

# RATTLESNAKE GUTTER TRUST NEWSLETTER

## IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

A land ethic gives an ideal of how we should live in nature, and it guides the preservation work of the Trust. What land ethic is the right one for Leverett and Western Massachusetts?

No simple slogan, like "preserve the wilderness" will do for us. We live in a settled land with hundreds of years of history, and even our wildest woodlands, wetlands and ledges are owned as property—most privately owned, a few publicly owned. "Protect endangered species" won't do either, because that kind of protection is an act of desperation, necessary only when damage has gone too far. The point of a land ethic, like the point of a good medical system, must be to maintain health and prevent disease. It fails if it offers only heroic cures. It also fails if it defines nature as something separate from ourselves and our own ways of living and surviving. Our health and nature's health are inseparable.

What if maintaining health requires living in harmony with nature? The Pocumtuck lived in harmony with nature long before the European immigrants arrived. Their "land ethic" showed in their religion, their science, their agriculture, and their whole way of life. But of course it was much easier then than now to live in harmony with nature because there were very few people and they used the original "appropriate technology." We suffer from the bountiful fruits of progress.

A modern land ethic has to give a way of integrating our modern society into nature—multitudes of people, regulated by law, dependent for livelihood on national and international markets, a society in which "the land" is legally defined as property sold, bought, and developed. The character of that vast society, and its problems, are mirrored here in Leverett. A land ethic for Leverett is our contribution to a more general solution. How might we live in harmony with nature and with each other?

The trustees want to share this work on a land ethic for Leverett with the Friends of Rattlesnake Gutter. We would like to hear your thoughts on some of the following questions and issues:

What goals would you like to see incorporated in a Leverett land ethic? How would you reconcile the need to preserve wildlife habitat and promote wildlife survival with the need to provide human habitat and promote human survival? How would you integrate Leverett with the region in reconciling these needs?

How do we preserve significant land while respecting rights of ownership? What tools are at our disposal in making a liveable land ethic in Leverett? Education? Legal? Political? Neighborly? Donations of land or conservation restrictions? Co-housing? Community land trust? What contribution can the Trust and the Friends of Rattlesnake Gutter make?

Do you have a picture of our living in harmony with nature in Leverett? What is it? How would you work to make it happen?

## TRESPASSING

*Trespass—to exceed the bounds of what is lawful, right or just; to offend.*

Leverett lands are laced with trails, wood roads, and logging roads. There are many acres of woodlands, hillsides and mountain tops. Historically, these lands have been the domain of woodsmen, hunters and occasional gathers, such as fern-pickers (for the tanning of hides) at the turn of the century.

These same lands today are increasingly used by hikers, cross-country skiers, horseback riders, bikers, snowmobilers and ATV users, in addition to hunters and the owners who log and cut firewood.

Some lands are liberally covered with "NO TRESPASSING" or "NO HUNTING" signs. Some lands are placed under a special tax category allowing recreational usage in exchange for a lower tax rate. Most large tracts of land are placed in a forestry category, which allows an even lower tax rate, but does not specifically include open usage.

What is a law-abiding, land-respecting, nature-loving person to do, when desiring to "get away from it all" for an afternoon? True, there are still many dirt roads, obviously public, whose use would be unchallenged. However, the pleasure of these roads to the person on foot is decreased by vehicular use, whose pace is considerably different. The use of roads marked "Discontinued—Pass at Your Own Risk" will not be challenged, although the status of these roads is questionable. And what about an obviously much-used trail, with no signs? What about getting off that trail and bushwhacking to a hilltop? How does one know which landowner has agreed to open his field or woods to recreational use? How does the afternoon hiker known whose land it is, anyway, short of researching assessor's maps?

And what is the public-spirited, friendly and sharing land-owner to do, one who is willing to share his land with the above person, but not in large numbers, and not with the user who tramples his newly-seeded field, leaves his pasture gate open, cuts his fence and leaves a path of cans and litter? How can he welcome the one and discourage the other? How can he protect the land he, after all, *owns*?

The concept of land ownership is curious, when put in a larger context. For instance, the thought that land could be *owned* seemed ludicrous to the native Americans. Their concept was of a brief stewardship, of a filial relationship with Mother Earth, based on need, respect and conservation of resources. Intertribal conflict might arise from territorial usage, invasion of hunting or grazing grounds, but not ownership.

The idea of "owning" a piece of land, to do with what they wished, was an integral part of the dream which, along with religious freedom, brought the European settlers to America. And when those eastern lands got too crowded, there was always more land in the vastness of the west. Ownership was unquestioned and understood.

In the country tradition for many years, there was clear separation between the lifestyles of city and country folk, although movement between the two was both individual and periodic. The roles of the "country bumpkin" and the "city slicker" were easily identified. It is only in our lifetime that a blurring has occurred, as technology has allowed city businesses to be carried on in the country and has forced country businesses to adopt professional methods to survive. Current country living can be as sophisticated as desired, whether based on agriculture or business.

As small farms disappear and country homes house those not involved in "living off the land", the concept of land ownership is undergoing subtle changes. Lot sizes do not reflect the amount of land needed to sustain an extended family with a dairy herd, an agricultural crop or a lumber harvest. Instead, lot size and location are chosen to provide the privacy or the scenic view for an owner who earns his living in other ways. Preservation of land for general public use and enjoyment, interest and concern about how land is used has brought us to complicated zoning by-laws designed to protect our property and landscape.

One result is the changing role of "trespassing". In an earlier agricultural day, unwanted intrusion or trespassing, was quickly observed and resolved by the farmer at home working on his land. "No Trespassing" signs usually denoted the proximity of a private estate. An occasional "No Hunting or Fishing" sign was seen, but in general, there was little need to worry about whose land was being crossed. Neighbors were known to each other; respect and understanding of land use was expected. In any case, recreational use of land was only occasional.

Not so today. More leisure time, more indoor jobs more inside than outside work, resulting in the need for exercise as an activity, has brought an expanding group of people to back roads, trails and woods. Leverett is fortunate in having large areas open to this kind of usage. In most cases, no restrictions limit the user. But there are warning rumblings from those whose lands are abused and those whose thoughts of ownership do not include sharing with others.

Many landowners feel strongly about their role as stewards of the land, acting responsibly and with a determination to pass on

their legacy to the next generation. Others maintain their right to "do with the land as they please"—which may or may not be in the long-range interest of the land itself. Few of us are ready to give up the concept of private ownership, but most of us recognize the need for some kind of control and preservation.

Rattlesnake Gutter Trust has been devoting a portion of its regular meetings to a discussion of land ethics, land usage and preservation. We invite your participation through letters, and direct comments.

—Annette Gibavic

## HIKING IN LEVERETT

There are many great hiking trails in Leverett, some long, some short, over many different types of terrain. The most prominent trail travels the north-south length of our town, from the January Hills in Amherst to the Wendell border at a point on Chestnut Hill. This trail—a portion of Metacomet-Monadnock—provides hikers with tremendous opportunities to view historical sites, geological marvels, and acres of woodland away from town roads and human habitation.

The Metacomet-Monadnock is a 117-mile trail through Massachusetts linking the Metacomet Trail in Connecticut to the New Hampshire State Trail System. Originally laid out by Professor Walter Banfield, it is maintained by the Berkshire Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the newly-formed Metacomet-Monadnock Trail Conference. The trail is well-marked by white blazes, usually on trees, with two blazes indicating an abrupt change in direction.

The section of the trail between Shutesbury Road in East Leverett and Richardson Road in North Leverett covers a distance of 4.7 miles over the western height of Brushy Mountain. Most of the length of this section follows an old town road whose stone culverts can still be recognized. Hiking south to north, the trail climbs through stands of hardwood, hemlock, and dense laurel. Small streams cross the trail at several points—those on the south side of the trail's summit feed into Mountain Brook and thence into Roaring Brook; on the north side the freshets flow into the Sawmill River.

On the western height of Brushy, the trail passes stone walls and cellarholes and, just as it begins to descend, an old mill site, evidence of the earlier settlement in Leverett, built on a hilltop when Native Americans still roamed the valleys of the Connecticut River and its tributaries. Some of the cellarholes still bear the signs that were put up for Leverett's bicentennial in 1974, indicating the names and dates of those first settlers. Viewing the stone walls and second growth timber, it is easy to imagine the land cleared for farming and livestock. There's a real sense of the life people lived two centuries ago.

The trail descends through thick hemlock, and in several places it becomes a shallow, rocky stream. It joins a newly re-laid logging road just west of the powerline, and, turning left, runs down to Rattlesnake Gutter Road. The most recent edition of the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail Guide suggests that hikers not familiar with the Gutter take a side trip to view its spectacular rock formations, but the marked trail itself continues north, bearing to the left on Hemenway Road, to pass the coke kilns on its way to a junction with North Leverett Road.



# Flower-Watching in the Gutter

Typically the wildflowers in the dark shady woods of the Gutter Road are early bloomers, showing up before the dense leaves filter out most of the sunlight. Thus the mid-summer hiker is presented with a vast selection of greens—hemlock needles, fern fronds, wildflower leaves, and unripe berries—against the masses of foliage of the deciduous trees. The only prominent spots of color are the pink clusters of the shrubby mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) in early July. However, many less conspicuous flowers can be discovered by those who are willing to look closely.

One of the most interesting and identifiable is the tiny partridge berry (*Mitchella repens*). A common component of terrariums, this minute creeper has small pairs of dark green, rounded leaves, usually with lighter midveins. But what is most interesting is that the tiny flowers are twinned. Each flower has four velvety white petals, and the flowers are actually joined at their bases like floral Siamese twins. When the plump red berries form, they reveal their double origin by bearing separate scars of two groups of petals—looking just like two tiny leg-holes on an elfin pair of red rubber pants!

Two of the most graceful wildflowers both bear their leaves in whorls, but careful observation can separate the starflower (*Trientalis borealis*) and the Indian cucumber root (*Medeola virginiana*) even when blossoms are not present.

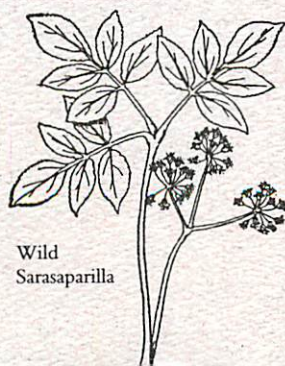


Starflower

First, the starflower: it is the one with a showy white bloom followed by an almost unnoticeable fruit. The flowers appear in late May (usually in the company of the pink lady-slipper) and look like many pointed stars on slender stalks above a whorl of light green leaves. The slightly irregular leaves are elongated and diamond-shaped. The fruits, when present, are small dry capsules with grayish waxy seeds.

The whorled leaves of the Indian cucumber root are shinier, more regular, and more oval in shape, with the parallel veins typical of its family, the Liliaceae. On flowering specimens, this circle of leaves is surmounted by a second stalk bearing a whorl of three or four smaller leaves, where the dangling greenish flowers are attached. These flowers almost appear to be dangling spiders rather than blossoms. The showy part of this plant's life comes in the fall, when the leaves—especially the upper ones—become tinged and streaked with a deep beet color, forming a petal-like frame for the dark blue-black berries. The plant's Latin name comes from the sorceress Medea, but its supposed medical uses seem to have vanished from the literature. Its culinary virtues are discussed by Euell Gibbons in *Stalking the Healthful Herbs*, explaining the common name Indian cucumber root.

Adding to the autumnal display of richly colored berries are three other plants of these woods—the large *Aralia nudicaulis* (wild sarsaparilla), the curving false Solomon's seal (*Smilacina racemosa*), and its modest cousin the Canadian mayflower (*Maianthemum canadense*).



Wild Sarsaparilla

The *Aralia*'s deep blue-black fleshy drupes and the clear scarlet berries of the others provide jewel-like accents to the fading, gold-brown forest floor.

The *Aralia* is a member of the Ginseng family, and its root is supposedly inter-changeable with that of the official Sarsaparilla. Its berries are also aromatic; my teacher Harry Ahles and I once made a "jam" from them—pretty, bitter, and spicy—herbal in flavor. The leaf of the *Aralia* is large and split into leaflets, first into three parts, with each part again divided into five toothed oval leaflets. The early flower clusters appear on a separate leafless ("naked") stalk. The flowering cluster is also divided, usually into three balls of pale greenish florets.

The false Solomon's seal is so named because its leaves resemble those of the true Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*). It grows in an arching stem bearing smooth, alternating, oval leaves and ending in a terminal triangular cluster of white foam-fairy flowers, each one a dainty six-pointed star with a faint perfume. These flowers turn to green and then bronze mottled berries, growing heavier and heavier, pulling the stem into a deeper curve. Ultimately the berries turn a translucent ruby-red.



False Solomon's Seal

The false Solomon's seal (*Smilacina*) has a little cousin, *Maianthemum canadense*, known variously as wild lily-of-the-valley, Canadian mayflower, or two leaved Solomon's seal. It is only a few inches high, with two or three leaves hugging an erect stem, topped by a similar cluster of white starry flowers. The main difference, apart from size, is that each *Maianthemum* flower is a four-point star in contrast to the six-pointed *Smilacina* blossoms. The subsequent berries are almost identical in appearance to those on the larger plant, and vast colonies of *Maianthemum* form carpets on the forest floor.

So, hikers, take the time as you walk the quiet path, to turn your eyes a moment from the spectacle of the gorge and notice some of the individual plants which add their living softness to the cold and crumbling stones.

—M.L. McGuigan

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	1st Week	2nd Week	3rd Week	4th Week
JULY	<p>1982: Scarlet Tanager spotted. Heard Cuckoo.</p> <p>1988: Woodcocks still grunting and whirring. Great din of birdsongs before dawn ("world waking").</p> <p>1991: Swallows about to fledge, phoebes fledged, four brown creepers. Barred owl on road, broadwing hawk over meadow, great blue heron. Mosquitos! Red admiral butterflies appear.</p>	<p>1984: 2 swallow babes still in SE house. Baby thrush alone in meadow. Spidewort down in production but still blooming.</p> <p>1985: Honeysuckle has bugs, quince is schwach, brown-eyed susans bloom, Sweet William going by. Black raspberries in for some days now. Blueberries beginning.</p> <p>1986: Quince strong. Aphids on apples, purple spots on pears. Sweet William in strong bloom. Black raspberries hardly begun. Phoebes on second nest.</p>	<p>1984: Thunder storm, rainbow.</p> <p>1985: roses magnificent. Families of orioles, jays, hermit thrush, barn swallows, juncos, wrens, catbirds, crows.</p> <p>1991: Wrens moved into vacated swallow houses.</p> <p>Indian pipes bloom in deep woods; watch for sphinx moth larvae on tomatoes.</p>	<p>1981: Juvenal porcupine in apple tree. Phoebes fledge.</p> <p>1991: Cedar waxwings, warblers, vireos, flickers, red and white breasted nuthatches all over the place. Baby jays whine loudly. Cherry trees full of birds. Purple finches and goldfinches eat seeds of weeds.</p> <p>Wasp and hornet nests are complete. Watch for toads in the garden.</p>
AUGUST	<p>1984: Cedar Waxwings, warblers, orioles, robins in cherry trees.</p> <p>1988: Sphinx moth in garden. Perigrine Falcons at U.Mass. Wild blueberries.</p> <p>Goldfinches nest, barn swallows begin to gather. Night-singing insects in full chorus.</p>	<p>1990: Great blue heron fishing on pond.</p> <p>1991: Red breasted grosbeaks in cherry. Sixteen baby swallows on the TV antenna.</p> <p>Corn ripens. Watch for Perseid meteor showers.</p>	<p>1984: Wrens nesting in SW house.</p> <p>1990: Bats still hunting over meadow at dusk.</p> <p>1991: Hurricane Bob. Tree down on drive. Lost phone and electricity. No birds or birdsongs the day after. Plant fall crops in garden. First asters bloom. Watch for nighthawks.</p>	<p>1987: Birds quiet in early a.m. Strange. Nighthawk migration.</p> <p>1990: Sounds of August are waxwings and jays. Great crested flycatcher calls in eve, titmouse in morn. Many kinglets came through. Swallows gathering on wires.</p> <p>1991: Female oriole and babe in berry-bearing weeds. Vireo babe. Kingbird family. Many robins in meadow. Crickets.</p> <p>Barn swallows leave. First wave of fall warbler migration.</p>
SEPTEMBER	<p>1982: Nighthawk migration.</p> <p>1987: Catbird still here.</p> <p>1988: Crowds of redbreasted nuthatches. Flock of robins in meadow, many adolescents.</p> <p>Listen for screech owls. Apples ripen.</p>	<p>1982: Jays gang up on small hawk. Working on trail, a saw whet owl came to look us over.</p> <p>1991: Multitudes of birds in meadow. Flickers, phoebe, jays, nuthatches, creeper, chickadees, goldfinch, robins at eve.</p> <p>Goldenrod blooms, first frost.</p>	<p>1984: Frosts in meadow. Silent days, no birdsongs.</p> <p>1989: Hurricane Hugo, only winds here.</p> <p>1990: Canada geese migrating.</p> <p>1990: Hawk watch a Mt. Tom Reservation: kettles of broadwings, osprey, sharpies, redtails, TV's and a peregrine. Wowie!</p> <p>Monarch butterfly migration begins. Autumnal equinox, September 21.</p>	<p>1985: Hurricane Gloria, eye went over at 4 pm but she was pooped.</p> <p>1989: Many flickers in the meadow. Hawk scattered them. River otters at pond.</p> <p>1991: The bats leave.</p>

To help you start your own phenology, we've created this calendar. The italicized notations are selections from a desk diary phenology kept by a North Leverett Friend of the Trust. Undated notations, not italicized, are general observations taken from an Audubon calendar to give some ideas about what to look for.

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