

# RATTLESNAKE GUTTER TRUST

# NEWSLETTER

## Ten Rattles for the Trust: LOOKING BACK TO THE BEGINNING

This being the 10th anniversary of the Rattlesnake Gutter Trust, it is appropriate to look back and muse over the adventure which has brought so many of Leverett's residents together in a common cause. Local home-grown organizations are a bit like skyrockets. They are ignited by some heartfelt issue where people, acting together, feel they can mend or make better a situation by their collective action. Some fizzle on the launch pad, and others sail out of control endangering limb and livestock. Others still arch gracefully into the sky and dazzle onlookers below as a single spark spreads across the night in a wondrous array of color. This is how many of us feel about the unforeseen accomplishments of the Trust over the past decade. These have come not only from the careful laying out of an organization that was expected to endure and the generous and dedicated efforts of the Board of Trustees, but also from the continuous support of our members and their realization that Leverett's nature is an essential part of all of us.

Who would have thought that with the name of Rattlesnake Gutter Trust we would have any future at all. Fortunately we concentrate our efforts on Leverett where the image of the beautiful gutter distracts us from thinking too much about the name—a raging contradiction—which sounds more like a shady real estate

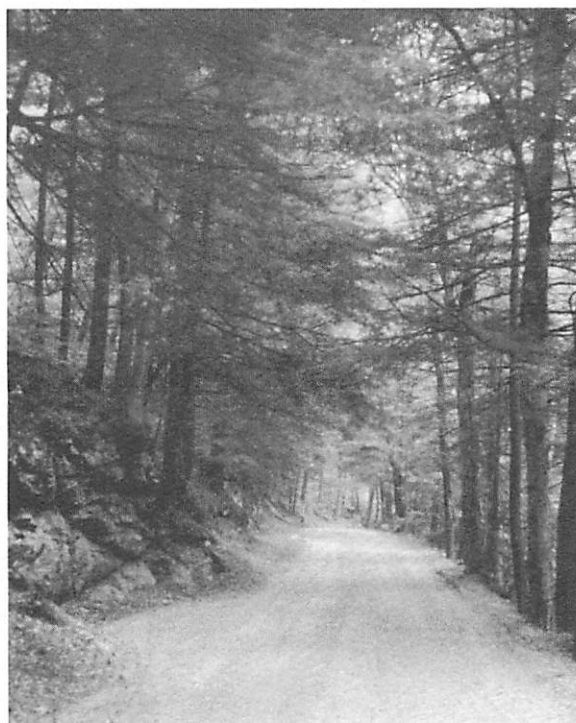
company than a respectable conservation group. Thus, in spite of our name and our T-shirts which once placed a rather realistically coiled rattler just below one's jugular vein, we have persisted and grown, building on our experience. We will spare you from yet another review of our remarkable accomplishments over the years, which by now most members recite by heart before they go to sleep. Instead, we would like to take you back to

events which launched the Trust and took us through our first year or so, for these gave us foundation, direction and energy. We frequently return to this early example when in need of inspiration or confidence in launching a new project.

According to Andrew Scheffey, as far back as 1927 the Gutter was designated as one of the rare and beautiful spots in the region. And in 1977, local geologist Peter Robinson describes it as such:

*Rattlesnake Gutter is both the most spectacular and at the same time the most accessible late glacial spillway in west central Massachusetts. It represents a record of specific events in*

*the immediate geological past that are not likely to be repeated in the age of man on this planet. Except for Rattlesnake Gutter Road, the Gutter itself remains today essentially as it was when the Sawmill River returned to its pre-glacial drainage about 11-12,000 years ago. In its combination of the late geological history, bedrock type, and geologic position, Rattlesnake Gutter is*



essentially unique.

Peter went on to suggest that the Gutter might be threatened within five years under the "heavy" impact of logging, transportation or residential development. Over the next ten years both pressures and concerns for the Gutter's future mounted until two fairly insignificant events sparked the skyrocket.

*"Please don't pick the cardinal flowers!"*

*"I'm getting a snake off Rattlesnake Gutter Road!"*

Two yelled concerns, one for flora and one for fauna, began a coalition of concerned citizens that was to continue through the birth and growth of the Trust. People were picking the rare cardinal flowers that bloomed in the streambed of Doolittle Brook, as it reclaimed its name each summer. Increased traffic on the road was resulting in more threats to wild as well as human life. How long could the Gutter remain pristine? Major changes would be irreversible—forever! Anyway, trash was increasing along the road, as well as over the banks in the ravine.

It was in September 1987, as yellow and red leaves of fall began to sparkle in the ravine, when a group of townspeople sharing these concerns came together as a Steering Committee, acting as Friends of Rattlesnake Gutter. Word that a sizable piece of land (40 acres) straddling the steepest part of the Gutter was on the market provided an immediate goal. Meeting monthly, the Committee decided to become a land trust and agreed to eventually expand its interest to all parts of Leverett.

Next we began formulating a set of goals and by-laws which defined our role as responsible to the town's environment and people: the two—nature and community—should support one another. No, we didn't want to combine with a government group: we needed the flexibility to negotiate with landowners seeking to put their land in conservation agreements in ways that served them best. Yes, we wanted to become an educational force as well as a preservationist group: young people, especially, needed exposure to the intrigue and beauty which lay beyond their backyards. No, we didn't want to prevent growth and change. Nor did we want to buy up every piece of land in Leverett. We would instead concentrate on those special environmental features of town and help preserve them for future generations. And so, as the snows began to fall and deepen, we hammered out the wording of our charter, bringing in experts of this and that to help us through this uncharted ground.

By February 24, 1988, the first Annual Meeting

of the Rattlesnake Gutter Trust was held with thirty-some friends and townspeople in attendance. The By-laws were accepted and officially recorded, and a Board of Trustees was appointed to direct the work of the Trust. Our immediate goal was to raise money to purchase the parcel in the Gutter, and fortuitously a memorial gift of \$5,000 was received to jump-start our work. We were off: the skyrocket was heading upward on track—we hoped.

During that year fund-raising began in earnest while the purchase price of the Gutter parcel danced illusively out of reach. All sorts of schemes, short of selling snake oil, were entertained. T-shirts were created, a calendar was planned, a newsletter published, inflatable snakes lured the brave and unsuspecting to our booths at Harvest Festival and Town Meeting. In addition, Rattlesnake Gutter Trust lifetime memberships (now THAT really sounds suspicious), regular memberships (designed for the more cautious Yankee disposition), pledge drives and gifts gave us an indication that the town was enthusiastically backing our work. John Reid marched groups up the Gutter leaving them in awe that geology could be so dynamic. And with the help of the LES fifth graders pleas went to the populace to send us your spent pop and beer cans. A can collection shelter was constructed and over \$40 was received from deposits.

Finally, a Gutter clean-up was scheduled. We had the road closed for a weekend while groups with garbage bags descended the steep slopes of the ravine. Trash of every kind was recovered and coaxed back up to the road.

*"Can someone help this 70 year old woman up over the bank?"*

*"Sure. This 75 year old woman can!"*

The next day heavy equipment came in to haul up the car parts, refrigerators, and stoves. It is reported that a diving board still lingers in the Gutter's depths. For the first time in a very long time the Gutter was clean. Thereafter, walkers were frequently seen keeping up with roadside deposits, and even the midnight dumpers seemed to respect the heroic effort.

By the second Annual Meeting, it was reported that meetings had occurred with seven different environmental organizations seeking their advice and financial support. We had established a close working relationship with the Conservation Commission. Owners along the Gutter had been contacted with our hopes for preserving the area and their cooperation was requested. And conservation priority areas beyond the Gutter had been identified. The skyrocket had burst into colors. The pattern wasn't quite apparent yet, but it was

# **Rattlesnake Gutter Trust 10th Anniversary Party!!**

April 18, 1998 at the Leverett Elementary School

1 p.m. 10th ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING in the Cafeteria

2 p.m. **BIRDS OF PREY** with Julie Grow Collier  
LES Gymnasium

3 p.m. REFRESHMENTS in the Cafeteria

We invite our friends to join RGT's two hundred members at our local land trust's TENTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION. We will briefly review the past year, elect new trustees and display pictures of the Trust's projects as well as fundraising items, newsletters and brochures. Ten years of success in preserving the special places in Leverett is great cause for celebration. We are pleased to mark this anniversary with a very special program.

## **BIRDS OF PREY**

Julie Grow Collier of *Wingmasters* will bring her LIVE hawks and owls to the Leverett Elementary School (her alma mater) so that you may get a close-up look at their sharp eyes and beaks and talons and at their soft feathers. Come hear Julie tell all about these raptors.

This is Julie's "thank you" to the residents of Leverett for all our efforts to save our special places, most recently East Leverett Meadow.

*Wingmasters* is the partnership of two people, Julie Collier and Jim Parks, who are dedicated to increasing public understanding and appreciation of North American birds of prey. Julie creates wonderful drawings of raptors, researches and makes reproductions of Native American craftwork, and lectures throughout New England. Julie is part Native American; her Indian heritage comes from the Southeastern Creek and Chickasaw tribes. Jim is a nature photographer who has long been drawn to the beauty and wild spirit of owls, hawks, falcons, and eagles. You will see Julie's drawings and Jim's photographs of many raptor species and enjoy a program which features LIVE raptors, all of them nonreleasable birds cared for under Julie's rehabilitation permit.

After Julie's program, refreshments will be served in the cafeteria. Join us for a piece of our birthday cake! It will be a great time to become a member, to renew your membership, to find out what RGT is about.

**COME ONE! COME ALL! BRING YOUR KIDS!!**  
**NO ADMISSION CHARGE!!**

going to be a good one.

Two events set the Trust firmly in place. The 40-acre purchase in the Gutter secured the jewel of Leverett for posterity. Development of this area would have been an incalculable loss geologically, botanically and aesthetically. Instead generation after generation will return to this magnificent gorge and become inspired by its spectacular beauty. For the Trust, participating in the parcel's purchase gave us confidence that we could undertake a large project and count on the town to support our efforts. We are still working with owners of the remaining parcels on preservation agreements. The challenge continues.

The second event was the establishment of the recycling bin at the town dump. Through the hard work of a few individuals, and the cooperation of the town, this has been our largest source of income earning over \$20,000 during the past decade.

Looking back over the remaining nine years, we find the trip has been both enjoyable and rewarding. Enjoyable in that we have tried to educate ourselves on land preservation; to philosophize on what is really important and where we want to go; to invent and actually play homemade ecological games; to take school children up Brushy Mountain; and to perform corny theater and listen to the Gutter Gals belt out their theme song at the dump parade. Rewarding in that we have helped to bring our community together to foster a greater appreciation of Leverett's nature, and to leave behind for our children's children those places in town which we deeply cherish.

Thank you for your support!

—Brooke Thomas

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### *The Gutter Gals* (sung to "Ta Ra Ra Boom-de-ay")

We are the gutter gals, we make such utter pals  
We live down in the caves, most think we're quite depraved  
We dine on lichen stew, but that you probably knew  
We're full of magic charm, no cause for great alarm.

We dance the trails by night, under the full moonlight  
We greet each day with dew, so life begins anew  
We keep the forest green, we like it very clean  
Then rest beneath the lips, before our evening dips.

Through snow and sun and rain, steadfastly we remain  
Protecting plants and all, the creatures great and small  
We sing the birds to sleep, and help the peepers peep  
Then light the stars at night, much to our own delight.

We make the flowers grow, after the winter snow  
In summers after school, we keep the gutter cool  
We paint the leaves in fall, before we close it all  
Our work is never done, but we still do have fun.

Our sponsor's message now, which we'll sing loud, and how  
Recycle all your trash, help turn it into cash  
Your bottles and your cans, help purchase open lands  
And think before you throw, just where your garbage goes.

We are the gutter gals.....

Jean Bergstrom, Georgette Healy,  
Cynthia Kimmel Thomas and Shirley Thomas