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The Nature Conservancy of Vermont

Conservation Benefits Wildlife and Public Recreation

North Pawlet Hills Nature Preserve Expands to 739 Acres

PAWLET, VT - The Vermont chapter of The Nature Conservancy announced today the acquisition of a 272-acre parcel in the North Pawlet Hills. This acquisition, the first on the western side of the hills, includes the flanks of Haystack and Middle Mountain, the northern edge of Burt Hill and all of Cleveland Hill. The Nature Conservancy has been working to conserve the hills since 1998, and with this addition will expand the preserve to 739 acres.

Homer and Cecil Brown, third-generation farmers in nearby Pawlet, used the lower portion of the property as summer pasture for heifers. The brothers, who have been in friendly discussion with The Nature Conservancy for 10 years, knew they eventually wanted to conserve the land.

“We wanted to keep it for wildlife, and to let the trees grow,” said Homer. “There ain’t no better piece of mountain land around. If you don’t feel good, you go up there and you feel better by the time you get back down”.

A 17-acre portion of the property on the slopes of Cleveland Hill has been subdivided and sold to a nephew for use as a sugar bush.

The North Pawlet Hills, which encompass Burt, Cleveland and Simonds Hills to the west and the mountains of Bald, Middle and Haystack to the east, are worthy of protection. Not only are the forested peaks and distinctive cliffs visual landmarks from every direction, the plant and animal

species found here are considered state-significant, and the hills offer ample recreation opportunities for residents of the nearby towns.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) awarded this project \$335,900, one of the largest grants ever received by The Nature Conservancy. Gus Seelig, executive director of VHCB, said, “The Board is pleased to support the addition of this acreage to The Nature Conservancy’s holdings in the North Pawlet Hills, protecting one of the most biologically diverse areas in the state. Securing permanent public access to trails and woodlands guarantees future generations will be able to appreciate this unique resource.”

The Vermont chapter of The Nature Conservancy is raising private funds to cover the remaining project costs and to establish an endowment fund to manage the property. As a private property owner the Conservancy pays property taxes on this, and all other nature preserves, in Vermont.

Amidst nearly 2,000 acres of unbroken forest in the North Pawlet Hills a patchwork of dry woodland communities stands out, noticeably different from the surrounding forest type. Drought-like conditions produced by south facing cliffs and shallow, acidic soils create an ideal environment for red, white and chestnut oaks, shagbark hickory and hop hornbeam.

Beneath an open canopy the sparse understory is dominated by sedge meadows, and provides ideal habitat for more than a dozen rare and uncommon plants. Amongst those protected by this acquisition are rattlesnake hawkweed and squaw root, used by Native Americans for their medicinal properties, native members of the buckwheat family, and the uncommon wood lily. This lily, with orange-red petals and an open, delicate flower, attracts butterflies for pollination. Even underfoot the hillside continues to amaze; moss and lichen species recently discovered here have not been recorded anywhere else in Vermont.

The cliffs of Haystack Mountain are home to another success story. Peregrine falcons, whose populations were decimated by DDT contamination, were officially removed from Vermont’s endangered and threatened species list in 2005. Peregrine falcons have occupied the cliffs of Haystack Mountain for nine years and successfully hatched twelve fledglings over this time. A

consortium of partners and volunteers led by the National Wildlife Federation, Vermont Institute of Natural Science and Vermont's Fish and Wildlife Department continues to monitor the health of this species.

Following in the footsteps of generations of Vermonters, hikers can access the North Pawlet Hills Natural Area from Waite road, and reach the modest 1,919-foot summit of Haystack in about an hour. From there one can see as far west as Glens Falls, NY and south beyond the farms of the Mettowee Valley to Mount Equinox in Manchester. Hiking trails will remain open for pedestrian recreation, and the Conservancy allows hunting with permission.

Keen bird watchers should listen for the distinctive calls and watch for the occasional glimpse of migratory songbirds. These shy creatures, like the scarlet tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, goshawk and the magnificent pileated woodpecker, are disturbed by the presence of roads and motorized vehicles and will only successfully nest in large blocks of unfragmented forest.

When asked what lies ahead for the Brown brothers Homer replied with a smile, "I'm going to raise beef." With one nephew sugaring on the lower slopes of Cleveland Hill, and a second farming nearby, the Brown family's tradition of stewarding the land looks set to continue into the fourth generation.

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The Nature Conservancy is a leading international, nonprofit organization that preserves plants, animals and natural communities representing the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. To date, The Nature Conservancy and its approximately one million members have been responsible for the protection of more than 14 million acres in the United States and have helped preserve more than 83 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. The Vermont Chapter, chartered in 1960, has helped conserve over 170,000 acres of significant natural areas throughout the state, and maintains 43 nature preserves. Visit us on the Web at www.nature.org/vermont.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) is an independent, state-supported funding agency providing grants, loans and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations, municipalities and state agencies for the development of perpetually affordable housing and for the conservation of important agricultural land, recreational land, natural areas and historic properties in Vermont. Using state revenue from the property transfer tax and managing several federal funding programs, since 1987 VHCB has funded the conservation of 356,000 acres of land and the creation of 8,000 permanently affordable homes. VHCB commitments of \$190 million have leveraged nearly \$660 million in other federal, private and foundation funds to complete projects in more than 200 Vermont towns.