

# DU a vital new partner in conserving New York State's Great Swamp

by Ned Sullivan



Theodore Roosevelt said, “Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children’s children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.”

Wetlands may be America’s most underappreciated natural wonders. For centuries, they were considered wastelands—until it was discovered that they contain incredibly rich soils. Then the race was on to drain and clear them for farming. Only in recent decades have wetlands been given their due. Today they’re recognized for possessing some of the world’s most biologically productive ecosystems and also providing significant benefits for humans.

Duck hunters and environmentalists have a mutual interest in protecting wetlands. And the Great Swamp, located in New York’s Harlem Valley, is a prime candidate for such a shared preservation initiative.

Encompassing about 6,000 acres and spanning nearly 20 miles in eastern Dutchess and Putnam counties, the Great Swamp is a critical stopover for migrating waterfowl as well as a significant breeding habitat for wood ducks, mallards and Canada geese. It supplies many recreational opportunities—hunting, fishing, paddling, hiking—that support a \$4.7 billion regional tourism industry sustaining 60,000 jobs. It plays an important role in purifying water before it reaches local aquifers and reservoirs furnishing New York City with the world’s cleanest drinking water. And it acts as a giant sponge, holding back floodwaters from intense storms that otherwise could inundate nearby homes, businesses and infrastructure.

The unsurpassed natural splendor of the Great Swamp also makes it a spectacular place to seek inspiration and restore one’s soul. Recently I had the pleasure of paddling through the swamp, and I was moved by its serenity and abundance of wildlife. But I also noticed the threats it faces from encroaching development.

Fortunately, many organizations have been engaged in helping to protect the Great Swamp and raising awareness about the urgency of their mission. These groups include the Friends of the Great Swamp (FrOGS), Oblong Land Conservancy, Dutchess Land Conservancy, Putnam County Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land and Open Space Institute. A FrOGS-led coalition of these groups, working closely with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, obtained funding under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act from the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) to protect over 1000 acres of wetland and upland buffer in the Great Swamp. These organizations also prevailed upon the Highlands Coalition to rank the Great Swamp Watershed as the top priority for protection under the Highlands Act, and in 2008, the USFWS gave DEC \$1 million to help buy the 600 acre Haviland Hollow Parcel. Critical to their success is the partnership with private landowners who have joined them in preserving key properties along the Great Swamp and within its 62,000-acre watershed.

With the creation of the Dutchess County chapter, Ducks Unlimited (DU) promises to be a valuable partner in defending and conserving the Great Swamp. It has the track record to make a difference: Since 1937, DU has invested over \$124 million dollars to protect more than half a million acres within the Atlantic flyway—including 46,057 acres in New York State, which has lost 60 percent of its wetland habitats. Sarah Fleming, DU’s regional biologist, brings her experience coordinating DU’s efforts in protecting, enhancing and restoring habitats along the Great Lakes to Dutchess County. She provides expertise and enthusiasm to the new chapter and will help guide its collaboration with individuals, landowners, federal and state agencies, scientific communities and environmental groups.

With DU on board, now is the time for all engaged in protecting the Great Swamp to push their collaboration to the next orbit—to preserve it as a habitat and stopover for waterfowl, a world-class hunting ground, a terrific destination for engaging in recreation, and a place vital for sustaining human health.

Returning to Teddy Roosevelt, he said, “Wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must and we will.” Working together, you can turn words into action and save the Great Swamp.

*Ned Sullivan is president of Scenic Hudson, an environmental and land preservation organization based in Poughkeepsie focused on protecting land along the Hudson River. This article is adapted from remarks delivered at the newly chartered Dutchess County Ducks Unlimited First Annual Great Swamp Shoot in September, 2013.*