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Litchfield Area News

New Preserve in Litchfield to be Haven for Wildlife

By: Maggie Behringer 08/20/2009

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LITCHFIELD-Wigwam Brook and its surrounding wildlife habitats in Litchfield will never again be in danger from development. The Litchfield Hills Audubon Society recently completed the purchase of a stretch of 36 acres between Northfield Road and East Chestnut Hill Road and is deep into plans for transforming the property into a pristine wildlife preserve.

"The whole idea is to make it for wildlife," said John Baker, chairman of the Wigwam Brook Wildlife Sanctuary Committee. "We, in fact, now control all of Wigwam Brook." New Sanctuary

The society bought the first tract of land, roughly 30 acres in July 2008, and closed on the second piece of the new sanctuary, another six acres, this June. Funding for the purchase, which totaled \$299,500, came from a 50 percent grant from the state Department of Environmental

Protection, with help from neighbors and organizations such as the Seherr Thoss Foundation as well as money bequeathed to the society, all of which completely covered the costs. Waterbury officials also supported the project, Mr. Baker said, as Wigwam Brook is a water source for the city's drinking water.

"It's really exciting because you have all these different habitats."

Unlike the nearby Boyd Wood Sanctuary, this new property is much less tamed, and the society intends to keep it that way. Beyond the stream, the area contains several beaver dams, two overgrown hay fields, a Christmas tree farm, beaver meadows, formed when plants take over former dams and water areas, woods and a huckleberry and red maple grove.

"This goes back to the glacial time," Mr. Baker said of the grove. "According to our botanist, it's really rare."

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Plans to re-establish healthy habitats includes restoring the hay fields to accommodate the nests of meadow larks and bobolinks, clearing out invasive plants such as knot weed, bittersweet vines and honeysuckle and thinning out the conifers that have been planted in tight rows. The latter work is being funded by a Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program grant. The society will move the entrance to two trails, one leading to the beaver dams and the other to the conifer forest, 20 feet up Wigwam Road and construct a small parking area at the site, which was approved at the Litchfield Planning and Zoning Commission Monday night. The American Chestnut Foundation has tapped the society's holding as a site to further explore the development of a blight resistant strain of the tree species. Two plantations are planned for spring, one in the center of the conifers forest and another in full view along Northfield Road. As Mr. Baker explained, members cross-pollinated local trees with local pollen and exotic pollen from Virginia that the foundation provided. Five hundred seeds collected this fall will be planted in next spring.

Though the timeline will depend on many factors, Mr. Baker estimated the organization's designs for the Wigwam Brook Wildlife Sanctuary will take approximately two years. For more information on the organization, visit www.lhasct.org.

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