



The Friends of Valley Falls, Inc. NEWSLETTER

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VALLEY FALLS PARK

Hemlock Hill Grant Work Completed



New boardwalk on Hemlock Hill Trail

The Friends received a Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Recreational Trails grant in 2002 to make improvements on the hillside trail that connects the Rail Trail to the Park. The major goal of the grant was to implement **erosion control techniques** on the hillside to prevent the soils from washing into the pond, particularly the fine sediments which are destructive to aquatic life. As the popularity of the park has increased in recent years, Hemlock Hill became overused in some areas, loosening soils and creating some unsafe trail conditions. Several errant pathways had been cut into the slope by the hikers, exposing more soils than necessary to the erosion process.

The project focused on directing the public to a single main trail down the slope. The trail was improved with steps in steep areas, and the errant paths were covered with limbs to discourage their continued use. Signs noting "Erosion Control Area - Stay on the Trail" were installed. A new boardwalk was built over a heavily-rooted trail

section, and a six-foot wall was constructed on a very steep trailside area where loss of soil threatened to topple some trees.

In addition to trail improvements, twenty-four new hemlock trees were planted by Garden Barn. Four nature interpretive signs were also installed noting the mountain laurel, hemlock, sassafras and witch hazel that grow on the hillside.



New interpretive trail sign

The total project cost was \$10,000. The Friends received \$8,000 from DEP and had to provide



Volunteers Joe King (l.) and George Arthur (r.)

matching cost share of \$2,000. This cost share was mostly volunteer labor by trail workers **George Arthur and Joe King**. We are deeply indebted to George and Joe for their many hours of strenuous work, especially on the steep terrain of Hemlock Hill. Dragging lumber, materials and tools

up and down that incline was hard enough on the knees, let alone the heart. But the heart of these two wonderful volunteers is big - and their dedicated efforts resulted in easier and safer access to Valley Falls Park from the Rail Trail. Come check it out!

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Erosion control sign hung by volunteer Joe King

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(Park & Farm, continued)

New Restroom Building

Finally - a new restroom at Valley Falls! The new building construction is under the direction of the Parks and Recreation Department. The building was designed by architect **Dan Wright**, a Friends Board member, and will reflect some of the architectural features of the Valley Falls Farm buildings. It is expected to be completed by mid-summer. Parks and Recreation personnel are providing some initial site preparation work to save costs of the project.



Mark Lucas of the Parks and Recreation Department

Valley Falls Chosen as a Trout Park

Each year the DEP holds a trout stocking media event somewhere in



Trout fishing at Valley Falls pond

the state to involve children in the process. This year Valley Falls Park was named as the "Trout Park" for the event - a nice honor for Valley Falls! **Jeff Carlson** coordinated Vernon activities, and **Myra Rabin's** class at Center Road School participated in the educational

component. DEP Commissioner **Gina McCarthy** and Mayor **Ellen Marmer** spoke at the ceremony, which was later telecast on Channels 8, 30, 3, and 61. In spite of the wind and rain, kids learned, the pond is stocked, and a good time was had by all - a successful day!

Barn Hillside Clearing

Part of the hillside has been cleared between the parking lot in the Park and the red barn on Valley Falls Road. At one time, this area was open field and yielded many farm crops. The cleared area exposes the picturesque barn which can now be seen from several points in the park. And from the barn, there is now a clear view of the pond. A small return to yesteryear. Again, thanks to **George Arthur** and **Joe King** for their efforts.



Vista from Hemlock Hill to the red barn

Pet Waste Project

Dog feces are a major problem and nuisance on the Park's trails. Congratulations to the Vernon Greenway Volunteers (VGV), led by **Don Bellingham**, who decided to take action to address the problem. In 2006, as a "test program," they installed a pet station comprised of a biodegradable pet waste bag dispenser, free waste bags, and a receptacle. The test was so highly successful that a second station will soon be installed. Thank you Don and the VGV for taking action on a problem that has plagued the Park for years!

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CONTROLLED BURNING AT BELDING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA *by Jane Seymour*

On April 10th, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) personnel set fire to a field at the Belding Wildlife Management Area.

Controlled burning is one way that the DEP maintains grasslands and other early successional habitats such as shrublands and young forests. Fire returns nutrients to the soil and also prepares the soil for native grass planting. The Wildlife Division will plant native warm season grasses at the site of the burn. Warm season grasses, particularly the bunch grasses like little bluestem, are used by grassland ground-nesting birds. Grassland birds have become increasingly rare in the past decades.

Early successional habitats, and their associated species, have been disappearing from Connecticut and the Northeast. Development and reforestation are replacing grasslands and shrublands. The species that suffer the most are ones that are dependent on large tracts of these habitats. Grasshopper sparrows and upland sandpipers nest in grasslands of about 100 acres or more. How many 100-acre grasslands have you seen lately?

Why worry about grasslands and grassland dependent species? It is a common misconception that pre-settlement New England was one big non-stop forest, devoid of early successional habitats. But only 10,000 years ago, pockets of post-glacial outwash supported open habitats such as sand plains and pine barrens into colonial times. Annual flooding along river plains inhibited the growth of many tree species. And lets not forget about the industrious beaver. Beavers cut down trees to build dams and lodges. Once the dam is built, flooding kills inundated trees. Over time, the beaver pond fills in with

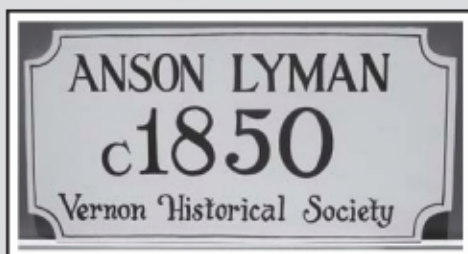
sediment and a beaver meadow is created. As the decades pass, the meadow is replaced with shrubs and young trees until finally, the site succeeds into mature forest where the process can begin all over again. Wildfires were an important natural process that maintained early successional habitats. As the landscape became settled, forest fires, which usually started with lightning strikes, were no longer allowed to burn and early successional habitats decreased. Today, controlled burns (every 5 years) and mowing (every 2 or 3 years) are management tools used by DEP to create and maintain these declining habitats. Frequently mowed grasses are NOT considered grasslands, and offer very little in the way of value to wildlife. In fact, lawns are often referred to as "ecological deserts" .

How can you protect early successional habitats and the species that depend on them such as meadowlark, bobolink, field sparrow, prairie warbler and woodcock? Convert large patches of lawn to natural areas that are mowed every other year at the end of the breeding season. Support local agriculture. Educate others about the loss of grasslands, shrublands and young forests. Support conservation organizations that protect wildlife habitat such as The Nature Conservancy, Connecticut Farmland Trust and local land trusts. Remember wildlife at tax time with the Wildlife Tax Check-off. Purchase a Wildlife or Farmland Preservation license plate. And let your legislators know that wildlife is important to you.

Jane Seymour is a DEP Wildlife Technician, and steward of the Belding Wildlife Management Area.

(Park & Farm, continued)

VALLEY FALLS FARM Historic Sign for Farmhouse



As we previously reported, Valley Falls Farm has been officially designated as

a Vernon Historic Property. The Vernon Historical Society prepares standard signs for historic homes in Vernon noting original owners and date of ownership.

The farmhouse will now proudly display a historic sign noting Anson Lyman as the original owner, circa 1850.

Stable Restoration

This summer we will continue work on the stable, including new window installation, replacement of some siding, scraping and painting. **Please call Bob Letendre at 875-4623 if you can spare time to help with any of these tasks!! We desperately need volunteers to continue this work.**

NATURE NOTES

PINK LADY-SLIPPER (*Cypripedium*)
(Orchid family)



Thrives in places where other wildflowers do not, yet when cultivated in gardens, it needs the correct balance of soil, moisture and light to live for more than a few years. The pouch formed by the flower's lip is a trap that allows

bumblebees to enter, but can only exit with difficulty and receive no nectar for their efforts. Few flowers are pollinated each season by the bees, but humans can pollinate them by hand- if you are lucky to have one growing in your woodland. Lady-slippers are found during May and June in Valley Falls Park and along the Rails to Trails.

EVENTS

ARTISTS' DAY AT THE FARM

The 1st Annual **Artists' Day at Valley Falls Farm** will be held next summer, **August 2008**. Artists will be invited to paint during the day (8 a.m.-3 p.m.), and the paintings will be displayed and auctioned during a reception to be held between 4 – 6 p.m. The day will feature music, display of art work (by artists who have done previous work), and historical tours of the farm to coincide with the Bicentennial Celebration. Proceeds from the event will go towards renovation of the stable.

Would YOU like to help the Friends plan this exciting event? A committee is being organized – and has been meeting regularly. Current members are: **Carol Burke, Caroline Christman, Diane Cote, Heather Crowne, Mary Cross, Ginny Gingras, Ann Letendre, Karen Prewo, Sally Sullivan, Margaret Verdon, Betty Wardrop, Sandy Yamarik. PLEASE JOIN US!** Call Ginny at 875-9865, or email (ginnygingras@netzero.net).

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