

NEWS FROM THE ADIRONDACKS SPRING/SUMMER 2024

---

# Adirondacks Update

**“Follensby Pond links the deepest roots of conservation in America to the most advanced scientific thinking about the preservation of our natural resources in the face of climate change.”**

**- John Ernst, former trustee, The Nature Conservancy in the Adirondacks**

## **HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NATURE CONSERVANCY:**

A Second-Chance Wilderness  
Charting the Course for Historic  
Conservation Outcomes  
The Freshwater Imperative

---

## **CONNECT WITH NATURE:**

[nature.org/newyork](https://nature.org/newyork)

**BOARD MEMBERS**

Sarah Underhill  
*Chair*

Emily L. Brittan  
*Vice Chair*

Charles O. Svenson  
*Treasurer*

Peter S. Paine, Jr.  
*Secretary*

Frances Beinecke  
Michael Bettmann  
Stephen H. Burrington  
Kristofer Covey

Hannah Darrin  
Peter J. Falco

Jenny Liu  
Elizabeth McLanahan  
Amy Vedder, Ph.D.

Takeyce Walter

# Dear Friends of the Adirondacks,



© Ken Aaron

We are celebrating a major milestone in Adirondack conservation and one that could have global impact.

We've owned and studied Follensby Pond for many years. Now, we've partnered with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to protect this unique and threatened freshwater ecosystem while offering opportunities for recreation.

**This historic agreement establishes a first-of-its-kind freshwater research preserve, provides new public access for recreation along the Raquette River, and recognizes the long-standing relationships that Indigenous Peoples have with the region.**

Under this agreement, The Nature Conservancy retains ownership of the property, which it has stewarded for over 15 years, and New York State acquires two conservation easements—one for the Follensby Pond area and one for the Raquette River area. Together, they constitute one of the largest land protection projects in recent years in New York State. The pond easement pilots a collaborative approach to conserving freshwater ecosystems in a changing climate. The river easement offers new opportunities for hiking, camping, picnicking, hunting and fishing on lands that have been historically off limits to the public.

This is a critical time for conservation, and we need to be creative in addressing new challenges related to climate change and rapid biodiversity loss around the world. Freshwater ecosystems are some of the most threatened on Earth; in fact, freshwater plants and animals have declined by 83% since 1970. And earlier this year, a study by Cornell University found that only about 5% of Adirondack lakes may continue to maintain water that is cold and oxygenated enough to support cold-water fish species.

Follensby Pond is unique because it has cold, deep and highly oxygenated waters, and as a result, it ranks among the five most climate-resilient trout lakes in the Northeast. And since this body of water has remained relatively untouched for more than a century, it serves as an excellent reference site for understanding the natural dynamics of cold-water plants and animals, especially as our climate changes.

Together, we have protected Follensby Pond in perpetuity for future generations. We could not have done it without the tireless efforts and generosity of our staff, board members, partners and longtime supporters. There is much to celebrate in this historic agreement, but this is just the beginning of a new phase for Follensby Pond. We can't wait to get to work with our partners and the community to realize this shared vision.

Sincerely,

Peg R. Olsen  
Director

Sarah Underhill  
Chair



The Nature Conservancy is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) international membership organization. Its mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

The Nature Conservancy meets all of the Standards for Charity Accountability established by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance. The BBB Wise Giving Alliance is a national charity watchdog affiliated with the Better Business Bureau.

Printed on 100% PCW recycled, process chlorine-free paper, creating the following benefits:

**3.8** # trees preserved for the future  
**287.0** gallons water saved

**556.4** lbs. CO<sub>2</sub> prevented

# A Second-Chance Wilderness

---

The Adirondacks are sometimes called “the second-chance wilderness” because the land has recovered from widespread logging. They are a testament to the healing that can happen when people commit to prioritizing nature. The Nature Conservancy has been caring for Follensby Pond since we acquired the property from the McCormick family in 2008. Today, our creative agreement with New York State represents a once-in-a-lifetime chance to carry out a novel approach to preservation that builds on the legacy of the Adirondack Park as a proving ground for conservation.

The predominant narrative of European settlers was that the Adirondacks were never permanently inhabited by Indigenous Peoples, but there is now an understanding that the historical portrayal of the Adirondacks as an empty wilderness is inaccurate. Some of that evidence comes from near Follensby Pond. The Penobscot, Abenaki, Oneida and Mohawk Nations are all known to have hunted, fished and lived in this region. An old portage trail, extending from Upper Saranac Lake to Stony Creek Ponds, still carries the name Indian Carry Road, and there are indications that the carry reached all the way to the Raquette River at the northeast border of the Follensby Pond tract.

Follensby holds additional historical value as the site of the 1858 Philosophers’ Camp, where Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Stillman and other prominent 19th-century thinkers

spent a month immersed in nature—an experience that influenced a new conservation movement. But soon after, stories of the Philosophers’ gathering spread, and people began to flock to the Adirondacks. Maps pointed the way to Follensby, which became overrun with tourists. In addition, several private timber companies owned Follensby Pond in the 1800s and early 1900s and, reportedly, some of their logging practices devastated parts of the surrounding forests. When one of the original 10 philosophers returned to the site in 1884, he wrote that all around were “ashes and ruin.”

Today, the land has recovered and offers lessons on resilience. Follensby was one of the last places in the Adirondack Park with nesting bald eagles. By the 1960s, the eagle population had plummeted due to the use of the now-banned pesticide DDT, and only one pair remained in New York. This once-endangered bird’s populations have since rebounded thanks in part to the DEC’s introduction of bald eagles at Follensby that were brought in from Alaska in the 1980s. Follensby was selected as the sole site in the Adirondacks because of its abundant habitat and lack of human disturbance. As many as 60 eaglets were released at Follensby over several years.

The story of Follensby Pond is one of inspiration, near ruin, restoration and the chance to repair relationships with the land—and its future offers something for everyone.



A bald eagle with two chicks © Marian McSherry/TNC

# Charting the Course for Historic Conservation Outcomes

Since acquiring the Follensby Pond property in 2008, The Nature Conservancy has learned so much about this extraordinary 14,600-acre landscape. With so many important attributes and opportunities, it presented a conservation puzzle at first. By working closely with the DEC and consulting other partners, we developed a plan that would benefit all New Yorkers and achieve The Nature Conservancy's mission of conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends.

## Collaborative Research to Address Climate Change

The conservation easement covering Follensby Pond and surrounding lands will establish an 8,660-acre freshwater research preserve that will be a reference site for monitoring and addressing the impacts of climate change while providing a refuge for cold-water fish and other aquatic plants and animals.

To achieve the research potential here, DEC and The Nature Conservancy are establishing a public-private consortium, whose other partners include Cornell University, Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey. The partners will collaborate on novel research and guide the ecological care of the freshwater research preserve.

Follensby Pond will serve as a living laboratory and as a lifeboat for cold-water species in the face of climate change; it will be a destination for scientists worldwide.

## New Public Access and Recreational Opportunities

The second easement, which covers nearly 6,000 acres of the river portion of the property, will allow public access—for the first time in over a century—along 10 miles of the Raquette River. This section of the Raquette River is part of the iconic Northern Forest Canoe Trail and a portion of the longest canoe route in the Adirondacks, which runs 90 miles between Old Forge and Saranac Lake. It includes a beautiful and extensive stretch of silver maple floodplain forest and other wild areas that have been historically off limits to the public.

Opening the western shore of the Raquette River along this segment will provide new camping, hunting and fishing opportunities. Anglers will be able to explore Moose Creek and Beaver Brook, which offer outstanding brook trout fishing, and hunters will have the opportunity to access new, remote terrain.



Nature Conservancy staff members at Follensby Pond. © John DiGiacomo

*“2023 saw higher temperatures on this planet than in at least 125,000 years; that’s the context for this important announcement that climate researchers will be able to make use of a crucial record of the past, with huge implications for the future.”*

–Bill McKibben,  
author, educator and  
environmentalist

### **Restoring Indigenous Relationships with the Land**

Another historic aspect of the easements is that they provide the opportunity for Indigenous Peoples' cultural activities. Ultimately, restored relationships with this land will be shaped by Indigenous perspectives and priorities. Through our new Indigenous Partnerships Program in New York and in partnership with SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, The Nature Conservancy has been co-creating a more honest narrative of Indigenous Peoples' relationship with Follensby Pond. We are also restoring Indigenous Peoples' access to and caretaking of their ancestral homelands. This effort aims to give a voice to Indigenous perspectives in interpretation, education and stewardship practices at Nature Conservancy preserves and recognizes Traditional Ecological Knowledge as an integral approach to climate resilience.

### **Enriching Educational Experiences**

The Nature Conservancy is committed to providing educational experiences at Follensby that foster a deeper understanding of the critical role nature plays in our everyday lives. The renowned Wild Center is just a mile down the road from Follensby and has been at the forefront of climate change education. By collaborating with The Wild Center and other organizations, The Nature Conservancy will develop educational and interpretive opportunities that inspire future advocates for nature.

*“There is growing evidence from all around the world that biodiversity flourishes under Indigenous stewardship. With our partners, we look forward to creating opportunities for a productive collaboration between Traditional Ecological Knowledge and conservation science based on mutual respect, reciprocity and shared access. Land care which reflects Indigenous perspectives and priorities has the potential to enhance the well-being of land and cultures in the extraordinary landscape of Follensby Pond.”*

—Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, Director of SUNY's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment



SUNY ESF leads a discussion on the Philosophers' Camp at the site of the 1858 gathering. © Erika Bailey

# The Freshwater Imperative

For all of nature, water is life. Rivers, lakes, wetlands, springs and water found beneath the ground, like aquifers, collect, store and deliver the water that makes Earth a living planet. Freshwater systems are hardworking—they feed and bring people together, sustain the planet’s biodiversity, and increase resilience to climate change.

But freshwater ecosystems are in trouble. For too long and in too many places, the unique challenges and needs of freshwater ecosystems have been ignored or undervalued. It was once assumed that conserving terrestrial habitats would address the needs of freshwater. We now know this approach is not enough.

Freshwater systems are on the brink of collapse. We’ve overextracted, overfished and overengineered these ecosystems. Deforestation, fragmentation from dams, unsustainable farming and fishing, and unchecked pollution are only adding to the damaging impacts caused by accelerating climate change.

The urgency to better protect our world’s dwindling freshwater ecosystems is now absolute. The well-being of humans is inextricably linked with our world’s climate and natural systems. Thus, our solutions must be equally interconnected and catalytic.



An eDNA analysis at the Boquet River © John DiGiacomo



The Raquette River runs alongside 10 miles of the Follensby Pond Protected area. © John DiGiacomo

That's why across the Adirondacks we are:

- **Protecting and Restoring Freshwater Ecosystems**

We're implementing long-term protection efforts by creating a 8,660-acre freshwater research preserve at The Nature Conservancy's Follensby Pond property to both conserve and study this incredible freshwater system, ensuring it remains healthy and resilient so it can inform the conservation of cold-water ecosystems around the globe. In addition to the ecologically unique lake, the Follensby landscape includes 1,400 acres of wetlands that sustain a rich biodiversity. Wildlife such as moose, black bear, common loons, and lake trout rely on the healthy forests and fresh waters found here.

- **Ensuring That Rivers Flow Freely**

For over a decade, we've been modifying or removing obsolete dams and culverts, restoring natural flows and reconnecting river systems in the Adirondacks. Now we're partnering with several Adirondack agencies and organizations to plan for the release of Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act funds. The goal of these efforts is to define clear projects and programs so that Bond Act decision makers can bring funds to the region for these infrastructure improvements. We have also created a list of the "top 10" priority road-stream crossings with municipalities in the Lake Champlain Basin to help them direct this influx of public funds to the most critical projects.

- **Building Resilient Watersheds**

We've taken a comprehensive approach to boosting the resiliency of the Boquet River watershed by working to restore the natural river system. Restoration will protect freshwater habitat for fish and other species while reducing the threat of flooding to our communities. We're focusing on the North Branch of the Boquet, which provides cold-water habitat for brook trout and the best existing and potential spawning habitat for salmon. Together with partners, we identified 13 stream barriers that needed upgrading or replacing, and have addressed six of them so far. This will result in an additional gain of more than 90 miles of river habitat. We've raised over \$1.2 million in critical funds needed for this important work. And we've also identified the most important land to conserve to help maintain or improve the river's water quality. Recently, in partnership with the Adirondack Land Trust and a local landowner, we protected 290 acres through a conservation easement. To increase the pace and scale of this work, we helped establish the Boquet River Partnership that will identify opportunities to make an even bigger impact in the watershed.

In the face of these complex challenges and recognizing that freshwater ecosystems are connected to nearly all aspects of our work, we are determined to protect and restore freshwater systems at unprecedented scales.

That's why we've protected Follensby Pond for future generations and continue to form new partnerships and develop groundbreaking solutions to some of our biggest freshwater challenges.



A right-sized culvert replacement in Jay, New York, reconnects habitat and prevents flooding. © John DiGiacomo



 facebook/tncny

 twitter@nature\_ny



A painting of Follensby Pond by Adirondack Board of Trustees member Takeyce Walter © John DiGiacomo

## A Shared Legacy

---

Through the incredible work of a dedicated, hard-working team and with the help of our supporters, we are celebrating a historic agreement with New York State that strikes a thoughtful balance, achieves historic conservation outcomes and sets several important precedents.

This marks the beginning of a new chapter for Follensby Pond. Stay tuned to learn more about this storied landscape, explore new recreation areas and support the future of Follensby Pond.

To read more about Follensby Pond, visit [nature.org/newyork](http://nature.org/newyork)