

NEW YORK UPDATE | FALL/WINTER 2024

New York Update

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Conservation Begins at Home



© Jonathan Grassi

Dear Friend,

With your support, The Nature Conservancy is working to create a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature—in New York and around the world.

Lasting change is achieved through strong partnerships with diverse people, organizations and communities. By using science and working together with others, we amplify our collective impact, leverage complementary skills and create solutions that are more effective and sustainable. For example, we’re working with fellow researchers on Gull Island, a seabird colony in Long Island Sound, to study federally endangered roseate terns and other species that rely on healthy waters from New England to Brazil.

In this issue, you’ll read how we are making a tangible difference on the ground, in the water and in the air—often seizing momentum when an individual or community questions the status quo and has the dedication to “be the change.” With your help, we’ll plant trees in NYC and throughout the State, restore wetlands, and ensure cleaner air and cleaner water. With your support, we will see thriving wildlife and healthier communities.




Across New York, we are working tirelessly to influence policymakers and create a better future for all. By working together, we demonstrate that conservation is not just a cause, but a way of life. It’s about caring for our planet, our communities and ourselves. We’re putting our philosophy into action by making major upgrades at our preserves, such as our recently opened, 4-mile shared-use trail at Hickory Ridge Preserve in Naples, New York. The trail (open to hikers, mountain bikers and trail runners) is designed to offer enhanced access to nature while protecting the environment.

As we move forward, we invite you to become even more involved in our work. Sign up to receive monthly conservation news and updates from New York by scanning the QR code below. Follow us on your favorite social media channels. Consider volunteering your time, sharing our mission with your network or attending upcoming events.

Thank you for being an integral part of The Nature Conservancy’s work. Together, we will create a legacy for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Bill Ulfelder'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Bill Ulfelder
Executive Director
The Nature Conservancy in New York

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Accessible Trails in New York Bring Nature Closer to Many

A ribbon of opportunity now winds through Hickory Ridge Preserve. The Nature Conservancy, Genesee Regional Off-road Cyclists, Finger Lakes Trail Conference, and the Town of Naples celebrated the grand opening of a new, 4-mile shared-use trail this spring. This is the first phase of a planned 13-mile system designed to enhance people's access to nature while also protecting the environment.

The trails, open to hikers, mountain bikers and trail runners, replace a previous system of steep and muddy paths. The new routes include 2.8 miles of fully accessible trails for adaptive mountain bikers who use specialized equipment to meet their physical, intellectual, neurological and sensory abilities. The trails are designed to be environmentally friendly, reducing erosion and sediment pollution into a nearby, high-quality trout stream—and also feature an improved crossing over sensitive wetlands.

"The new trail system at Hickory Ridge is one example of how we are working across the state to provide more opportunities for people of all abilities to connect with nature," says Mathew Levine, director of stewardship for

The Nature Conservancy in New York. "By getting more people outdoors in nature, we hope to provide a greater appreciation for the natural world and encourage more people to want to protect it. And by attracting a wider variety of nature enthusiasts to our preserves, we can help educate more communities on the importance of conservation, while also safeguarding these important places for generations to come."

Community input was essential to the trail's design. "Shared-use trails offer a wider range of experiences," says Rob Silker, president of Genesee Regional Off-road Cyclists. "By listening to the community, we were able to create a trail that meets the needs of many."

The Finger Lakes Trail Conference is excited about the project too. "Increased access to sustainable trail systems improves the lives of people in the community," says Nathan Hayes, executive director.

The town of Naples is also thrilled with the new trail. "It highlights what makes Naples so special—access to nature and a strong sense of community," says Sean Sullivan, village board trustee.

The new trail at Hickory Ridge Preserve is open to the public seven days a week, from dawn to dusk.

Visit [nature.org](https://www.nature.org) to learn more about accessible trails at The Nature Conservancy's preserves in New York, including:

- Hickory Ridge Preserve in Naples
- Boquet River Nature Preserve in Willsboro
- Thompson Pond Preserve in Pine Plains
- Uplands Farm Sanctuary in Cold Spring Harbor
- Wolf Swamp Preserve in Southampton
- Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island
- Moss Lake Preserve in Houghton (under construction)



Hickory Ridge Trail Opening 2024 © Anthony Graziano

Spending time in the outdoors is incredibly beneficial for mental and physical health. The Nature Conservancy in New York is helping more people access nature by transforming preserves across the state with accessible infrastructure and trails. New universal trails opened at Wolf Swamp Preserve in Southampton and Uplands Farm Sanctuary in Cold Spring Harbor. We're also installing new trails at Moss Lake Preserve in Houghton and our newly transformed site, Hickory Ridge Preserve in Naples.

Charting a Course for Long Island's Clean Water Future

Since time immemorial, the bounty of the sea has influenced life on Long Island. From Native Americans' use of shells for wampum, to oystering in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the rise of commercial clamming in the 1960s-70s, Long Island's briny treasures are woven into the fabric of local history. Today, shellfishing remains an important cultural touchstone, a way of connecting with the land and sea, often passed down through families like a well-worn clam rake.

An incredible example of this relationship is in Great South Bay, a sprawling estuary along Long Island's south shore that is a vital ecological and economic resource.

Here, locals say, shellfish were once so abundant that one could almost walk across the water from one clam boat to the next, earning it a reputation as the country's "hard clam factory." It wasn't uncommon to find littleneck, cherrystone and chowder clams in abundance, and Great South Bay was the leading producer of these clams on the entire eastern seaboard. This period represented a peak in the clamming industry, with harvests reaching a staggering (and unsustainable) 700,000 bushels in 1976. But over the next decade, this bounty dwindled due to overharvesting and degrading water quality.

In the following decades, nitrogen pollution, primarily from rapid and dense development and polluting septic systems, severely compromised the health of Great South Bay. In 2004, The Nature Conservancy embarked on a transformative journey to restore the bay, beginning with the acquisition of the 13,425-acre Bluepoints Bottomlands.

As the preserve celebrates its 20th anniversary, it's fitting to reflect on the catalytic action our supporters have made possible here and across all New York's waters.

Uncovering the Science of the Problem

The story of Bluepoints Bottomlands is one of unexpected discoveries and a shift in focus. Initially, The Nature Conservancy's goal was to field test a hypothesis: Could rebuilding the clam population in the bay bring it back to life? After years of monitoring, research, and a failed attempt to bring back clams, we learned that to restore the bay, we needed to address an even more insidious challenge: nitrogen pollution leaching from septic systems and fertilizers which were the leading causes of water quality decline. This discovery required a drastic shift in how we approach our work.

"Nitrogen and other pollutants had been leaking into the ground and ultimately flowing to our creeks and bays for decades—causing symptoms like harmful algae blooms that were slowly killing our waters and everything in them," explains Carl LoBue, The Nature Conservancy's oceans



Researchers monitoring shellfish at Bluepoints. © Carl Lobue

director in New York. “It became clear that this wasn’t just a Great South Bay problem, this was a serious threat—and one for us to resolve across Long Island.”

Addressing nitrogen pollution at its source became our highest priority on Long Island. We partnered with state and local governments to develop and implement innovative solutions, work led by our policy team. “Our successful efforts to secure billions of dollars for Long Island water quality is a major step in revitalizing this vital resource,” Long Island Policy Advisory Kevin McDonald explains. One such program helps homeowners pay for infrastructure upgrades by providing tax-free grants to replace polluting systems with clean-water alternatives. Public investments in expanding and improving wastewater infrastructure are essential to reducing the amount of nitrogen pollution entering waterways.

Stemming the Tide on Nitrogen Pollution

Thanks to our supporters, The Nature Conservancy’s work over the past two decades has yielded significant progress.

“What really excites me is thinking about the future and all the community support that exists for not only restoring what has been lost, but creating a healthy bay that will serve as home for people and wildlife for generations to come.”

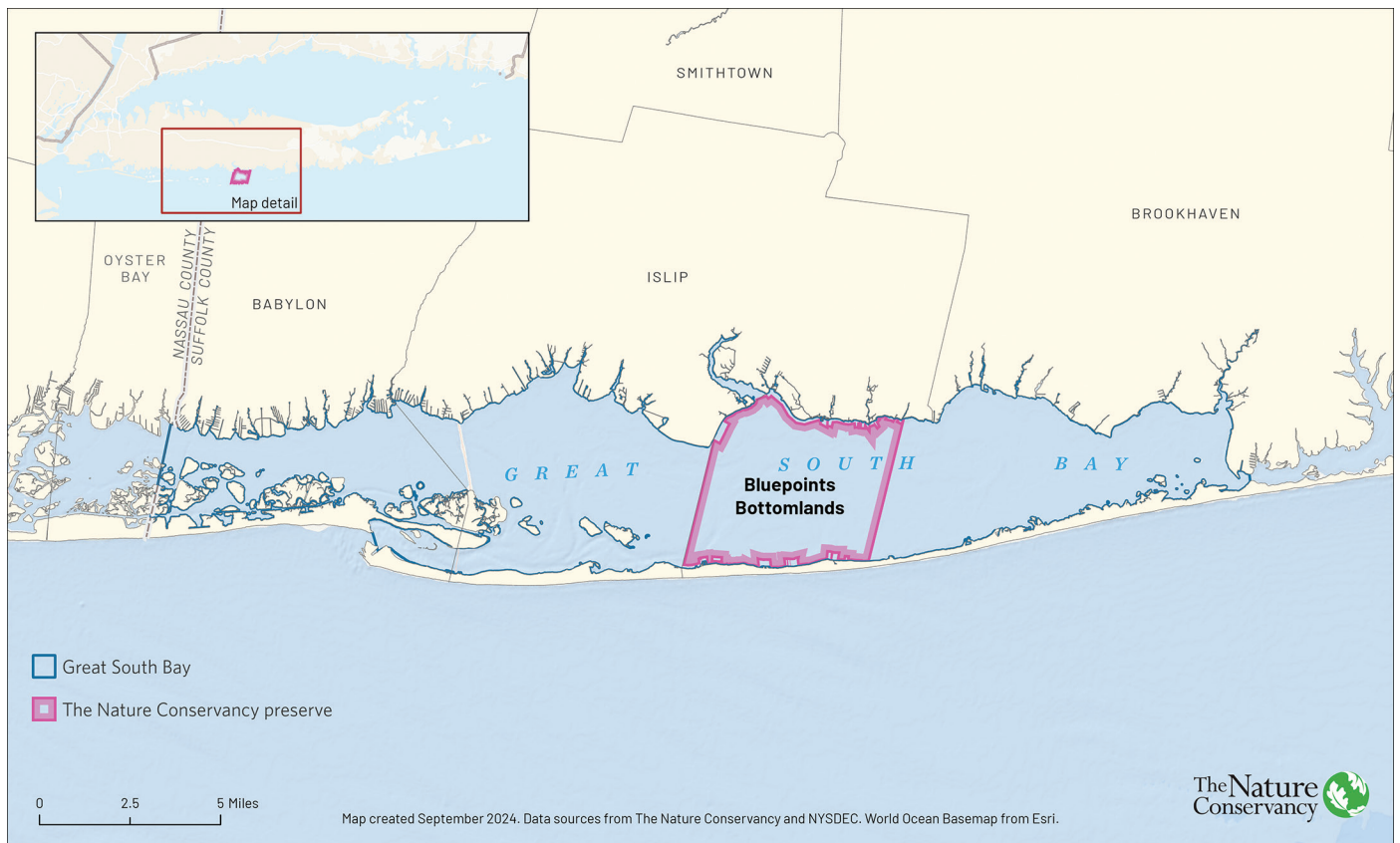
—Carl LoBue, oceans director for
The Nature Conservancy in NY

Through forming partnerships and working in coalitions, we successfully advocated for landmark environmental restoration and policy initiatives and are on a path to secure billions of local, county, state and federal dollars for implementation.

“Our work that began at Bluepoints is an outstanding example of how science can inform action, and how partnerships can make a transformative difference on the ground. We’re at a point now—for the first time in 50 years—that the clean water future we envisioned for Great South Bay is within reach,” says LoBue.

The abundance and diversity of shellfish at Bluepoints is on the rise. We are improving water quality and reducing the risks of fish kills and harmful algal blooms like brown tides. However, the fight for clean water is far from over. Climate change poses new threats, such as rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events.

Our results at Bluepoints extend far beyond the preserve. Locally driven shellfish restoration and restorative shellfish aquaculture initiatives are taking hold across the island. Residents have become more informed about our clean water goals and are championing major sewage treatment plant modernizations and expanded alternate septic system installations across Long Island, the Finger Lakes and Hudson Valley.



Terning the Tides: A Week on Great Gull Island

By Rebecca Kusa, Mashomack Outreach & Volunteer Coordinator

The salty spray stung my cheeks as the research boat deposited me on the rocky shore of Great Gull Island. A cacophony of squawks and screeches assaulted my ears. The sound of so many terns calling was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I was there, on a short assignment, to live with five other researchers and 40,000 terns, helping to document the birds' lives.

My fellow islanders (of the non-feathered variety) were a women-led crew of academics, scientists and conservationists from University of Connecticut, University of Rhode Island, Massachusetts Audubon and the American Museum of Natural History. Some researchers stay on the island for weeks at a time, while others do shorter visits; a supply boat brings a new crew and fresh food each week. Our observation stations were a cluster of weathered blinds hidden amongst rocks, seaside plants and decommissioned military structures. When we arrived, the season was in full swing; tern nests dotted the island, some with eggs nestled amongst pebbles, others with fluffy, downy chicks already exploring their precarious world.

"Chicks scurried under foot with every step I took, literally keeping me on my toes. My eyes swept the ground while their parents called and dived above."

—Rebecca Kusa

The research team's mission for the week: to monitor how many common and roseate tern chicks survived daily and what

they were being fed. The data we collected adds to a larger body of work identifying the marine habitats and forage fish that terns need to successfully raise chicks, led by The Nature Conservancy's Marine Scientist Juliet Lamb.

Every day at dawn, we were each assigned a specific blind, where we sat for two-to-three-hour shifts, meticulously documenting nest activity. Using a spotting scope, we recorded the chicks and parents we saw, identifying them using telemetry (satellite) leg bands they were tagged with earlier in the season by Dr. Lamb and others. Then, we noted what types of fish the chicks were eating (mostly sand lance and herring), what parent was feeding the chick, and what time of day the feedings occurred. These data, which we collect from tern chicks whose parents are tracked using miniature GPS transmitters, will help our scientists assess where the parents forage and for what kind of fish.

Life on Great Gull Island was a constant dance with the elements. The wind whipped incessantly, but there was a beauty to the wildness. When I left the island, the cries of the terns seemed to follow me, a reminder of the incredible week I'd spent in their company. We'd gathered invaluable data about the tern populations, contributing to a long-term study vital for their conservation. And I carried with me a newfound respect for these tireless seafarers, a deeper connection to the natural world, and the knowledge that even the smallest contribution can make a difference in the fight to conserve our planet's diverse inhabitants.



An adult common tern sits on a driftwood log. © Rebecca Kusa/TNC

By the Numbers

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innovation interns are working across the Conservancy, bringing diverse perspectives, backgrounds and skillsets to our challenges. Pulled from an extraordinarily strong applicant pool, coordinated by the New York Division's Innovation Program, they are exceptional undergraduate and graduate students who are helping us tackle the biggest, most complex challenges of our lives—for people and nature.

\$82,000

in grants from the Land Trust Alliance will help Indigenous partners co-develop a "Cultural Provisioning Network" that will increase Indigenous Peoples' access to their ancestral lands. Our Indigenous Partners Program and Stewardship teams will pilot the concept on two preserves. Cultural provisioning refers to the gathering of resources by Indigenous Peoples in relationship with the land. This could range from gathering berries and medicines, to hunting and fishing, to sourcing black ash trees that are essential to basketmaking.

150

member organizations now comprise Forest for All NYC. The group was launched in 2021 to carry forward the vision of the *NYC Urban Forest Agenda*. Developed by a team of nearly 50 organizations, the Agenda is a comprehensive strategic plan to protect, maintain, expand, and promote the urban forest and build a more resilient and equitable New York City.

12

stewardship team members met with field biologists from the New York Natural Heritage Program and Seatuck Environmental Association at Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island for a three-day training on how to conduct small mammal surveys. Our goal is to gather vital data, since the last survey of this kind on Long Island was 50 years ago.




150

pots of native wildflowers were planted with our partners Latino Outdoors and Outdoor Afro along the new universal trail at Uplands Farm Sanctuary in Cold Spring Harbor. The plants included milkweed and bergamot, which are an important food source for pollinators such as bees and butterflies.



Trees help clean and cool the air, and add seasonal beauty. © Kara Jackson/TNC



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With a New York State of Mind and a Heart as Big as Texas

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, a San Antonio native, has worked tirelessly for decades to restore New York's Central Park but has never forgotten her Texas roots. Recently, Rogers and her husband Theodore made the ultimate commitment by creating a private land conservation trust for their nearly 1,000-acre CL Browning Ranch in the Texas Hill Country. This generous donation enabled The Nature Conservancy in Texas to reach an astounding milestone: the conservation of 1 million acres of land in that state.

Barlow Rogers's commitment to conservation goes back decades. She helped found the Central Park Conservancy to support the restoration and renewed management of the park, which had fallen into disrepair, and she served as that organization's president until 1995.

By supporting conservation efforts, individuals and donors are not just protecting nature; they are investing in a sustainable future for all. Every supporter has the potential to be a champion of nature—it all starts with a caring heart.

Friends and family of Elizabeth Barlow Rogers (second from the right) join with colleagues from The Nature Conservancy Texas in a celebration at the Browning Ranch. © Earl Nottingham