most associated with streams in flat, lowland landscapes, but they also occur in some mountainous areas. As temperatures continue to rise in the coming decades, climate models predict that habitat availability for wood turtles in the Northeast will shrink by more than 50 percent and become limited to high-elevation areas, including the Catskills. Despite this increasing importance montane areas will have to wood turtle conservation, the ecology and habitat requirements of wood turtles near their current elevational limits have received little study, and high-elevation populations have been largely overlooked in conservation planning for the species.

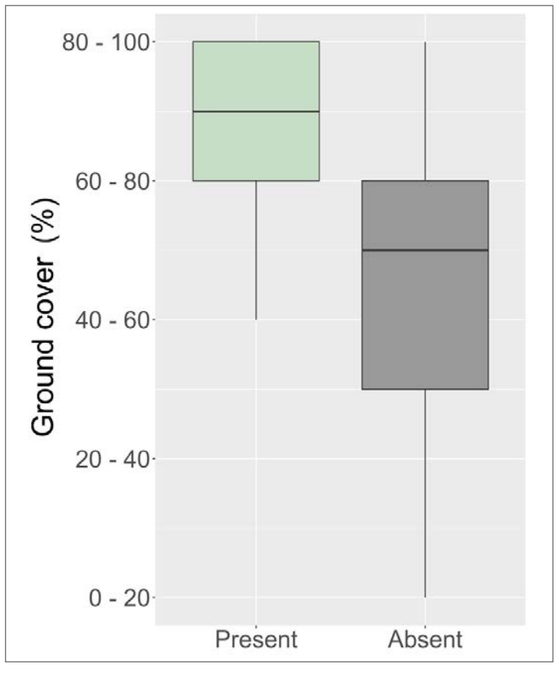
To that end, Great Hollow was contracted by NYSDEC to survey wood turtles in the Catskills, to better document their distribution and habitat associations in this montane area. We surveyed 28 kilometers of streams, layered and mapped all the data in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software, and statistically modeled the presence/absence of wood turtles in relation to 10 stream and floodplain habitat characteristics. This study provided the first empirical information on wood turtle habitat relationships in the Catskills and some of the only such information at high elevation. We found wood turtles at some of the highest elevations ever documented (over 1,600 feet above sea level) while otherwise being associated with many of the same habitat features described in lowland areas. Specifically, our results showed that wood turtles are most likely to inhabit mountain streams that are shallow-grade and sinuous, with relatively deep water and cobble bottoms, and bordered by gently sloped floodplains that have open-canopy forest and dense ground cover. This new information will help natural resources agencies and conservation practitioners better predict the presence or absence of wood turtles in mountain streams that lack survey data, and identify high-quality habitats to prioritize for conservation and management.











Left: Great Hollow's education director, Tara Ewers, preparing to release a wood turtle found during our study of wood turtle habitat requirements in the Catskills. Above: The study found that mountain streams are significantly more likely to be inhabited by wood turtles when they have curvy channels (top left), fine substrates on the stream bed (top right), a shallow gradient (bottom left), and dense ground-cover vegetation in the floodplain (bottom right).

The Buzz About Spotted Lanternflies

Few insects have made headlines in the Northeast quite like the spotted lanternfly. Accidentally introduced from Asia and first discovered in Pennsylvania in 2014, this highly destructive species has been steadily advancing across the region. Its appetite for trees and commercially important crops has made it a threat to our forests and farmlands, with vineyards and orchards the hardest hit.

To help tackle this growing problem, Great Hollow is supporting and working with Columbia University graduate student, Coco Deng, and professors, Bekka Brodie and Malcolm Rosenthal, to unravel the spotted lanternfly's unusual communication system and hopefully exploit it to develop more effective trapping methods. Instead of relying on sound or scent, lanternflies send signals through vibrations. Previous work by Dr. Brodie suggests their preference for certain plant species may be related to how well vibrations travel across the plants' surfaces. Our team is now investigating when and where lanternflies produce vibrations, how this behavior changes through their life cycle, and how well different plant species conduct the signals. By decoding this hidden language, the hope is to turn the lanternfly's own communication system against it, laying the groundwork for new kinds of control strategies that could help curb the invasion. Data collection for the study kicked off in the fall of 2025, coinciding with the time of year when adult lanternflies are mating, laying eggs, and feeding heavily on trees and vines. Using a device called a vibrometer (photo below), Coco has been eavesdropping on the lanternflies to compare vibration intensity and frequency across various native and non-native tree species. So far, she has observed that on medium-sized trees, the insects mostly stay on the trunk, while on larger trees, they tend to congregate on branches. Preliminary results suggest this choice may be related to vibration transmission. Next summer, the team will expand the research to more tree species, more locations, and different life-stages of the lanternfly to better understand how its tree preferences and communication change over space and time.

Graduate research assistant, Coco Deng, measuring the vibrations of spotted lanternflies.

2025 Summer Internship

Great Hollow's summer internship program allows college students and recent graduates to gain hands-on experience in ecological research and land stewardship. Each summer our interns contribute to nearly every aspect of our operations, from collecting data for field studies to maintaining trails, facilities, and animal enclosures. Their enthusiasm, curiosity, and dedication make an enormous difference to our research and the smooth running of Great Hollow during our busiest season.

In 2025, we were fortunate to have Eliza Wein join us as a research intern to assist with our study of the effects of New England cottontail habitat management on plants, insects, birds, and bats. Working closely with Great Hollow scientists, Eliza helped collect and analyze data that will shed light on how habitat enhancement efforts for this rare rabbit species influence broader ecological communities. Her days in the field often included identifying plants, conducting insect and bird surveys, and processing acoustic recordings of bats to identify them to species. She also got to assist with our field research on high-elevation birds in Vermont, monitor our nest-box colony of tree swallows at Great Hollow, and use her taxidermy skills to start a teaching specimen collection of salvaged birds for our education programs.

Eliza had recently completed her undergraduate degree in environmental sustainability at Cornell University, where she developed a strong interest in ornithology and wildlife conservation. "My internship at Great Hollow gave me an incredible and fulfilling opportunity to participate in conservation science and study how habitat management for a single species can ripple through biological communities," Eliza reflected. "I learned a lot of new field techniques that will benefit me in my career, and I'm grateful to have been part of a project that will contribute to real conservation outcomes."

Eliza's attention to detail and positive attitude made her an essential member of our team throughout the summer. We thank her for her hard work and dedication. Eliza is currently applying to graduate programs and we look forward to seeing where her passion for conservation science leads her next.

Eco-Discovery Camp

Eco-Discovery Camp was as popular as ever this year. Nearly 100 different children spent part of their summer with us, engaging in hands-on science activities, STEM-based arts and crafts, and outdoor exploration. Our nine weekly sessions featured the return of some perennial favorites, such as Survival Week and Water Exploration Week, in addition to new themes that were instantly a big hit. The previous summer, campers had suggested we try a Harry Potter-themed week, and our counselors and campers then spent days dreaming up creative ways to tie Harry Potter to a science curriculum. This laid the foundation for what eventually became 2025's most popular session—Magical Minds Week. Campers were sorted into "houses" named after famous scientists, such as Copernicus and Cousteau, made slime in "potions class," got a close-up visit from one of our resident owls, dissected owl pellets, crafted their own wands, and even played some spirited games of Quidditch (photo above). A great time was had by all!

We also saw a record number of CITs participate in our camp this summer, and more than half of them were former campers who aged out but just couldn't leave Eco-Discovery Camp behind. For these CITs, just like many of our active campers, Great Hollow offers a familiar home away from home where they can reconnect not only with nature but with the close friends they had made at our camp over the years. Preparations for the 2026 camp season are already underway, and we are looking forward to seeing many familiar faces and welcoming in many new ones. See you next summer!

Community Engagement

Great Hollow's community events and outreach programs are designed to bring families together for unique experiences that blend fun, learning, and connection for all ages. This year, favorites like Hollow Fest and Jazz Night were back by popular demand, and joined by exciting new additions such as the Earth Day Extravaganza. It's always great to see familiar faces coming to these events again and again, in addition to the many folks who are discovering Great Hollow for the first time.

This year's events spanned a wide range of topics and interests, from guided hikes and bird banding demonstrations to maple sugaring and educational "walk-and-talk" programs on everything from forest ecology to pollinators to invasive plants. We also got crafty with "DIY and Wine" nights, such as holiday wreath-making, which were as popular as ever. Whatever your curiosity, there was something for everyone to enjoy.

The Juried Art Show returned for its 8th consecutive year, celebrating the many ways creativity and the natural world intertwine. This event has grown in size and popularity year over year, with 2025's show the biggest yet. More than 130 remarkable works were exhibited over the three-day show. A fun addition was a special section of children's artwork made by Great Hollow campers and attendees of our Creative Spring Break program that we provide for free to Danbury families thanks to a grant from the Cultural Alliance of Western CT. A huge thank-you goes to the show's coordinator, Linda Hubbard, whose dedication and passion continue to elevate the show each year, and to co-chair Phyllis Chadwick and the hardworking team of organizers: Christy Bonaiuto, Carolyn Cohen, Jeff Ginsburg, Karen Golden, Susan Locke, John O'Donnell, and Masumi O'Donnell. We also extend our appreciation to judges Ned Reade for paintings and Lori Adams for photography, and to the many local businesses that generously contributed prizes for the artists (see Acknowledgements, p. 20). Congratulations to the first-place honorees, Betty Ann Madeiros for painting, and Susan Locke for photography.

We're incredibly thankful to everyone who attended and supported our 2025 community events, and we can't wait to share more exciting opportunities with you in the year ahead!

Celebrating Staff Achievements

Great Hollow is proud to celebrate three outstanding members of our team for their professional development and career advancements this year. Education Director, Tara Ewers (above left), received her master's degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology from Clemson University. The two-year remote program covered a wide range of subjects, including invasive species management, restoration ecology, conservation biology, and environmental education. She also earned a certificate in GIS Applications for Natural Resources, adding valuable technical skills in mapping and spatial analysis to her expertise. Tara has already been applying her new knowledge to Great Hollow's ongoing research on spotted lanternflies and wood turtles, and the development of new summer camp curricula. We were thrilled to see her hard work and dedication pay off. Congratulations, Tara!

We also extend our congratulations to Ben Lee (above right), Great Hollow's Naturalist and Steward, who recently completed his Master Woodland Manager certificate through the Connecticut Forest & Park Association. This intensive year-long program provides participants with the tools and knowledge to effectively manage Connecticut's forests for long-term health and resilience. The coursework spans topics such as forest ecology, wildlife habitat enhancement, and chainsaw safety, and is taught by some of the state's leading forestry and wildlife experts. Ben's achievement reflects his deep commitment to forest stewardship and conservation. Congratulations, Ben, on this well-deserved certification! We're incredibly proud to have such dedicated and talented professionals on our team, helping advance Great Hollow's mission of conservation, research, and education every day.

We are pleased to also share that our post-doctoral research fellow, Dr. Sarah Deckel, landed a permanent position as the Director of Bird Conservation for the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. In her new role, Sarah will lead Audubon's science-based initiatives to monitor and conserve bird populations across her home state of Rhode Island. She will work closely with colleagues and partners to advance research, communication, and advocacy efforts that inform habitat management and climate adaptation strategies. Post-doctoral fellowships like the one Sarah completed at Great Hollow are intended to bridge the transition from graduate training to a professional career, and we are thrilled to see her take this exciting next step. Congratulations, Sarah! We are grateful for your time at Great Hollow and wish you great success in your new leadership role.

Volunteer Spotlight

Volunteers are an invaluable part of Great Hollow's workforce, and we are fortunate to have had so many people from our local communities offer their time and skills to our needs over the years. Here, we recognize two of these volunteers for their outstanding contributions to Great Hollow in 2025.

Dayne Kepler (right) generously volunteered three weeks of her time in June to help us collect data on plants, insects, birds, and bats for our study of how these groups are affected by habitat management for the New England cottontail. Dayne joined us for some long, hot, and tick-infested days of field work that started as early as 5 AM so she could gain her first experience with field biology and learn several field techniques. While working towards her master's degree in Biology at the University of Bridgeport, Dayne was looking for extracurricular, field-based learning opportunities to supplement the program's offerings. We were thrilled to be able to provide her with that opportunity and, at the same time, we benefited greatly from her assistance with the project. Dayne is currently wrapping up her master's and considering applying to PhD programs, and we wish her the best in her graduate studies and future career.

Frank Yulo (below) is a retired science teacher who has generously volunteered an abundance of time helping us manage our preserve. From removing invasive plants and brush-mowing our meadow to repairing and donating myriad landscaping equipment, Frank has become an integral part of our property maintenance and land stewardship activities over the past year plus. Among his many skills, Frank is also a beekeeper and maintains several active hives at Great Hollow. Although he doesn't like the spotlight, we couldn't help calling out the immense help to us that he is. Thank you, Frank!

WITH THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Great Hollow is grateful to the donors, members, local businesses, volunteers, and program participants whose support in 2025 furthered our efforts to advance environmental science, education, and conservation in Connecticut and beyond.

A major donation was made this year by the Ada Howe Kent Foundation, a long-time supporter of Great Hollow, for which we express our deepest gratitude. Other generous donations were made by Julie Burnett-Toscano, the Amy McIntosh/ Jeffrey Toobin Charitable Foundation, Friends of the Great Swamp, the Gerow Cemetery Association, the Goldring Family Foundation, Kevin Heffernan, Fred Jacobs, Kathleen Kean, Jeff Kilberg, Stephen Schneider, Collette Shulman, Tiffany Victor, Paul Wolansky, Richard Zenk, and many anonymous supporters. Symbolic adoptions of our non-releasable birds of prey were kindly made by Jennifer Donovan, Isabel Emmet, Diane D'Isidori, the New Fairfield High School Environmental Club, Wolfgang and Margot Streckenbach, and Paul Richer in loving memory of his mother Julia H. Evans.

Grants were received from the Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut in support of our free spring break art program for Danbury youth, and the New Fairfield Community Thrift Shop for new office computer equipment and new signage around the preserve.

We thank Linda Hubbard, Phyllis Chadwick, Christy Bonaiuto, Carolyn Cohen, Jeff Ginsburg, Karen Golden, Susan Locke, John O'Donnell, and Masumi O'Donnell for organizing the 2025 Juried Art Show, Ned Reade and Lori Adams for serving as show jurors, Friends of the Great Swamp for loaning their display panels, and the Sherman Artists Association for financial support of the show. Winners' prizes were kindly donated by Eagle-level sponsor ($200+) the Sherman IGA, Owl-level sponsors ($100-199) the Barn Gallery & Frame Shop and Ed Schaffer, and Heron-level sponsors (up to $99) Agway of New Milford, American Pie Company, Bank Street Theater, Biscotti's, The Blue Olive, Bruno's Pizzeria, Claire's Garden Center, LAND Gallery, Limoncello Restaurant, New Milford Fitness and Aquatics Club, Putnam Diner, Sacred Grounds Coffee Roasters, Sherman Wine & Spirits, and Twisters Ice Cream Café.

Additional friends of Great Hollow who volunteered their valuable time to help with events, stewardship, property maintenance, research, or raptor care included Mary Bower, George Buck, Buster Comaskey, Grayson Dawson, George Gibson, Claudia Henry, Claire Hoffner, the Immaculate High School Youth Volunteer Corps, Dayne Kepler, Peter Krupenye, Phoebe McCartney, the New Fairfield High School Environmental Club, Eileen Tannenbaum, Maeve Turk, the WCSU Day of Service team, and Frank Yulo. We also extend our sincerest thanks to Dr. David Gropper for volunteering as our camp physician for the eighth straight year, and Stella Angel, Bethany Archiere, Ema Balidemaj, Sasha Belkin, Izzy Bova, Eden Bruzinski, Sophia Cozart, Sohum Dash, Johnathan Gerardi, George Gibson, Anastasia Imbert, Aimee Lippman, Nora Paninski, Eden Pitt, Stella Tardie, Robert Taylor, Kailyn Walsh, and Amy Zeilnhofer for their help with camp as counselors-in-training.

We thank Aidan Mattiace of Boy Scout Troop 142 for repairing the subfloor and deep cleaning the gravel in our red-tailed hawk enclosure for his Life Project. We also thank Scouts, George Gibson and Gabriel Areklett, for building nest boxes and for assisting with invasive plant removal.

Finally, we recognize our members for their ongoing support and commitment to keeping Great Hollow going strong:

Left: Aidan Mattiace and Troop 142 after helping deep-clean and repair the sub-floor of our red-tailed hawk enclosure.
Right: New Fairfield High School Environmental Club volunteers helping prepare our vegetable garden for spring.

2025 MEMBERS

Merritt Club

Gary Goldring | Stuart Orsher | Henry and Sabine Renard | Amy McIntosh and Jeffrey Toobin

Quaker Brook Club

Donald and Cindy Tanenbaum | Paul and Jane Wolansky

Sponsor

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Individual

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