

NEW YORK UPDATE | SPRING/SUMMER | 2024

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# Together, We Find a Way.

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# A Big Win For Conservation For All New Yorkers



© Jonathan Grassi

Dear Friend,

I continue to be so grateful for your invaluable support and inspired by the remarkable results we're achieving, together with our dedicated team and partners.

Working with the New York Department of Environmental Conservation and other partners, we conserved the inimitable Follensby property, nestled deep in the Adirondacks. This landmark agreement, 16 years in the making and one of the largest in New York State history, protects 14,600 acres, establishes a first-of-its-

kind freshwater research preserve, opens nearly 6,000 acres to new public access for recreation, and recognizes the long-term relationships that Indigenous Peoples have with the region. This tremendous conservation milestone demonstrates what we can achieve, together.

Follensby is a place of legend, where generations of Indigenous Peoples lived before Europeans arrived, where the famous Philosophers' Camp was held in the 19th century and where bald eagles were reintroduced in New York State. This storied landscape features a 102-foot-deep lake containing abundant freshwater-dependent species, which this conservation agreement will help protect. It will also serve as a living laboratory for researchers and a refuge for species in the face of climate change.

As you'll read in this issue, the protection of Follensby will help us achieve lasting conservation with far-reaching impacts. It is the first-ever conservation easement in New York history that specifically identifies climate change as part of our reality and expresses the need to create a science consortium to inform both the ecological management of the preserve and the research agenda.

Since time immemorial, Follensby has been part of Haudenosaunee and Abenaki ancestral lands. Our ongoing collaboration with SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment on biocultural Re-Storyation reflects our commitment to reconnect Indigenous Peoples to their ancestral lands and give voice to their perspectives and stewardship practices. The conservation easement provides opportunities for Indigenous Peoples' cultural activities on the property and sets an example for future open space protection projects.

Conserving our natural world is an investment in ourselves and a commitment to pass down a planet teeming with life and wonder to future generations. Whether by exploring a new trail or volunteering for a local conservation project, I hope you can enjoy the many gifts of nature and the wild places right here in New York that stir with the very essence of life.

Thank you.

Bill Ulfelder  
Executive Director  
The Nature Conservancy in New York

# By the Numbers

The Nature Conservancy maintains over 160 stunning preserves across New York State, with a combined total of 79,000 acres. They represent every major habitat type in the state, from the bottomlands in the Great South Bay, to cascading freshwater creeks upstate, to the shores of Lake Ontario. Our preserves are crucial sanctuaries for wildlife and offer fantastic opportunities for recreation.

Here's a glimpse into our preserves:

- 68% of The Nature Conservancy's preserve acreage in New York is within the Resilient and Connected Network. This network is composed of biodiverse lands covering 35% of the United States and representing connected habitat through which species can move to adapt to climate change.
- 250,000 visitors enjoy our preserves each year. Our top five most visited preserves annually are:

Christman Sanctuary:

**34,000**  
visitors

Mashomack:

**30,000**  
visitors

Lisha Kill:

**25,000**  
visitors

Butler:

**18,000**  
visitors

David Weld:

**14,000**  
visitors

Our New York portfolio of preserves encompasses a diverse range of habitats, including:



**Forest preserves.** These lush sanctuaries safeguard woodlands like those surrounding Follensby Pond in the Adirondacks (14,600 acres) and the Catskills' West Branch Preserve (450 acres), which is home to magnificent old pines and hemlocks overlooking a mountain stream.



**Coastal preserves.** From the tidal creeks and salt marshes of Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island (2,350 acres) to the dramatic cliffs and beaches of Montauk Point (585 acres), these areas shelter abundant marine life and coastal birds.



**Freshwater preserves.** The Nature Conservancy protects crucial wetlands and waterways like the Neversink River Preserve (8,000 acres), which provides vital flood control and habitat for migratory birds.



**Grasslands and meadows.** These open spaces, such as the Albany Pine Bush Preserve (2,100 acres), provide homes for rare plants and pollinators.



**Public access.** Many of our New York preserves welcome visitors for hiking, birding, fishing and other recreational activities.

To learn more about specific preserves or to get involved in The Nature Conservancy's work, visit [nature.org/newyork](https://nature.org/newyork)



Nature Conservancy team members from across the state at Mianus River Gorge Preserve in Bedford, NY. Purchased in 1955, this site is The Nature Conservancy's first land preservation project. ©Anthony Graziano

# Follensby Pond: A Unique Freshwater Research Preserve

As waves lap against a sandy shore, a bald eagle soars in the sky. He spots the remnants of an osprey's lunch, left along the water's edge. There isn't much to glean from the carcass, but in nature, nothing is wasted. The graceful eagle dives and his talons touch down in a choreographed landing perfected over years. He makes the act look so simple and effortless. While he feasts, the air is still. The water is silent. Not even the trees sway. And a perceptible calm moves over the landscape.

This is Follensby Pond, a magnificent site where nature holds sway, and the long thread of history connects Indigenous Peoples, philosophy and science.

## A Historic Agreement

Earlier this year, The Nature Conservancy and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation finalized a historic agreement—one that was 16 years in the making—to protect Follensby for future generations. One of the largest deals by acreage ever in New York State, this agreement establishes a first-of-its-kind freshwater research preserve, provides new public access for recreation and recognizes the long-standing relationships that Indigenous Peoples have with the region.

## A Unique Freshwater Research Preserve

Freshwater ecosystems are some of the most threatened on Earth. Monitored freshwater plant and animal populations have declined by 83% since 1970—more than double the rate of decline for terrestrial and marine ecosystems. A new Cornell study shows that only 5% of Adirondack lakes may support cold-water plants and animals in a warming climate.

In this context, Follensby Pond is a freshwater marvel. It is one of the few remaining intact lakes in the lower 48 states that still supports a rare, “old-growth” lake trout population—and it ranks among the five most climate-resilient trout lakes in the northeast.

The Nature Conservancy and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation are establishing a public-private science consortium to collaborate on novel research here and guide the ecological management of this 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 researchers worldwide.



Bald eagles were introduced to Follensby in the 1960s. © Darrell Bodnar



Along the shores of Follensby Pond © Kara Jackson/TNC



The majestic moose is one of the most iconic sights in the Adirondacks. Moose prefer forested habitat with streams and ponds. © Darrell Bodnar

### **New Public Access**

One of the largest wilderness areas in the northeast is on the opposite shore of the property's Raquette River frontage and provides a larger context for lasting conservation. The once-exploited forests of the Adirondacks have recovered to rank among the most intact forests of their type on the planet. This impressive status is thanks to generations of conservation action. It is now our turn to build on this hopeful legacy. And for the first time in over a century, the public will have access to nearly 6,000 acres here.

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

This groundbreaking agreement creates access for Indigenous Peoples' cultural activities. Through our new Indigenous Partnerships Program and in partnership with SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, we have been co-creating a more honest narrative of Indigenous Peoples' relationship with Follensby Pond, as well as restoring access to and caretaking of their ancestral homelands. Ultimately, restored relationships with the land will be shaped by Indigenous perspectives and priorities.

### **A Second-Chance Wilderness**

Follensby Pond holds significant 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 the Philosophers' Camp ended, stories of the gathering spread. People began to flock to the Adirondacks; maps pointed the way to Follensby Pond, which became overrun with tourists. When one of the original 10 philosophers returned to the site in 1884, he wrote that all around were "ashes and ruin."

In modern times, the land has recovered and offers lessons on resilience. In the 1960s, New York's eagle populations had plummeted due to the use of the now-banned pesticide DDT. The New York Department of Environmental Conservation introduced bald eagles at Follensby Pond in the 1980s. This site was selected because of its abundant habitat and lack of human disturbance. Thanks in part to this effort, this once-endangered bird's populations have rebounded.

The Adirondacks are sometimes called "the second-chance wilderness" because the land has recovered from widespread logging. This landscape is a testament to the healing that can happen when people commit to prioritizing nature. Today, The Nature Conservancy's 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.

# From Jaguars to Waterfalls: A Warbler's Northbound Odyssey

A tiny black and white bird with a blazing orange throat perches high in the treetops, watching the largest cat in the Americas prowling in the shadows below. The season is changing, and the Blackburnian warbler feels an urge to leave his winter home in the steamy Peruvian tropics. His mission: to fly 4,000 miles to find a mate and start a family, while living off the bounty of a northern summer filled with insects.

Dozens of species of neotropical migrants like the Blackburnian warbler winter in the tropics, between Florida and Bolivia, and spend their summers in North America's Appalachian Mountains. These millions of birds depend on insects to live. Their arduous journeys are filled with hazards, including predators, bad weather, skyscrapers with deadly glass windows and a lack of stopover habitat.

Fortunately, The Nature Conservancy's network of preserves offer refuge, shelter, clean water and ample food. Several

hundred sites, including 160 preserves in New York alone, are critical migration stopovers as these tiny jewels make their seasonal expeditions.

The spring destination for many migrants is the Appalachians, which stretch from the hills of Alabama north into Canada, with New York as a key connecting point. Together, let's imagine what this extraordinary northbound flight might be like.

The Blackburnian warbler survives a stormy trip across the Gulf of Mexico, then settles in before dawn for a life-saving rest on the Georgia coast. He falls asleep next to a whip-poor-will who makes her spring home in The Nature Conservancy's Calverton Ponds Preserve on Long Island. A cluster of monarch butterflies, similar to the thousands he saw gliding north in Mexico, vibrate their wings to stay warm as they prepare to fly to Moody Forest Preserve in Georgia.



A striking orange and black male Blackburnian warbler © Ray Hennessy



© Larisa Shpineva



Monarch butterflies roost together during migration. © Gomez David



A family eagerly watches for birds during spring migration. © Paul Bradbury

After traveling through the southern Appalachians for weeks, often flying all night and into the morning, the winged wonder lands in Virginia's highlands. He's joined by flocks of other neotropical warblers, including bay-breasted, chestnut-sided, and cerulean warblers he met over farmland in North Carolina. They are also joined by several northbound hoary bats whose 16-inch leathery wingspans dwarf those of the warblers and whose sharp white teeth shine in the moonlight. Luckily, hoary bats eat only insects, so bats and birds briefly share the same nocturnal flight.

Just days away from his destination, the Blackburnian makes one last rest-stop in central New York to nap and feed before his final flight north. He lands and recuperates in our West Branch Preserve with hundreds of other colorful (and exhausted) neotropical migrants: orioles, flycatchers, vireos, hummingbirds, thrushes and even a pair of broad-winged hawks that wintered in Venezuela. He rests in forests of maple, oak and pine trees above a fast-moving stream and hunts in the treetops for early-season insects like gnats, flower flies, tiny native bees and tumbling flower beetles.

**Conservation Status** – Most birds are threatened by climate change, and Blackburnian warblers are no exception. Some models predict they could lose 54% of their breeding range if the average global temperature increases by 1.5 degrees Celsius. However, as of 2024 their populations are considered relatively stable. Clearing of their winter forests in South America, human disruptions along their migration route and the effects of climate change on the Appalachians are some of the greatest threats they face.





The jaguar is the biggest cat species in the Americas. © Global Pics

He also practices his bright, high-pitched, buzzy song, throwing his head back, spreading his mouth wide and shaking his chest and sides to throw his song as far as possible from his sunlit perch. For many birders, spring has not arrived until they've witnessed this spectacular show.

Body rested and belly full, he completes his last leg north in May and lands in a towering hemlock. He was born here in Albany County four years ago and has made it back three times to raise a family, each time meeting an equally astounding and well-traveled mate. He's returned to The Nature Conservancy's Hannacroix Ravine Preserve, a 415-acre gem with hemlock, yellow birch, sugar maple and a carpet of native wildflowers in full bloom.

The globe-trotting Blackburnian is finally home. But in just a few months, he and his new family will point their sharp bills south, join millions of other birds and throw themselves into yet another, millennia-old odyssey back to the land of the jaguars.



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A new accessible trail at Wolf Swamp Preserve, Southampton, New York © Anthony Graziano

## OUR TANGIBLE CONSERVATION IMPACT

The Nature Conservancy's New York preserves play a crucial role in many ecosystem functions.

- **Protecting biodiversity:** From iconic species like black bears and bald eagles to rare plants and invertebrates, these sanctuaries provide vital habitat for a multitude of species.
- **Safeguarding water quality:** Forested wetlands and rivers protected by the The Nature Conservancy help filter water, mitigate floods and replenish aquifers.
- **Combating climate change:** Forests and other natural areas absorb carbon dioxide, a harmful greenhouse gas, making them crucial tools in addressing climate change.
- **Connecting people to nature:** Through educational programs and newly expanded public access, we foster an appreciation for the natural world and inspire action for conservation.

By protecting diverse ecosystems and providing opportunities for connection with nature, these preserves ensure a healthier planet for generations to come.