

Wildlife sanctuary in hands of Trust

PRESERVATION LAN:
140 acres transferred by Bird Club to be used to educate the public

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The Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust is making the North Country Bird Club's dreams come true.

The club transferred ownership of a 140-acre wildlife sanctuary to the land trust this summer, with hopes of preserving the land while using it as an educational tool for the public.

"As with many organizations, our active membership has decreased," said Carolyn R. Marlowe, club president. "We weren't able to maintain the sanctuary as it should be."

Also known as the Joseph A. Blake Jr. Wildlife Sanctuary, the property is on Middle Road on the Rutland/Champion town line. It is also the first property-owning venture for the trust, which focuses on land protection and education. Land trust Executive Director Linda M. Garrett said the organization hadn't owned property before because its staff members are "sensitive to the fact of taking land off tax rolls won't make us good neighbors."

The newly acquired sanctuary property, however, has been off the tax rolls for 50 years, she said.

Throughout the 140 acres is an abundance of wildlife — more than 12 bird species, and countless plants and shrubbery. There are also many trails, but because of a lack of Bird Club members, few have been properly maintained. Mrs. Garrett said two are now cleaned up, and as the trust gathers more volunteers, additional trails will open up.

In the meantime, the site is being used by students from SUNY-ESF, Syracuse, who plan to develop a recreation plan for the site.

"We want schools to get out there and use it," Mrs. Garrett said. "This is really helping us



Richard B. Johnston, land protection manager of Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, replaces an old sign at the Joseph A. Blake Jr. Wildlife Sanctuary on Middle Road, town of Rutland.

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as far as being able to get kids back outside and understand and appreciate the natural environment. Some kids are actually afraid to be out in the woods, but some will see it's a fun place to be."

The wildlife sanctuary is open to the public for hiking, nature appreciation and mountain biking, Mrs. Garrett said. She said she also envisions the space as a large outdoor classroom for the young and old.

"The property is interesting," she said. "It has a diverse

ecosystem. There's nice wooded areas, stone fences and a big wetland area."

Ms. Marlowe said property highlights include "a wonderland of warblers" and other bird types, and a swampy area that attracts red-winged blackbirds and butterflies.

She said the club used to have 100 active members in the mid- to late 1990s, but that number has dwindled to about 20 active members today.

While the land trust staff is small, its need for active volunteers to maintain the property

is large. Thus far, groups have worked together to change signs and improve trails, but more help is needed, Mrs. Garrett said. The trust has regularly scheduled work days at the site.

People can volunteer by calling the agency at 779-2239.

To celebrate the ownership transfer, there will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 5 p.m. Thursday at the property, followed by a 6 p.m. barbecue at the pavilion in Thompson Park.