

Lyme Land Trust Seeks to Preserve Whalebone Cove Headwaters

Lyme -- The Lyme Land Conservation Trust has announced a fund raising drive to protect 82 acres of ecologically strategic upland forest and swamp wildlife habitat in Hadlyme on the headwaters of Whalebone Cove, one of the freshwater tidal wetlands that comprises the internationally celebrated Connecticut River estuary complex.

The new proposed preserve is part of a forested landscape just south of Hadlyme Four Corners and Ferry Road (Rt. 148), and forms a large part of the watershed for Whalebone Creek, a key tributary feeding Whalebone Cove, most of which is a national wildlife refuge under the management of the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

The Land Trust said it hopes to name the new nature refuge in honor of William Hawthorne of Hadlyme, whose family has owned the property for several generations and who has agreed to sell the property to the Land Trust at a discount from its market value if the rest of the money necessary for the purchase can be raised by the Land Trust.

“This new wildlife preserve will represent a triple play for habitat conservation,” said Anthony Irving, chairman of the Land Trust’s Preservation Committee.

“First, it helps to protect the watershed feeding the fragile Whalebone Cove eco-system which is listed as one of North America’s important freshwater tidal marshes in international treaties that cite the Connecticut River estuary as a wetland complex of global importance. Whalebone Creek, one of the primary streams feeding Whalebone Cove, originates from vernal pools and upland swamps just south of the Hawthorne tract on the Land Trust’s Ravine Trail Preserve and adjacent conservation easements and flows through the proposed preserve. Virtually all of the Hawthorne property comprises much of the watershed for Whalebone Creek.

“Second, the 82 acres we are hoping to acquire with this fund raising effort represents a large block of wetlands and forested wildlife habitat between Brush Hill and Joshuatown roads, which in itself is home to a kaleidoscope of animals from amphibians and reptiles that thrive in several vernal pools and swamp land, to turkey, coyote, bobcat and fisher. It also serves as seasonal nesting and migratory stops for several species of deep woods birds, which are losing habitat all over Connecticut due to forest fragmentation.

“Third, this particular preserve will also conserve a key link in the wildlife corridors that connects more than 1,000 acres of protected woodland and swamp habitat in the Hadlyme area.” Irving explained that the preserve is at the center of a landscape-scale wildlife habitat greenway that includes Selden Island State Park, property of the US Fish & Wild Life’s Silvio O Conte Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy’s Selden Preserve, and several other properties protected by the Lyme Land Conservation Trust.

“Because of its central location as a hub between these protected habitat refuges,” said Irving, “this preserve will protect forever the uninterrupted access that wildlife throughout the Hadlyme landscape now has for migration and breeding between otherwise isolated communities and families of many terrestrial species that are important to the continued robust bio-diversity of southeastern Connecticut and the Connecticut River estuary.”

Irving noted that the Hawthorne property is the largest parcel targeted for conservation in the Whalebone Cove watershed by the recently developed US Fish & Wildlife Service Silvio O Conte Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Irving said the Land Trust hopes to create a network of hiking trails on the property with access from both Brush Hill Road on the east and Joshuatown Road on the west and connection to the Land Trust's Ravine Trail to the south and the network of trails on the Nature Conservancy's Selden Preserve.

Irving said there is strong support for the Land Trust's proposal to preserve the property both within the Hadlyme and Lyme communities and among regional and state conservation groups. He said letters of support have come from the Hadlyme Garden Club, the Hadlyme Public Hall Association, the Lyme Inland Wetlands & Watercourses Agency, the Lyme Planning and Zoning Commission, the Lyme Open Space Committee, the Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments, the Lyme Garden Club, the Lyme Public Hall, The Nature Conservancy, The Silvio O Conte Refuge, the Connecticut River Watershed Council, and the Friends of Whalebone Cove, Inc.

He reported that between Hawthorne's gift and several other pledges the Land Trust has already received commitments of 25 percent of the cost of the property.