

2014 Year in Review

Columbia County has a diverse cultural and ecological landscape. The Farmscape Ecology Program (FEP) strives to help people develop their own informed, heartfelt connection to this landscape, and consciously contribute to its future in ways that honor this rich diversity. We hope to complement the valuable work done by others in the County by integrating aspects of many disciplines (e.g., ecology, sociology, agriculture) in both original research and stimulating outreach. This year's activities, described below, illustrate our approach.



A Walking the Living Land Outing at Nutten Hook

Living Land Project

The goal of this project is to create an ecological and cultural field guide to the habitats of Columbia County. This is meant to be not only a physical field guide, but also a suite of outreach activities designed to help familiarize people with their surroundings. We are in the final stages of field research for this multi-year, collaborative project (with Hudsonia Inc. and the Columbia Land Conservancy) and plan to begin the sharing of results by mid 2015. We will offer walks, exhibits, workshops, and other opportunities to share what we have learned and to gather feedback as how to best present the information to make it most useful and interesting.



Grass Pink (Calopogon tuberosus)

Living Land Biodiversity Inventories: This year, with substantial involvement from our colleagues Gretchen Stevens and Chris Graham of Hudsonia Inc., we surveyed 200 locations representing a variety of habitats throughout the western part of the County. At each location we conducted detailed biodiversity inventories (including plants, ground beetles, ants, dragonflies, butterflies, and amphibians) to learn what the land “looks like” from the perspective of these wild species. This brought the total number of locations surveyed throughout the County during the last three years to almost 500.

During these surveys, we documented several rare plant species, including the gorgeous orchid Grass Pink (*Calopogon tuberosus*) which was in flower during our visit to a bog in Gallatin. False Hopsedge (*Carex lupuliformis*) which had never before been reported from Columbia County, was found at two vernal pools. In the insect world, we documented four ant, three dragonfly, and several ground beetle species that were not previously recorded in this part of the country.

Living Land Cultural Research: In order to learn more about how people perceive and interact with the land here in Columbia County, we spoke with 371 visitors at nine different recreation areas, documented the Special Places of another 170 people at four different community events, building on our 2013 surveys of 340 people's special places, and gathered input from 37 participants on five Walking the Living Land Outings. As part of this research, we asked people to share their perceptions of habitats (viewed on pictures or directly experienced) and to document some of their impressions photographically.



Mapping Special Places at a Philmont event



Walking the Living Land Participants in a Shrubland

During the Walking the Living Land Outings, we also facilitated participants' deeper experience of various habitats by encouraging them to move off trail into habitats that we usually only look at from a distance and to explore different sensory experiences of the habitat through guided exercises.

Finally, with the help of collaborating artist Jill Jakimetz, we created botanical portraits of each habitat from items collected by the participants. These served as both an illustration of the physical objects reflecting people's experience of each habitat and a focal point for the discussion of differences and similarities between the habitats and each participant's relationship with them.



Examples of Botanical Portraits from a Pasture, Hemlock Forest, and Floodplain Forest created in the field by Jill Jakimetz during an outing.

This Fall we have also started to explore questions of changing access to land through the replication of a survey of posted land in Claverack and Chatham that was done in the 1960s. Finally, we are also preparing for a series of oral history interviews with residents of the County who have a long history of interacting with the land, as well as residents who have daily working experiences with local landscapes.

Pilot Project on Apple Orchard Ecology

This project is the continuation of our line of agro-ecological research which documents the role of farming in providing habitats for 'wild nature' and of 'wild nature' in providing so-called services for agricultural production. This year, we studied seven orchards in the Hudson Valley, including orchards in Ulster, Columbia, Dutchess and Saratoga Counties. One of our primary goals was to look at the flow of insects and insect effects from wooded orchard edges in towards the center of the orchards. As a pilot project, our immediate objective has been to identify the techniques warranting further use and the patterns worthy of exploration.



One of the 450 Species of Native Bees we have in NY State is pollinating an apple blossom.

Wild Plants and Insects of Landscaped Wildflower Meadows

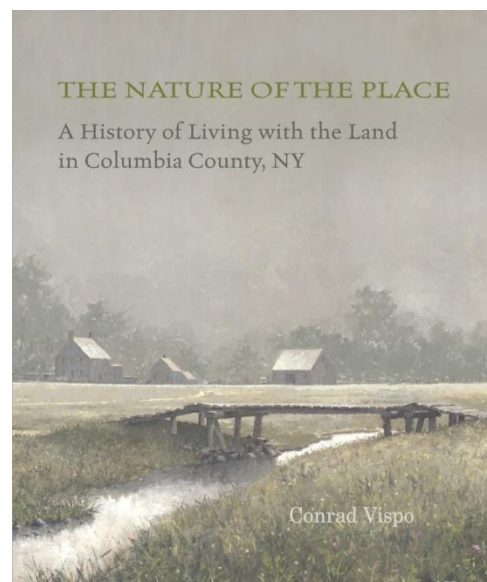
Two years ago, we piloted the study of the nature-conservation potential of landscaped wildflower meadows by documenting the plants and insects on five of these meadows in nearby Connecticut. As a follow-up, we are now conducting a more detailed, two year comparison of the plants and insects found across the seasons in a landscaped meadow and a neighboring old field in Falls Village, CT.

Customized Walks and Land Biographies

Throughout the year, we continued to do customized walks with landowners to help them deepen their knowledge of their land and its resident plants and animals, and share management ideas on how to safeguard and/or enhance native biodiversity. We are also currently engaged in two year-long consulting projects to create land biographies of large, privately owned parcels. These land biographies are customized and usually include the creation of habitat maps, inventories of plants and animals with photo documentation, archival and field research to document land use history, and management suggestions. We welcome inquiries from those interested in having such projects done on their land.

Conrad's Book is Published

"The Nature of the Place: A History of Living with the Land in Columbia County, NY" by Conrad Vispo has just been published by Adonis Press. In this beautifully designed and richly illustrated book, Conrad shares much of what he has learned during a decade of work with the Farmscape Ecology Program. Through chapters on the ecological histories of our forests, fields, waters and soils, this book describes people and pursuits that have shaped this land, and some of the native plants and animals who have joined us along the way. It provides an exciting invitation to explore the rich heritage and nature of Columbia County, and our place within it. We hope it will spark many inspired conversations and are looking forward to hearing other perspectives and to continue learning.



A New Website and Facebook Page

This year saw the launch of the long-expected new Farmscape Ecology Program website (www.hvfarmscape.org). Its structure has been “streamlined” to make the rich content easier to access. Much material has been updated and added. We hope you will find the resources we provide on the website helpful in facilitating your learning about nature and culture in our landscape. We also adopted Facebook as one of our tools to reach out to a wider group of residents and visitors of the County. By posting frequent brief highlights from the field, we provide a glimpse into our day to day work, share our exciting discoveries, and give readers an opportunity to learn with us as we learn. Top ‘hits’ this past year included postings on new orchids that we have found, images of some exotic-looking ants, and orchard sound-scapes.



Conrad Vispo and one of the younger walk participants are closely inspecting a Goldenrod Ball Gall.

In late spring, we led a group of 15 participants on a Natural History Outing along the Taconic Crest Trail and thanks to the sharp eyes of David Lewis and Ellen Winner, we discovered a small colony of Large Whorled Pogonia (*Isotria verticillata*), a species of orchid which had not been reported from Columbia County since it was first noted in Claverack in 1869.



Large Whorled Pogonia (Isotria verticillata)
Photo by David Lewis

Presentations

We were invited to give public presentations or be part of discussions at Colgate University, the Conservation Advisory Council Roundtable, Conway School of Landscape Design, the Cooperstown Graduate Program, the Cornell Cooperative Extension Spring Gardening Day, Harvard Forest, the Northeast Natural History Conference, the Omega Institute’s Sustainability Program and SUNY Albany. We also taught an eight-week elective class for Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School students.

Acknowledgements

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We are very grateful to the individuals who generously responded to our pleas for in-kind donations. We also would like to express our deepest gratitude for the financial support from the T. Backer Fund, Bank of Greene County Charitable Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Trust, Hygeia Foundation, Kalliopeia Foundation, Marilyn and Bob Laurie Foundation, New World Foundation, Rhinestrom Hill Community Foundation, Sandy River Charitable Foundation, Ole Skaarup Fund, Furthermore, a program of the J.M.Kaplan Fund, and from more than 100 individual donors.