

Connecticut Audubon Society to Develop Conservation & Management Plan for Aspetuck Land Trust's Trout Brook Valley Preserve

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Aspetuck Land Trust (ALT) announced plans in October this year to work with the Connecticut Audubon Society (CAS) to develop an adaptive management and conservation strategy for the Trout Brook Valley Preserve. The objective is to gather information to help ALT maintain Trout Brook Valley in a natural state while simultaneously supporting its public use goal encouraging passive recreational use and enjoyment of the property. CAS is delighted to be able to partner with ALT in this important project.

Over the course of a year, biologists and staff from the CAS Science and Conservation Office will carry out surveys to detect the presence of threatened, endangered or otherwise at-risk species in the Trout Brook Valley Preserve and to identify sensitive habitat areas contained within the preserve's forested uplands.

Within the 1,009 acre preserve spanning Weston and Easton are vernal pools, shrub swamps, talus slopes, grasslands and other specialized habitats harboring plant and animal species. These species are uniquely dependent on these biological 'islands' within an otherwise largely forested area intersected by a 22 mile trail network. The trails were laid out gradually over the last 12 years often without knowledge of these special microenvironments.

Risks of Disappearing Species

These specialized habitat pockets tend to be the first to disappear or become degraded when environmental pressure increases. The species that rely on them generally disappear simultaneously. Due to their very specific environmental requirements and because of the overall scarcity of the habitats they occupy, these specialized plants and animals tend to be rare and in need of protection.

We already know that the Trout Brook Valley preserve is home to some species included in Connecticut's Endangered and Threatened Species Act. We believe there are more to be found.

Across the state, Connecticut forests are gradually becoming more homogeneous with reduced species diversity and increasing numbers of invasive species. At the same time rarer, more sensitive habitats and species slowly disappear. Highly adaptable plants and animals that can survive in a wide variety of habitats are very able to expand their range. These are the kinds of species that one tends to see in yards, parks and other areas associated with development – starlings, pigeons, squirrels, raccoons, coyotes, etc. Without careful land management, all our natural forests are at risk of becoming impoverished carbon copies of such disturbed habitats.

Importantly, this process takes place while the overall habitat may still look like a forest to the untrained observer. Effectively, more sensitive species are driven to extinction under our very noses! The quality

and functionality of an area can be irreversibly damaged if no careful management and conservation strategy is put in place to maintain and protect healthy species and habitat diversity.

Meeting ALT's Stewardship Goals

A carefully designed management and conservation plan based on relevant survey data will allow ALT to carry out its stewardship goal of maintaining the Trout Brook Valley Preserve in a natural state in a way that balances the need for protection of the area's resources, plants and animals. Simultaneously, the study findings will help ALT fulfill its commitment to provide open space for passive recreational use and enjoyment of the property. Currently TBV recreational regulated uses include hiking, dog walking, mountain biking, hunting, fishing, and horseback riding. Off leash hiking with dogs has been suspended for a year while the CAS study is carried out.

The surveys carried out in the preserve will span an entire year starting September 2011 and concluding in October 2012 to ensure complete coverage of all seasons (not all plants and animals are visible year-round). This prolonged survey period will also allow Connecticut Audubon Society staff to evaluate a wide variety of factors that could potentially affect the preserve's future health. These include the spread of invasive plants, plant diseases and pests, to the location of the existing trails and the management practices used to maintain sections of the property.

Throughout the year we believe there will be opportunities for interested members of the public to directly help us and participate in the surveys. Please stay tuned for more information!

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