

INTRO: Land trusts are usually small non profits, working in specific geographic areas—a certain county or town—to try to save land from development. For a long time, a lot of land trusts managed their properties as preserves, allowing nature study and passive recreation, but not much else. But now, many have begun re-evaluating this approach, and have started merging ecological goals with compatible economic ones as this naturalist Laurie Sanders explains on this week's Field Notes.

Field Notes: East Quabbin Land Trust, Beef and Birds
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[crickets] Visiting the Mandell Hill Farm in Hardwick, MA is like stepping back in time. There's a stillness here and a breathtaking view, old stonewalls and foundations and fences. [moo] Chris Bulow is a board member of the East Quabbin Land Trust and a life long resident of Hardwick. He says this property has been farmed for more than 200 years, and in its heyday in the early 1900s, it was renowned throughout New England for its Guernsey cattle. [moo]

AX1: When we first acquired this property in 2003, we looked at it and we tried to figure out what would be the best direction to move forward with the property. And we decided that the agricultural base was a major mission of the land trust.

And by leasing the land to a farmer, the land trust could play a role in sustaining local agricultural and at the same time, it could help cover its own operating expenses. But agriculture and economics weren't their only objectives. Bulow says he and other board members also recognized that this particular property could—if managed properly-- provide great habitat for grassland birds.

AX2: We realized that this plateau up here, especially when connected to the neighboring fields that are abutting us, come together to about 50 acres of open grassland. Which is really regionally significant from a grassland bird management perspective.

Species like bobolinks, meadowlarks, and savannah sparrow are in trouble. Here in New England, many of the open fields of yesteryear have grown up into forests or been developed into house lots. In the fields that still exist, the birds face a different risk. Haying activities. Bulow says the birds have time to set up territories and start nesting, but not enough time to finish raising their young.

AX3: What's happening in most cases is that the fields are being harvested before that process ends. Essentially destroying the nesting attempt every time, and the birds won't re-nest. So you can kind of follow that to its conclusion, year after year, these birds are coming up here and getting zero reproductive success and really populations are crashing as a result.

[sound of walking through grass] And that's where Ridge Shinn comes in. Shinn is a local farmer who raises grass-fed beef on these fields. His goal is to not cut hay—ever.

AX5: The real end game for the cattle is to try to not make hay. Making hay is not an economically sustainable deal. The reality is that every day that the bovine can walk out and eat

some, versus every day you got to go to the barn and haul something out to the bovine, is tremendous money in your pocket. [sound of fencing wire being rolled out]

On these fields, Shinn's cattle are playing the same role as the bison did in the Great Plains—once the stronghold for grassland birds. Keeping the trees out and the grass healthy.

AX6: Hey guys come on, we'll give you some new grass. [sound of cattle sort of stampeding through]

To make sure his cows don't trample any nests, during the nesting season, Shinn pastures his cattle in the fields on the property that have good forage for cows, but are too small for grassland birds to use. Then, once the nesting season is over, he moves his cattle on to these bigger fields—fields that are 10 acres or more in size. [stampeding continues, then munching]

AX8: The bovine is the only one that's 100% solar energy. You can do it on grass. And actually when you do it on grass, the meat is tremendously healthy for you. You know, the fats are the right kinds of fats. You have a perfect balance of omega 3, omega 6 fatty acids. The chance of having E.Coli in these meats is virtually negligible. You can't get mad cow. There's all these benefits, and beyond that, the meat tastes great. [sound of munching up as cows settle in to feed] When you see a bunch of cattle with their heads down, you know they're content. That's their job in life.

Shinn's says, by collaborating with the local land trust, he's been able to start a profitable grass fed beef business--something he wouldn't have been able to do if he'd had to buy this land outright.

AX9: It's a win: win. I don't have to capitalize this piece of land. I'm not paying a note on it. I'm just paying a yearly lease, which is reasonable for me. And they have someone taking care of it and actually improving, versus having to pay to have that done.

And other farmers are taking note. Last spring, Shinn led a tour here for farmers from around the United States, and Bulow says local farmers are also seeing the potential benefits.

AX10: One of our major intentions of this property is also to work as a model for the community. *To show how working profitable agriculture can be compatible with sustainable ecology, especially with grassland birds. A lot of these farmers who were very skeptical of what we were doing back in 2003 and 2004 and who said they couldn't work with a lease like this, are now approaching Ridge and approaching us, and saying you know I've been watching what you guys are doing and we're starting to see how this could work.*

This year the land trust, with Ridge Shinn's help, cleared a 5-acre patch of forest that had grown up between two fields, and for the first time, Chris Bulow found bobolinks and savannah sparrows nesting in those fields. Meanwhile, Ridge Shinn is expanding his herd, and selling his grass-fed beef to restaurants in New York, Boston and a handful of local markets. For Field Notes, I'm Laurie Sanders.

OUT: For directions to the Mandell Hill Farm, visit the Field Notes website at WFCR.ORG.

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