

# Shawangunk WATCH

Friends of the Shawangunks and The Shawangunk Conservancy

MAY, 2016

Volume 21 Number 1

## THE RAMEY PARCEL

*Protecting  
Land Along the  
Coxing Kill*

**GRASSLANDS ❖ KESTRELS ❖ ACORNS ❖ HERPS**

**Preserving Open Space in the Shawangunks since 1963**



# HERPS ON THE GUNKS, PART I

Bill Cutler and Susan Erny

**HERPETOLOGY IS THE STUDY of reptiles and amphibians.** The term is derived from the Greek word “herpeton” which means to creep or crawl about on one’s belly. This article discusses the Shawangunks’ frog and salamander residents. A future article will investigate lizards and other herps found in the Shawangunks.



Two Gray Tree Frogs [*Hyla versicolor*].  
Photo by Dustykid.

## FROGS

Pickerel frogs, gray tree frogs, wood frogs, bull frogs, green frogs, toads and chorus frogs (e.g. Spring Peepers) are common. Most New York State frogs, toads and salamanders hibernate over winter. Wood frogs, chorus frogs, and toads dig under leaf and bark litter on the ground, and they may freeze almost solid as winter sets in. They are equipped with an anti-freeze-like compound in their bodies that allows them to turn into “frog-sicles.” They are not rock-hard, but are more the consistency of hard ice cream. They stop breathing and their hearts stop beating. Once the temperature starts to rise in the spring they begin to thaw, and the glycerol-like anti-freeze compound reverts back to normal frog physiology and they are ready to move about. Other frogs, like the bullfrog, hibernate under water, only breathing through their moist skin. An exception is the pickerel frog that has been found under bottom debris in winter ponds and occasionally under leaf litter on land.

The quartz conglomerate—the white rock that is so characteristic of the Ridge—lacks calcium and magnesium which means there is poor buffering of hydrogen ions in the water, making it more acidic. Most frogs can’t survive in the lakes Minnewaska, Awosting, Haseco (Mud Pond) and Maratanza that tend to be very acidic, with a pH approaching 4, though wood frogs have adapted to lower pH conditions and may be found in fairly acidic water. Water in Lake Mohonk passes through layers of naturally pH-buffering Martinsburg Shale, reducing its pH to a level frogs can tolerate. Peepers require more pH-neutral water to breed in, so these frogs seek out shallow ponds and swampy areas with naturally buffering soils.

## SALAMANDERS

Another amphibian common to the Gunks is the salamander. There are four species of mole salamanders, or Ambystomids, that inhabit the Shawangunk Ridge: the spotted salamander, blue spotted, Jefferson, and marbled. These creatures spend most of their lives buried underground in burrows created by shrews and moles, hence their name. Spotted salamanders are familiar as the large black salamander with bright yellow spots seen crossing local roads in early spring en route to their breeding ponds. Jefferson salamanders and blue-spotted maintain distinct populations in the Shawangunks. However, along the southwestern ridge, some hybridization between these two species has been reported.

Mole salamanders eat worms and invertebrates underground. You won’t see these herps very often because of their fossorial (subterranean) lifestyle. However, once a year they move in a mass migration to breeding pools to lay their eggs. You might chance to see them either in early spring, as with the spotted, blue spotted, and Jefferson salamanders, or in the fall, the marbled salamanders, as they leave their burrows en route to their breeding ponds—possibly the same ponds they were born in! Salamander eggs hatch in a couple of weeks. The larval salamanders mature in a few months into four-legged juvenile salamanders, and then they leave the pond or vernal pool. They may sometimes travel a distance of a mile or two from their birthplace. Other lungless salamanders, or Plethodontids, such as the red-backed and dusky salamander, reside on the Gunks, but we’ll delve more into those “sallies” in a future article.

*Bill Cutler has a degree in biology from Binghamton University with concentrations in environmental science and geology. He has worked as the Sullivan County Recycling Coordinator for 25 years. Bill leads “herp” walks for the Basha Kill Area Association as well as the Sullivan County Audubon Society. Susan Erny is a Friends board member.*



**ABOVE:** The Spotted Salamander [*Ambystoma maculatum*] seen in the Shawangunks every Spring. The beautiful adults are 6 to 10 inches long. Photo by Brian Grutwicke.



**LEFT:** The Blue-Spotted Salamander [*Ambystoma laterale*] has long toes, four on its front feet and five on its rear. Photo by Greg Schecter.

# THE SHAWANGUNK GRASSLANDS WILDLIFE REFUGE

Casimir Nozkowski

**WALKING THE SHAWANGUNK Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge** can be a great change of pace for the Shawangunk hiker. The most striking element must be its apparent “emptiness.” Not quite as flat as a pancake—but close—it consists of 566 acres of grassland and some small wet spots. There are very few trees or shrubs and they lie mostly around the margins of the property. Instead of the usual Shawangunk menu of leafy paths and overgrown roads, of ravines, hills, escarpments and babbling watercourses, here there is no middle ground. Your eye instead gets a simple choice, between the detailed or the grand.

Visiting a few times, in late summer and early this last autumn, we saw dragonflies, flycatchers, grasses and flowers, and we looked at the extraordinary “big” sky with a thirty-mile length of the Shawangunk Ridge, from Bonticou into Sullivan County, lying below it.

Not being birders—and walking at midday besides—we did not see any of the 12 local species of birds dependent on this kind of grassland. They would include the bobolink, eastern meadowlark, grasshopper sparrow, horned lark, northern harrier, savannah sparrow, the short-eared owl and the upland sandpiper. (See “*Babysitting the American Kestrel*” on page 4.) Habitat destruction is endangering all of these birds in our area hence the creation of the refuge.

Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge is just off Hoagerburgh Road, close to the village of Wallkill, lying between the Shawangunk Kill and the Wallkill River. The 566-acre refuge offers a few one to two-mile loops and trails that cut through high grasses and circle out from the parking lot about a thousand feet in from the road. There are also a handful of blinds and one observation deck for birding.

The refuge’s previous incarnation was as the Galeville Military Airport, created in the early 1940s by filling in a wetland. It was used for five decades to train federal marshals, FBI agents and West Pointers. A nearby farm-stand operator called it “that secret CIA base.” According to Wikipedia, the airport was decommissioned in 1994 “and turned over to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1999.” This was not an uncommon occurrence at the time. A 2011 article in the *Geographical Review* reveals, “nearly two dozen major military sites have been closed and reclassified, adding more than 1 million acres to the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge System” since the 1980s. The Fish and Wildlife website counts the Shawangunk Refuge “among a dwindling number of sites in New York State large enough to support the entire assemblage of northeastern grasslands birds.”

Two years ago the runways, excluding a short length used for the parking lot, were covered with soil, adding another thirty acres of grasses. The Fish and Wildlife Service mows twenty percent of the refuge every five years to maintain the grassland. The occasional tree you see spotted about is part of the management program: on every ten acres one mature tree will be left for predatory species. Invasive control is also underway using several strategies. The goal is to have more than 90% of the plants here consist of local species. A kiosk at the entrance to the refuge has two excellent pamphlets: one covers the Grasslands as a whole and the other focuses on birds and birding.

Walking the Shawangunk Grasslands Wildlife Refuge is a different kind of Shawangunk experience. It is very beautiful in a unique way and brings us to a special understanding of our ecosystem, full of the poetry of contrasts.

*Casimir is a filmmaker based in Brooklyn, NY*



**ABOVE:** Trail following old North-South runway. Millbrook Mountain at far left, Bontecou is straight ahead.

**LEFT:** Boundary Marker.

**RIGHT:** One mature tree for predators is planned for every ten acres.

**FAR RIGHT:** A blind for birding.



PHOTOGRAPHS: CASIMIR NOZKOWSKI





# Babysitting the American Kestrel *by Zach Smith*

**I AM DRAWN to open spaces.** The opportunity to see great distances, to have a greater perspective on the landscape beyond my immediate surroundings is both comforting and humbling. I frequently travel to such landscapes—deserts, grasslands, beaches and agricultural valleys—in search of other creatures that like a broad horizon—raptors.

After recently moving to New Paltz, an area where open habitats are relatively scarce, I soon found my way to the Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge (SGNWR). While enjoying the Short-eared Owl show at dusk on my first visit, I could not help but notice the nest boxes in place around the refuge for American Kestrels. I had monitored boxes elsewhere in the past for this diminutive falcon to document reproductive success. Working with nest boxes provides an intimate view of the birds' breeding life. The boxes also provide nesting sites where natural ones are few or nonexistent. One of the perks of this work is banding the nestlings when they come of age. Few would deny that falcon chicks are the cutest of the raptor clan.

Our continent's smallest diurnal raptor, the American Kestrel has a taste for grasshoppers, an affinity for wide-open spaces and a fondness for prefab housing, usually a cavity in a dead tree. Or... a custom-made nest box. They are ubiquitous inhabitants of agricultural lands and are often shrugged off as 'just another kestrel.' These tiny predators make up for heft with a knack for the deft. They can hover with uncanny stillness over a grassy slope, waiting for a lizard's moment of inattention, or pluck an agile dragonfly out of the air, rip off the wings and gobble it down, all without having to land. By far the most colorful of North America's raptors, kestrels are also one of a small handful of species in which the male and female display markedly different plumages. The species is also declining in the northeast, which may be hard to believe since they are still among North America's most common raptors. Open space they prefer is actually becoming scarce as factors such as development, incompatible farming practices and re-forestation continue to increase. Nest boxes are successful management tools that have helped maintain kestrel populations throughout their range.

"Kiii-ki-kikikiki!!"

This delightful sound greets your ears upon approaching a kestrel nest box - one or both parents giving you their not-so-gentle version of "Keep Out!" It is a sure sign that something quite valuable rests inside that box. I will visit a box at least once during the egg-incubation stage and twice during the nestling stage to count eggs and nestlings. After incubation is well underway, a pair of kestrels is unlikely to desert the nest after such a disturbance. Their investment is too great and there is likely insufficient time to restart the nesting process.

After I am fairly certain the female has gotten

down to the business of laying eggs, I will have a look inside the box to get a count of her clutch. She'll lay 4-5 eggs at one-day intervals, and she will incubate them for about a month. This gives a rough idea of when to expect nestlings. Shortly after hatching occurs, the male will start making regular prey deliveries to the female in the box. She will gradually spend more and more time outside of the box. Now I get to take another look inside the box to see how old the nestlings are, which informs on when I can return to band them. I am lucky that kestrel researchers elsewhere have produced a photographic guide to nestling ages, so this is straightforward. The chicks need to be young enough so as not to prematurely fledge, but old enough to regulate their own body temperature. For kestrels, this falls somewhere between 12-20 days old.

The banding day arrives (very exciting) and I make sure I have the necessary gear--extension ladder, banding kit, basket or box to transport the chicks between nest box and the ground, and a camera. I try to make these visits during the morning before it's too hot. The adults will likely be yelling their cacophonous greeting I mentioned earlier. After climbing to the box, which is ideally 10-20 feet high on a tree or pole, I carefully open it to see what I'm up against. First of all, the box is usually pretty disgusting with whitewash (bird poop) and prey re-

ALL KESTREL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZACH SMITH



mains. Hopefully I am greeted by 4 or 5 young falcons that are torn between fear and wanting to rip my fingers off. All of this feathered fury is gently put into my carrier and down we go. The carrier is mostly dark with ventilation holes. If

they can't see any danger, they remain relatively calm.

I try to get nestlings banded and measured as quickly as possible to minimize stress to the birds. To the parents, I am an unwelcome predator that is most definitely trying to eat their offspring. Anyway, bands go on first. Each one has a unique number that identifies the bird wearing it, as well as an address where anyone who recovers the band can find out where the bird was banded. I quickly weigh each chick and check for ectoparasites (feather lice, flat-flies), which can be common on nestling raptors. A couple of photos for each bird and then back up to the safety of the nest box. Ideally, the entire visit takes no more than 1/2 hour.

I can only hope all of the chicks I just banded will fledge successfully. While the odds are against such a grand slam, I am optimistic at least two will survive to independence. With the ongoing assistance from nest boxes, like the ones at the SGNWR, kestrels will remain a vibrant and engaging fixture in habitats across the northeast.

*After growing up in San Diego, Zach attended UC Davis and subsequently embarked on the life of a transient field biologist. This has taken him all over the US and abroad chasing raptors. When not doing this, he will most likely be riding his bike, rock climbing at the Trapps or looking through binoculars at other birds. He currently lives in New Paltz with his wife Elizabeth, Dax the dog and Louise the cat.*

# ALL THOSE ACORNS! *Jean Lerner*



**ANYONE HIKING on the Ridge** this past fall couldn't help but notice that there was a bumper crop of acorns. They ricocheted down from the canopy, bounced off our heads, and rolled around under our feet like marbles. If you tend to hike only locally, what you might not notice is that years with a bumper crop (a.k.a. "mast years") are synchronized over huge geographic areas, and that all the nut producing trees, including the various conifer species in the forest, participate. There are lean years, average years, and mast years; in a mast year an oak tree has many hundreds more acorns than in a lean year. Hikers might remember the last great mast year in 2010, whereas 2011 was a bust.

Despite records going back many hundreds of years, the exact cause of this phenomenon has been a tough nut to crack (pun intended) for scientists. Theories abound: warm April followed by cool May; more rain or less rain than average; frost at the right or wrong time, El Nino, etc. Although none of the theories adequately explains the observed variations, the consensus seems to be coming down on the side of evolutionary strategy, i.e., starve the predators some years to reduce their populations, then flood the market so that enough of the crop will survive to reproduce. About the only certainty is that a great mast year will be followed by a year with very few nuts.

To further confuse things, not all acorns are created equally. Some oaks produce acorns every year; others take two years to mature their crop. Chestnut oaks (named for the shape of their leaves, but also known as rock oaks, for where they like to grow) are abundant in the Gunks. They are in the white oak group, which matures seed in one growing season. Their acorns germinate in the fall soon after hitting the ground. Also found in the Gunks are members of the red oak group, which requires two growing seasons to produce acorns, which then sprout the following spring. Animals know to stash away the high-tannin, high-fat red oak acorns for munching on over the winter, whereas the sweeter, higher-carb white oak acorns are generally eaten right off the tree or as soon as they fall.

Deer, bear, squirrels, chipmunks, turkey, mice, jays and many other animals and insects (as well as people) gorge on the nuts. Locally, high mouse densities following a large crop help to keep gypsy moths in check, while at the same time the population of deer ticks increases. A local orchard owner told us that in years when mast is plentiful, the deer don't bother with his apples, preferring the more nutritious acorns. We have heard from local hunters that deer are harder to hunt in a mast year because they don't need to move around a lot to find food. We've also heard that bear meat tastes sweeter when the bears have fattened on acorns.

*Jean is a Board Member of Friends*



ALL ACORN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN LERNER



## NOTES FROM THE SOUTHERN SHAWANGUNKS

### SEVEN PEAKS?

As of February 25, 2016, Seven Peaks has not yet paid the more than \$100,000 in back taxes owed on the “653 acres of prime mountaintop lands with stunning views in all directions” as Paul Smart described developer Shalom Lamm’s property in the June 2014 SHAWANGUNK JOURNAL. The planned park of 59 luxury homes with a five-acre lake is still on hold. Not since November 2014 have the developer’s representatives come before the Mamakating Planning Board. The Planning Board engineer, Larry Paggi, has identified a number of problems with the developer’s plans: wastewater treatment, storm water management, area of disturbance for each construction phase, subsurface sewage disposal systems, testing of groundwater levels, aquifer test data on bedrock wells, and validity of percolation tests. These issues have yet to be addressed by the developer. Stay tuned!  
—SUSAN ERNY



LOOKING SOUTH, THE BASHAKILL IN WINTER photographed by Renee Zernitsky

### YET ANOTHER HUGE DEVELOPMENT

As if the proposed Seven Peaks development isn’t enough of a threat to the ridge, along comes a proposal for commercial/residential development in Deerpark, on the Shawangunk’s western flank. DaTang Development has filed an application to build on 190 acres:

- a 250,000 square foot hotel with 800 – 900 parking spaces.
- 662 residential units.
- three retail buildings of 15,000, 30,000 and 100,000 square feet.
- an additional 6,100 parking spaces, 300 of them underground.

This development would be off of Galley Hill Road that lies between Routes 209 and 211. The road would be upgraded to three lanes. All this is possible because zoning in Deerpark allows for 70% coverage of the 190-acre tract.

The environmental review process is just getting started, and local citizens are organizing to fight this proposal. The Basha Kill Area Association, which already has its hands full with Seven Peaks and two other off-the-ridge projects, has agreed to assist the local effort by serving as a conduit for tax-deductible contributions. —KEITH LABUDDE

## Shawangunk WATCH

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*Friends of the Shawangunks, Inc.  
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preserve open space in the Shawangunks.*

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The latest financial report of  
Friends of the Shawangunks  
and The Shawangunk Conservancy  
may be obtained by writing to the  
Office of the Attorney General,  
Charities Bureau,  
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271,  
or by writing to us at  
the above address.

## PROTECTING LAND IN THE SHAWANGUNKS

### THE RAMEY PARCEL ON THE COXING KILL



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN HAYES

THE SHAWANGUNK RIDGE has long been a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts and lovers of nature. Starting in 1869 with the opening of the Mohonk Mountain House and later the Minnewaska Mountain House by the Smiley family, generations of visitors to the “Gunks” marveled at its sky lakes, cliffs, pitch pine barrens and extensive scenery. Today, much of the land accumulated by the Smiley families at Lake Mohonk and Lake Minnewaska has been incorporated into two vast conservation holdings—the 23,000-acre Minnewaska State Park Preserve (the largest park preserve in New York State), and the 8,500-acre Mohonk Preserve (the largest privately supported nature preserve in the state).

But something equally important has happened over the last twenty-five years. Local and regional conservation organizations such as Friends of the Shawangunks (FOS) have worked year after year to protect additional lands on the entire length of the Shawangunk Ridge—from Rosendale to Port Jervis near the New Jersey border—creating one of the larger assemblages of conservation land in the New York metropolitan region. Today, over 45,000 acres of land on the Shawangunk Ridge is permanently set aside for habitat protection and public outdoor recreational use, making it—along with Harriman State Park and the Catskill Park—one of the largest “reserves” within a several hours’ drive of New York City.

Assembling an ecological reserve of this size—over 68 square miles of land—requires the conservation community to acquire land parcel by parcel over a period of many years. Since 1986 the State of New York and its conservation partners, including FOS, have acquired over 150 separate parcels of land ranging in size from one acre to 4,870 acres. And while many of the larger parcels are acquired by well-funded organizations like the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and Open Space Institute, every once in a while a parcel becomes available which requires the financial assistance of FOS and local donors.

This is the case with the Ramey parcel, a 49.7-acre parcel of land located in the Clove, a valley in the northern reaches of the Shawangunks, bounded on three sides by the Mohonk Preserve. Located in the upper part of the Coxing Kill watershed, the Ramey Parcel includes an important section of a 140-acre patch of hemlock/northern hardwood forest. Both Clove Road and the Coxing Kill, one of the major streams of the northern Shawangunks, run through it, and the parcel protects a portion of the rocky summit (known as “Ronde Barre”) that lies near its northern border. Approximately 15 acres of the Ramey parcel lie northwest of Clove Road, while the remaining 35 acres lies southeast of it and is bisected by the Coxing Kill. In addition to protecting an important viewshed, the parcel includes important plant and animal habitat. The obvious way to protect this parcel was to add it to the 8,500-acre Mohonk Preserve that almost completely surrounds it.

*continued on the next page* 7



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The property was owned by Carrie Ramey, who purchased it in 1971 and who had a long-term affection for the Clove and the Shawangunks. When the property unexpectedly became available for purchase last year, Mohonk Preserve had to quickly raise the funds to acquire it.

Raising the purchase price in a timely fashion was the problem. Mohonk Preserve was able to provide a portion of the funds required, but it still had financial commitments to fulfill with respect to its other recent land acquisitions. This is where Friends of the Shawangunks and members of its board of directors played a critical and timely role. The FOS board quickly realized the ecological importance of the Ramey parcel, and the desirability of adding it to the thousands of acres of protected land held by Mohonk Preserve. FOS became a "lead" donor by pledging to contribute \$60,000 over three years to Mohonk Preserve for the purchase. Several board members contributed nearly \$60,000 in additional funds. By acting quickly, FOS and its board members not only provided funds but also sent a strong message about the importance of the parcel and the need to protect it. This action leveraged enough additional gifts which, along with funds provided by the Mohonk Preserve, enabled the Preserve to purchase the property for \$331,500.

This was not the first time that FOS had come to the rescue. Several years ago, FOS provided \$85,000 to Open Space Institute, enabling it to acquire Joppenbergh Mountain, a 121-acre preserve in the heart of hamlet of Rosendale that is adjacent to the 24-mile Wallkill Valley Rail Trail. Now owned and operated by the Wallkill Valley Land Trust, this preserve would not have been created but for the action taken by Friends of the Shawangunks.

Obviously, creating a 45,000-acre reserve in the mid-Hudson River Valley requires tens of millions of dollars and often involves purchasing large tract of lands, such as the 4,780-acre Sam's Point Preserve or the 2,518-acre Awosting Reserve. But equally important are smaller parcels that if inappropriately developed would mar the spectacular Shawagunk scenery. Often when these parcels come on the market a quick response is required, which FOS is often able to provide. The 49-acre Ramey parcel was acquired by the Mohonk Preserve in February of 2016, and FOS and its directors are proud of the critical role they played in protecting this important piece of the Shawagunk landscape.

PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN HAYES



**YES!** This is important work and I want to be a part of the effort to save the Shawangunks.  
I WOULD LIKE TO JOIN OR RENEW MY MEMBERSHIP.

CUT OUT ALONG DOTTED LINE

- BENEFACTOR** \$250.
- PATRON** \$100.
- FAMILY** \$25.
- INDIVIDUAL** \$15.
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I would like to make an additional contribution to  
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