

## Conserving and Restoring Follett's Brook – An Ecologically Important Tributary of the Great Bay

by NH Audubon Director of Land Management Phil Brown

In 2008, NH Audubon accepted ownership of a 60-acre parcel of forests and fields in Newmarket, NH. This parcel, referred to as the “Kwaks” Wildlife Sanctuary after the landowner who initially sold to The Nature Conservancy and the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership (GBRPP), was formerly a golf driving range. And, it was Phase I of NH Audubon's role in protecting land around Follett's Brook, an-ecologically significant tributary of the Lamprey River, one of the major rivers feeding the Great Bay.



Smith Sisters Sanctuary above by Phil Brown.

This month, NHA will acquire ownership of another key parcel in this sub-watershed, this one affectionately called the “Smith Sisters” Wildlife Sanctuary. The Smith sisters all have different last names now, but these five sisters who recently sold to GBRPP all hail from the Smith family lineage in Newmarket, thus bestowing this land with their family's name, at least for now.

The Smith Sisters sanctuary, at just over 115 acres, is about twice the size of the Kwaks sanctuary, and though less accessible by the public, contains a greater mosaic of habitats that are important to numerous species of plants and animals, including some that are listed as “state-threatened.” A scenic, but undeveloped trail system takes visitors past the former Smith house and barn, through an abandoned gravel pit (which is in the process of being reclaimed), through a dry forest of white and pitch pines, across hayfields, through a second-growth hardwood forest, into an abandoned grassland, and finally, to the extensive wetlands of Follett's Brook.

The Kwaks sanctuary contains an older hardwood forest that is typical of Great Bay surroundings – dominated by red and white oaks, white pine, and shagbark hickory. Forested wetlands border Follett’s Brook here, while fields border it on most of the Smith Sisters property. Both are exceptional wildlife habitat, protecting habitat for early successional bird species like blue-winged warbler, American woodcock, ruffed grouse, and Eastern towhee. Additionally, numerous mammal signs – including that of fisher and red fox – and reptiles have been found on these properties.

Together, these two properties are anchors of the Follett’s Brook sub-watershed, one that is considered to contain the highest-ranked habitat in NH by the NH Wildlife Action Plan. Thanks to the work of the GBRPP, of which NHA is a founding member agency, many thousands of acres of important wildlife habitat remain blanketed in green. Still, further conservation of this area’s resource through conservation easements and fee ownership is necessary to preserve the wildlife habitat and a rural character in the growing Great Bay region.

These two properties are great examples of how to retain a working, rural landscape, and at the same time, restore habitats to a more natural state. What visitors would have seen just a few years ago upon entering these properties was a golf driving range and a gravel pit. Now, we’re aiming to replace golf balls with bobolinks through a delayed mowing and improvements of the hayfields, and the gravel pit is being restored in a way that will encourage nesting bank swallows and turtles, while removing invasive plants and stabilizing the sandy soil through a native seeding.