

The UNDERSTORY

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOUTHEAST LAND TRUST OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

2026



**CULTIVATING
A FARMING
FUTURE**





The Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire (SELT) saves, shares, and stewards land for the benefit of people and nature in southeast New Hampshire. SELT serves 52 towns and cities of greater Rockingham and Strafford counties and has conserved more than 30,000 acres since 1980, including nature preserves, hiking trails, farmland, and scenic vistas.

SELT relies on its annual contributing members, committed Board of Directors, talented staff, and dedicated volunteers to keep advancing critical conservation initiatives in our region.

Our Mission

To protect and sustain the significant lands in our communities for clean water, outdoor recreation, fresh food, wildlife, and healthy forests.

Our Vision

Conserved lands in every community, sustaining people and nature.

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The Understory is the annual magazine of SELT, the Southeast Land Trust of NH. Written by David Johnson. Photographed by Jerry Monkman, David Johnson, and SELT staff. Designed by David Johnson and Cathy Arakelian. Edited by Brian Hart, Deborah Goard, Ben Engel, Lesley Fawcett, and Lizzy Franceschini.

The Next Harvest

If you were asked by a friend or neighbor, "Why conserve farms?" you might first offer the most demonstrable (and delicious) answer: fresh food to sustain us.

Beyond this digestible answer lie many more complex reasons. Local farms provide economic opportunity, as long as you are willing to roll up your sleeves and work hard. Growing food here means increased security, knowing our nourishment was produced within tens of miles of home, not thousands of miles away. (This too is a major reason the federal government invests in programs used by SELT to permanently conserve farmland, like the Agricultural Land Easement Program.) And while the latest crisis of food contamination has faded from our memories (remember cyclospora?), there is comfort and safety in knowing your farmer, and knowing where your food comes from, that no inspection or label can provide.

Digging deeper, you may add building and sustaining community. Whether it's the season opening of a beloved local farm stand, where visitors and locals converge to fill their baskets with fresh crops and cuts, or the frenzied digital excitement in response to the social media post that the best corn is now available from your favorite farm, you know the connection that farms, large and small, make within our towns and communities.

On a personal level, for me, my connection stems from early childhood memories. I have blurry but real recollections of outings to Linvilla Orchards in Pennsylvania, filling my bag with apples, then returning home to help Mom make tasty pink-hued applesauce (the secret: keep the skins on). The tradition of visiting pick-your-own farms is one that I have carried forward with my kids. And now, as October arrives, it's pumpkins (and lots of cider donuts, as an enticement). With these visits, the true harvest is the experiences that bind us to each other and the outdoors.

New Hampshire's rich history of farming faces many challenges. Land values are rising faster than corn in July. Farm soils, prized for their productivity, are also great for septic systems and houses, making farmland an easy target for development. Farmers are aging, like our population as a whole, and the generational transfer that has sustained family ownership of a farm cannot be guaranteed forever. More and more often, the last generation is looking to what comes after the next hay harvest. Outside the family, young(er) aspiring farmers are seeking opportunities to hone their craft, yet remain stymied by the lack of ownership and the sheer cost of buying land.

So, how does SELT fit in? SELT's 2024–2030 Strategic Plan established the ongoing goal of conserving two to three working farms and farmland properties each year, a continuation of years of focused effort to protect our region's cherished farms. And beyond the act of protection, SELT, too, is seeking to expand the tools that provide access to farmland at an affordable, attainable price, including our innovative Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV). Inside this issue of *The Understory*, we share stories that reflect this focus on conservation, accessibility, and affordability. And knowing that the journey continues after the easement is signed, we follow up with the owners of a farm conserved several years ago to learn about their ongoing stewardship journey with SELT.

Simply put, SELT remains committed to conserving and sustaining our local, working farms. As the next crop, if you will, of farmers prepares to step up and continue feeding and enriching our communities, SELT, along with our friends, partners, and donors, is there with them. We are committed to helping save and steward current and future farmlands so their bounty can be shared and, through that, our appetites and spirits sustained.



Brian Hart, Executive Director



The Living Landscape



It's Saturday morning and The Coop is buzzing.

At one time, this massive building used to be a facility that housed 50,000 chickens, built at the beginning of World War II to produce food for the soon to be deploying U.S. Armed Forces.

Today, the inside is far different: a tastefully arranged second-hand thrift shop has erased any vestige of industrial level egg laying. Customers drift through the different rooms, eyeballing clothing, furniture, housewares, tools, and assorted knick-knacks.

Behind the checkout desk, Marianne Banks processes sales and makes small talk with customers. Jim Banks, her husband, is on the floor, weaving his way through the displays, fixing them up and pausing here and there for some of his own friendly banter. Every Saturday, Jim and Marianne are at The Coop, giving of their time to generate revenue that will go to the local church and the community aid fund for the Town of Lee.

Long retired, the duo has found great joy and purpose in their weekend side quest into thrifting. Their devotion to the cause, however, goes beyond making change and polishing coffee tables; Jim renovated The Coop himself, transforming it into the community treasure it's become. He's served on the Lee Zoning Board of Adjustment for nearly 40 years and this year received the Older Adult Volunteer Award for Strafford County.

But the greatest legacy he will leave — that anyone can leave — is on the horizon.





Jim and Marianne's home sits about a quarter mile up a dirt stretch on Carpenter Lane in Lee. It is, in fact, the only home on Carpenter Lane, and resides within a locus of sprawling fields, forests, and river frontage.

All told, the Banks property comes in at 404 acres, one of the largest privately owned, unconserved lands in southeast New Hampshire.

Which is about to change.

The Banks Living Landscape conservation project is another ambitious undertaking — a mosaic of five separate easements, each zeroing in on SELT conservation priorities: clean water, agriculture, healthy forests, wildlife habitat. You name it, the Banks property has it.

"We will often note how projects check multiple conservation boxes, but this incredible property really does have it all," says Ben Engel, SELT's Conservation Project Manager. "Its size and proximity to the Great Bay watershed

make it critically important to coastal health and our region. And when you account for the diverse and significant natural resources found within its boundaries, Jim and Marianne's property is truly one of one."

In addition, the popular Coppal House Farm abuts the Banks property and leases farmland from Jim and Marianne, allowing owner John Hutton to operate a successful agricultural venture producing lamb, chicken eggs, and sunflower products, as well as a beloved destination featuring horse drawn rides, the sunflower festival, and the iconic corn maze. The field farmed by John supports sunflowers, rye, and other crops used by both Coppal House Farm and the nearby SELT conserved Flag Hill Distillery & Winery.

"With Jim's land going into easement, it has enabled us to feel confident about making long-term investments that will stay with the land," says John. "It's peace of mind, and you can't put a price on that."

LEFT: Browsing the wares at The Coop. SELT STAFF

ABOVE: An aerial view of the Banks Living Landscape in Lee. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

"The challenge is to keep farming going on the Seacoast," John continues. "Rockingham County is the most active county in the state for development and Strafford is catching right up. Land is unattainable for anybody farming, so that means that your open space, your working open space, goes away."

To ensure active farming is always in its future, the Banks farmland, once conserved, will contain an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV), a provision that is triggered if the property is proposed to be transferred outside the family or to a non-farmer. The OPAV offers SELT the chance to locate a qualified farmer to purchase the property, or if necessary, SELT could acquire the property as a temporary custodian until a qualified farmer is found.

"This is the best tool available to keep farmland actively farmed and in the hands of farmers," says Ben, "and it can also help keep farmland more affordable."

East of Coppal House Farm flows the Wild and Scenic Lamprey River, and here is where the Banks Living Landscape extends its benefits to thousands more residents and visitors. With over a mile of frontage along the Lamprey, the entire Banks property protects the UNH-Durham water supply, which draws from the Lamprey River and provides clean drinking water to approximately 16,000 people.

Meanwhile, diverse wildlife abound on the Lamprey. Wetlands, backwaters, slough channels, and vernal pools are loaded with turtles, mussels, and over 60 species of common to rare birds. In fact, nearly the entire Banks property is identified by the NH Wildlife Action Plan as significant wildlife habitat.

The scope and diversity of the Banks' ownership has provided SELT an interesting tactic to protect the 370 acres: their land will be protected by five separate easements, each

tailored to the land's specific natural resources. The result: a cohesive mosaic of contiguous, conserved land.

"It is a testament to the breadth, significance, and diversity of the Banks Living Landscape that it possesses multiple pathways to conservation," said Ben. "It touches on each SELT conservation priority, as well as the priorities of multiple partners, including the Lee Conservation Commission, the Lamprey River Advisory Committee, and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) program."

The love of the outdoors has been hardwired into Jim since he was young. Growing up in Neenah, Wisconsin, a few steps from Lake Winnebago, can have that effect on a kid. It was a small, close community, rife with generosity and volunteerism.

"People worked together in the community to accomplish things that couldn't have been done other ways," Jim says. "And I have not forgotten that."

In 1970, New England beckoned, and Jim left for a position at the University of New Hampshire, which unfortunately almost immediately vanished due to legislative cuts. At a career crossroads, Jim chose to strike out on his own, bidding farewell to a future in academia and kicking off what would be a successful four-decade career as a self-employed electrical engineer.

Word spread about his prowess, and projects flowed in with regularity. Jim entered into partnerships with various companies, crafting specific electrical components that would slot into their products. He gained recognition, in particular, for his work on temperature controls and even sold a patent. And in 1990,

RIGHT: On the shores of the Lamprey River.

JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY



that reputation faced an interesting challenge.

"I get a call one day," he says. "The Air Force had taken over a company I had provided temperature controls to in Newington. This was during Operation Desert Shield, which was the prelude to Desert Storm. The Air Force was stationed in Saudi Arabia and the Navy was stationed out in the Gulf, and they were going to fly together into Kuwait."

But before the campaign could begin, the military needed to practice. This manner of desert warfare was new and the planning required precision. However, there was a curve ball: the radar on the Air Force planes could not handle the wide temperature swings of the desert without recalibration.

So, Desert Shield was delayed as the military scrambled to find a solution. Their search brought them to the company in Newington, and their engineers were tasked with solving the "radar chiller" problem — and they had to build one unit in 48 hours to do it.

Which is how the mild-mannered electrical engineer in Lee got the call. Could he, overnight, construct a temperature control to solve the radar problem? The answer was yes. With Jim's temperature control integrated into the new chiller, a prototype of the new tech was fabricated, shipped to Pease Tradeport in Portsmouth, loaded onto a plane, and flown across the world.

And the rest is military history.

These days, life isn't as high stakes as it was when the fate of the Middle East was in the balance. At age 84, Jim is content to work with Marianne in The Coop and serve on the Zoning Board and, of course, tinker in his basement; there is always something to tweak or repair or even build from scratch.

Jim and Marianne Banks.
SELT STAFF

As Jim and Marianne look to the next chapter of their lives, they are building something very special within the boundaries of their land.

They have opted for the path of conservation, and to help make this happen have made the extraordinary decision to agree to a "bargain sale," a price that is \$3.1 million less than the free market value of the lands they are choosing to protect.

The central location of their home affords 360-degree views of that legacy, that living landscape. Coppal House Farm and the rich farmlands it relies on can be seen in the distance, with wide open fields and thick, healthy forests everywhere you look. Unseen, a few clicks to the east, flows the Lamprey River.

When it comes to conservation stature, there are few properties in the Seacoast that can compete with the size, diversity, history, and community importance of the Banks Living Landscape. As such, there is a unique complexity to assembling the full vision through five easements, multiple funding partners, and a labyrinth of paperwork.

But as if he were soldering a transistor in the quiet of his basement, Jim can see the vision: a Living Landscape and a legacy for Lee — and the region — that will last forever. ■



The Banks Living Landscape

A Legacy on the Lamprey

Achieving this Conservation Vision

The Banks family have generously agreed to sell the conservation easements for 50% less than the appraised fair market value of \$6.1 million (commonly referred to as a bargain sale). The total cost to acquire, conserve, and steward the conservation easements of the Banks Living Landscape is \$3.4 million.

To conserve the Banks land, SELT is pursuing a mix of public and private sources, with early and generous grant awards from the US Natural Resources Conservation Services' Agricultural Land Easement program (\$1,840,000) and the Lamprey River Advisory Committee (\$200,000). Applications to the NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) and other state sources are pending decisions in December 2026. The Town of Lee is expected to vote on a warrant article in the spring of 2027.

As of October 2026, \$1.3 million remains to be raised for the Banks Living Landscape. Private donations will be an essential aspect of completing this project. Your gift will be used exclusively for the acquisition, conservation, and stewardship of four conservation easement on the Banks property in Lee.

- **Make a gift today!** Checks can be mailed to SELT at 247 N. River Road, Epping, NH 03042 with "Banks Living Landscape" in the memo field. Or give securely via credit or debit card at seltnh.org/banks.
- **Giving stocks or mutual funds and other investments** can be a smart, tax efficient way of giving. Give SELT a call or have your financial advisor contact us to learn how to make such a gift to SELT.
- **Distribute from an IRA.** Donors who are 70.5 or older are eligible to make tax-free donations from their IRAs, known as Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD), regardless of whether they itemize deductions on their tax returns. Such gifts made directly to SELT help meet your Required Minimum Distributions (RMD). Call to learn more about this unique way of giving.
- **Pledge support for up to three years:** To structure a gift that meets your financial needs, you can make a larger donation through a pledge to be paid by the end of 2028.

For more information or to explore your giving options, please start a confidential conversation with Advancement Director Lesley Fawcett at 603-693-7082 or via email at lesley@seltnh.org.

For project updates, maps, photos, and more information visit

seltnh.org/living-landscape

*fix it for her.
fix it for every*





Meet Margot.

Like most 12-year-olds she loves being outside — especially outside in New Hampshire, a place that was engineered specifically to deliver countless natural delights: trees to climb, ponds to fish, mountains to hike, oceans to swim.

For Margot, alas, not every adventure is available to her. As a child with multiple physical and cognitive disabilities, she may not ever be able to rappel down a cliff face or surf the breakers of North Beach in North Hampton — but that has not and will not stop her from finding immense joy in the outdoors. Overcoming obstacles to access has been the name of the game for Margot and her family, but the payoff will always be worth it: joy, peace, belonging.

“We’re well-versed in issues regarding physical and sensory access,” says Amanda Kelly, Margot’s mom. “We knew from the beginning when Margot was first diagnosed that as a family we wanted to do as many things as possible. But each level of access became more difficult and we had to learn to navigate them.”

This journey began when Margot was four months old and diagnosed with a chromosomal abnormality so rare that it doesn’t have a name. With no data at their disposal, doctors were unable to predict exactly what lay in store for her. There were broad predictions: she would have difficulty walking, talking, toileting. Beyond that? Questions with no answers.

“From early on, when we started early intervention, she was missing developmental milestones,” Amanda recalls. “So we were focused on just doing what we could to give her as many skills and opportunities as we could. We knew that it was going to be a journey we needed to start right away. We were out and in the community and with the public, so by the time she became a teenager, when disabilities would become even more of an access issue, we would already be comfortable.”

Not that there weren’t stretches of significant uncertainty. An unexpected disability — especially one so enigmatic — will turn any family’s world upside down.

“In the beginning there was a period of acclimation,” Amanda says. “But there came a point where I began listening to the experiences of other parents, and I grew more familiar with the tools for me to become an advocate. So I built that muscle of ‘fix it for Margot,’ and then take it a step further and make sure that somebody in power is aware of the problem.”

LEFT: Amanda and Margot. SELT STAFF

As Margot grew older, the outdoors proved to be her biggest joy — but truly accessible trails are few and far between, and the quest for access was evergreen.

Amanda's search brought her into SELT's orbit, where she developed an ad hoc consultation relationship with the stewardship team. Through her and Margot's life experience she brought recommendations, research, and real-world applications to SELT's burgeoning accessibility strategy.

"Amanda and Margot are able to provide us feedback from two unique perspectives: a

person with disabilities using the trails and a caregiver bringing her daughter out to use the trails," says Yohann Hanley, SELT's Trails and Community Engagement Manager. "Their experiences have shown me where changes can and should be made to entrance points, parking lots, and the actual surface of the trail. I look forward to hearing from them both after a trip to know that the changes we are making are going in the right direction for increased access for all."

Their intel proved to be especially vital during the planning and construction of the Birch



Ridge All-Persons Trail in New Durham, SELT's first complete accessible trail, which opened last fall. This 4,000-ft-long stretch, funded by the Recreation Trails Program (RTP) grant from the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails and built by Lew Shelley, was designed to accommodate people who use wheelchairs and have mobility challenges.

"When Yohann started spec'ing it out, he invited us to come out," Amanda says. "It's very exciting to feel heard and invited and included right from the beginning. And then when it was finished, we all went up as a family to use it.

That view at the top feels like you're out in the mountains and in the heart of New Hampshire. It's a view that you often get from a traditional hike, but it is now accessible to people who have mobility issues."

That day, when she and Ryan and Margot first took in the sprawling view of Merrymeeting Lake and, further out, the peak of Mount Washington — the steps to get there were small, incremental, sometimes infuriating, but often exhilarating. Now here they were, taking in a spectacular view.

"We knew that we weren't going to be able to



carry her forever,” Amanda says. “That trail being created in that New Hampshire setting with that view is the exact answer to what we had hoped for when she was little. Seeing it all come together was just magical.”

It's a perfect June morning at Kimball Reserve in Exeter. Warm, breezy - a great day for a walk. As she does so often, Amanda unbuckles Margot and helps get her ready for a morning walk in the woods. Kimball Reserve, a SELT

property in Exeter, is a preferred spot. The terrain is relatively even and the trailhead is just a few minutes from their house.

The thick canopy of trees that rings the parking area affords some protection from the hot summer sun, shining bright in a cloudless sky.

“Ready to go?” Amanda asks.

Margot smiles. In tandem, mom and daughter take to the path and enter the forest. It's time to explore. ■



MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Welcome to Sandown.

A hamlet of roughly 7,000 people (and formerly part of neighboring Kingston before it was carved out as its own town in 1756), Sandown features serpentine roads, thick green woods, and the vestiges of colonial structures one would find in southeast New Hampshire.

One such monument to early American history is the colossal gray barn located on North Road. James Atkins, the barn's owner, unlatches the sturdy doors and pauses. One

senses it's for dramatic effect and, when he throws the doors open, it's warranted.

From the outside the barn is an impressive structure, but once you see the area within, the exterior belies the vastness of this structure. Towering crossbeams fortify the roof overhead. Wide planks meet your footfalls with stubborn, centuries-old hardwood resistance.

There are memories wrought into the timbers. It is more than a edifice; it is a historical document.



The Atkins barn in Sandown. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY



In the late 1800s, the barn was used by B. & A. D. Fessenden Company, one of the largest cooperages and lumber firms in New England. The barn and its associated property would later find new life as Drowne Orchards, owned and operated by Clarence Drowne, who specialized in apples and peaches.

According to the Sandown Historical Society, Clarence would eventually boast over 500 fruit trees, harvesting nearly 1,000 crates of peaches a year.

In 1960, James's parents, Alvin and Lorene Atkins, purchased the property. Though it was no longer an active commercial farm at that time, the vestiges of the orchard still remain; and, as always, the barn stood steadfast.

"Our parents were able to bring it back to life as far as the homestead goes and our family has kept it up since. Unfortunately," James says, "the generations that farmed the land are all gone now, so new people living in town don't

really know that part of the history. So it's kind of a lost story to a point."

But it's a story James and his family haven't given up on — and they're determined to write a new chapter.

"Growing up, we had an opportunity that a lot of kids don't have," James says, recalling years of farm animals, horticulture, hunting and exploring in the vast backyard. "We want that carried on."

Conservation presented that opportunity. At 17 acres, the Atkins property may lack overwhelming breadth, (and many of the forests that buttressed the family property have since been developed), but it's the potential in the dirt that makes it so compelling.

"The soils on the Atkins Farm property are impressive and are a large part of what makes

ABOVE: An aerial view of the Atkins property. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY
RIGHT: A view of the trees from the forest floor. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

the farmland a priority for conservation,” says Ben Engel, SELT’s Land Conservation Manager. “Keeping this prime farmland open and available for agriculture both now and into the future is the top priority for both SELT and the landowner.”

The entire Atkins farm features prime or locally important soils, with 73% considered prime agricultural soils (i.e., the best soils for growing sustained crops).

And that makes the property an ideal fit for the OPAV (Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value), the conservation tool SELT has deployed to help ensure rich farmland has a future for commercial agricultural use.

The OPAV increases the likelihood that a conserved farm will continue to be in farmer ownership and in active production growing food. It requires that when a landowner sells the property outside of their family, they sell to someone with experience with farming and a plan to keep the property in active production –otherwise SELT can step in to find a farmer to purchase the property.

Which was music to James’s ears.

“I was drawn towards the OPAV because we can honor what the farm was and preserve it for another farmer — whoever and whenever,” he says. “So many farms are gone. But this may set the stage.”

As James and his wife Karen approach retirement, they look at this project as the next phase in their lives. Walking around the back of the barn, he takes care in identifying the burgeoning vineyard they have cultivated.

It is a signpost of what he envisions: a farm that will last, that will pass from their family to another family someday in the future.

“Our new business, Heritage Hills Farming LLC, will be honoring history, encouraging farming, and protecting nature,” James says.

But like the unique barn that sits at the fulcrum of their plans for the future, within an old-school exterior lies something way, way bigger: to help secure the past, present, and future of local farming in Sandown.

“We want to preserve this place the way it is,” he says, “and keep it ready for a new generation.” ■

The NH Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food’s Agricultural Lands Preservation Program awarded SELT with a grant of \$200,000, which represents approximately half of the funds necessary to complete the project.

This project would not be possible without their funding, providing critical state dollars to match the federal funds being provided by the NRCS Agricultural Land Easement program. Another crucial funder of this project is the New Hampshire Farm Future Fund, a grant that provides funding towards project costs as well as \$10,000 to the farmer to use for legal assistance and planning to help with both the easement process and with the farm’s future viability.





It's late spring and Edie Barker is in full prep mode. A (fingers crossed) busy summer is just around the corner for Barker's Farm, and before the veggies hit the Farm Stand shelves and the community once again congregates, there is a lot to do. A lot.

Most of her days in this late-spring run-up to the retail season are spent in the warm, incubating confines of one of the handful of greenhouses found throughout her Stratham property. At the tail end of March, seedlings are sown into the greenhouse soil — tomatoes, greens, lettuce, Swiss chard, spinach, and more.

When the temps rise and the sun breaks through one month later, the outside planting season kicks into full gear, and that's when Barker's Farm begins to find its momentum: the big push toward that window of a handful of months when the prep should pay off, the open sign flips, and a family farm that originated over 100 years ago keeps doing what all farmers work tirelessly to do, ensuring that...

THE FARM MOVES FORWARD



Tomatoes in bloom at Barker's Farm. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

In 1917, the Barker family bought the farm and originally used it as a true family farm — literally to feed the family. As the farm grew and passed to each successive Barker generation, the operation pivoted outward and became a “truck farm,” delivering vegetables to Portsmouth restaurants and markets.

In the early 1960s, Warren and Grace Barker built the first farm stand as a supplement to

the vegetable runs. That farm stand would eventually evolve into the current fixture on Route 33, a popular stop for passersby and committed customers. Gordon Barker, Warren and Grace’s son, was a key participant and helped take the farm to a new level.

Edie met Gordon at the University of New Hampshire, married thereafter, and took over the farm to work it in tandem. Sadly, in 2009,



Gordon passed away suddenly from a heart attack, leaving the farm's operation to Edie and, eventually, their daughter Forrest, who decided to follow in her parents' footsteps.

"I feel fortunate that we can grow healthy food to support our community," Edie says. "I find the stand is essentially a community center, and we try to promote that. I have customers rejoice when the opening sign first

goes up, and at the end of the season we have people come in, and you have to give them a handkerchief because they're so sad we're closed."

Conservation had been an ongoing discussion between Edie and Gordon, but his passing put that on hold; for Edie, the immediate need of keeping the farm afloat took precedence over long-term planning. Eventually, Forrest and Edie decided to follow through on those original conservation conversations.

In 2019, they worked with SELT to protect 88 acres of their property, which includes the farm as well as woodlands abutting Stratham Hill Park and a trail system. Needless to say, there's a lot going on at Barker's Farm, making the ongoing partnership between SELT (the easement holder) and the Barkers an important one.

"Edie and Forrest are outstanding caretakers of their land," said Nicole DeCarolis, SELT's Easement Stewardship Manager. "They set the standard for thoughtful stewardship and have been a pillar of the local community, promoting not only their work as farmers, but also the work of other community members."

SELT's easement stewardship support is geared toward providing resources like grant opportunities and clarification of easement terms, as well as offering counsel when questions arise. (An example: the proximity to public trails had produced some unfortunate animal interloping into the Barkers' vegetable fields, and SELT, the Barkers, and the Town of Stratham worked to establish signage and install a gate.)

"SELT has been awesome to work with," Edie says. "We are monitored each year and haven't had any issues, and obviously they helped with the language of the easement when it was written. We have a good relationship."



The iconic Barker's Farm stand. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

Speaking of relationships: you don't get much deeper than the bond of mother and daughter, and Edie and Forrest have worked in tandem to ensure Barker's Farm remains the community fixture it's been.

"Forrest has brought a lot of new innovations to the farm," Edie says. "She's definitely opened up my eyes to a lot of different things. The farm is a business, which I think some people don't realize. She's brought a lot of business awareness to the farm operation."

She then says, laughing: "She basically tells me what to do now."

These adaptations have shown up over the years as Barker's Farm has embraced new tech and agricultural advancements. Their relationship with NRCS (the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture) has yielded grants that Edie and Forrest have used for soil management, climate resilience, and greenhouse automation (they now have temperature-controlled side walls that open and close in response to the weather).

"Before these improvements," Edie recalls, "we'd be out in the field when we'd start, it would be cloudy, and then the sun would come out, and we would have to jump off the tractor, run back over to the greenhouse, and roll up the sides."

These infrastructure adjustments — this ongoing modernization — are key to ensuring Barker's Farm remains a durable, ongoing operation. Their easement allows Edie and Forrest to make these improvements and build a sustainable future for a family farm a century in the making.

For now? The greenhouses call, and Edie must tend to the seedlings and sprouts and lay the groundwork for another season of growth. ■

Edie and Forrest. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY





THE UNDERSTORY

HAIL TO THE KING

The ruffed grouse stands tall. SELT PHOTO



When it comes to stewarding healthy habitat for iconic wildlife like the ruffed grouse, diversity is the name of the game.

Walk through the woods and you might hear it — a staccato, rhythmic *whump-whump-whump* that gradually increases in velocity. It sounds a bit like a small helicopter revving up to take flight.

No. Strike that. This sound is completely organic, animalistic, produced naturally by... there it is, just in the distance, the source of the mysterious reverb: a medium-sized brown bird perched on a fallen log, its wings flapping so fast they blur into the forested background.

The King of Game Birds has arrived.

The ruffed grouse has earned a reputation over the years — actually, over the centuries — as one of the top game bird species.

After all, not every bird gets its own society. While its hunting bona fides are universally acknowledged, its keystone role in healthy habitats may not be as well known.

“The ruffed grouse is a bellwether species,” says Tyler Donaghue, President of the Granite State Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society. “They thrive in a diversified habitat. It’s a clear

indication of how that forest is doing if the ruffed grouse is there.”

One of the signs that ruffed grouse are present is their “drumming.” A renowned ritual, drumming is the male grouse’s go-to mating move. When the time is right and the mood strikes, the male seeks out a perch — ideally a log lying on the forest floor — and unleashes a rapid succession of wing-flapping.

This audio/visual display serves two purposes: 1) to attract females and 2) to deter rival males.



"When you're in a ruffed grouse habitat, you look for drumming logs," Tyler says. "There are specific diameters the birds really like. And when they drum, they have a distinct rhythm. If you've heard it before, you'd recognize it."

That sound is one of the few signals the ruffed grouse gives up during hunting season. It is known as an elusive bird. But the payoff is worth it for Tyler and his fellow ruffed grouse hunters.

"It's the best-tasting game bird," he says. "A lot of things have to line up for you to see a ruffed grouse, especially in the state of New Hampshire. It is a unique, diverse challenge in itself. And always when you're harvesting a game bird, the sole purpose is to eat it."

For SELT, the ruffed grouse is a species that benefits directly from focused land management to diversify habitat. In the stewardship world, diversification is key to ensuring areas are durable in the face of environmental pressures like climate, invasives, and even blight.

Early successional habitat is especially important to ruffed grouse and its co-habitants.

These landscapes are characterized by dense vegetation that grows low to the ground — shrubs, bushes, and thickets — a highly desirable venue for multiple species, including ruffed grouse.

"Ruffed grouse is a species that is an indicator for habitat quality," says Jeremy Thompson, Habitat Chair for the Granite State Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society. "If the ruffed grouse is doing well, it's not just that there's good early successional habitat — it says that there is a lot of good habitat diversity in that area."

"Many species of wildlife will use early successional habitat at some point," says Chad Fierros, SELT's Wildlife and Habitat Manager. "At SELT, we are looking at ways to encourage early successional growth in smart ways on the landscape."

And that is the key: encouraging a canvas of varied growth, vegetation of different ages, different sizes, different species, all working together to create a thriving landscape, harmonious like the drumming of the King of Game Birds. ■

IF YOU BURN IT, THEY WILL DRUM

One of those ways: the controlled burn at Birch Ridge Community Forest in New Durham that took place this past spring. SELT conducted the burn to advance community forest goals related to enhancing ecological values and early successional wildlife habitat in an area that was historically burned for blueberry production. The burn was conducted by Star Tree Prescribed Fire in coordination with state and local agencies, including the New Durham Fire Department.

"The burned parcel is located roughly in the middle of Birch Ridge Community Forest," says Chad. "And we've done other work to improve the forest around there. We already have some younger forest growing up, and now we have the burned area, which will create early successional habitat, and right behind the burned area is taller canopy. It's all about diversity."



LEFT: A male ruffed grouse drums. FORT ST. JOSEPH NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

ABOVE: An aerial view of the burn area at Birch Ridge Community Forest. JERRY MONKMAN-ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

ENGINEERING IMPACT

with Don Briselden

Perceptive visitors to the Nan and George Mathey Center for People and Nature may notice the small sign outside the large office room on the first floor. It reads:



It's a light-hearted token of appreciation bestowed on Don by the Board of SELT, and the honoree, Don Briselden himself, always gets a kick out of it when he stops by.

Never a man to seek attention or adulation, Don goes about his volunteerism quietly and always with a smile. He has been a SELT stalwart pretty much from the beginning; few are as enmeshed in the history of our mission as he is.

"When I grew up, our family had a small cottage up on the waters of the Wisconsin River in Wisconsin," he says. "And so we spent our summers up there and we would just play in the woods. We were very much focused on the outdoors."

Those early, formative years would leave an imprint on Don, following him through his

career as a civil engineer. His experience in the Navy, then later managing facilities at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and Phillips Exeter Academy, gave him an appreciation for caring for his surroundings — and managing the special places in his charge.

The roots he put down in Exeter brought him into the orbit of the Rockingham Land Trust (before it would come to be known as SELT), and there he found the perfect nexus of professional fulfillment and his lifelong love of the outdoors.

"While I was at Phillips Exeter Academy, I heard about the Rockingham Land Trust," Don recalls. "I thought, 'I'm very interested in conservation and taking care of our world and the good things we have,' so I joined the Land Trust as a volunteer. Our first big project was the Piscassic

Greenway, and little did we know that was just the beginning.”

Thus kicked off a relationship that has spanned decades. As a volunteer, Don has served on the Land Conservation Committee, the Board of Directors, and played a crucial role in helping design the Mathey Center.

“It’s just been a wonderful, wonderful experience and a great opportunity to contribute,” he says. “Every time I go to a board meeting, I’m impressed and sometimes even overwhelmed with the amount of actions that are taking place.”

As donors, Don and his wife Mary Jo support SELT by giving directly from their retirement account through Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD). Donating by QCD can be a helpful tool for those over the age of 70.5. Eligible donors can donate directly to SELT from their IRA without having to pay income taxes on

the money, regardless of whether they itemize deductions on their tax returns. For those who need to take the required minimum distribution from their IRA this year, giving via QCD can satisfy all or part of your obligation tax-free while supporting SELT’s mission.

“I would recommend anybody that’s interested in a Qualified Charitable Distribution to research it online or contact SELT,” Don says. “There’s just so much information available, as well as IRS guidance as to how it’s done. It is easy to set up, and it is a win for us and a win for the organization.”

Gifts via QCD must be received by December 31 in order to count toward the required minimum distribution for the calendar year.

If you would like to learn more about giving by QCD or any other giving tools, please contact Lesley Fawcett, SELT’s Advancement Director, at 603-693-7082 or email lesley@seltnh.org. ■



Don Briselden in The Nan and George Mathey Center for People and Nature.
SELT STAFF



247 North River Road, Epping, NH 03042
ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



SAVE

SELT conserves the special places in our communities for clean water, wildlife habitat, healthy forests, local farming, and outdoor recreation.

SHARE

Whether it is the miles of trails, or the local farms producing food, or the water flowing from your taps, SELT's properties are protected for the benefit of everyone in our communities.

STEWARD

SELT's team of stewardship staff and volunteers thoughtfully manage and monitor our properties - all to ensure these lands are safeguarded so that they can be treasured for generations.

SUSTAIN

SELT is a healthy, thriving organization whose staff, leadership, volunteers, members, and community partners work seamlessly to support our mission.

CONNECT WITH SELT'S MISSION!
Join or Renew Today! Scan the code or visit seltnh.org

