Attending summer camp is a common rite-of-passage for many children. It’s at camp where lasting friendships are built and practical skills learned. An appreciation for the natural world is cultivated through experiences such as fishing, hiking and camping. Although most kids don’t get the opportunity to participate in an environmental restoration project that will improve the very camp they return to every summer – at Camp Cutler, they do!

When Bill Banaszewski, photographer and retired professor of Environmental Conservation at Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC), asked me if I would work with him on a conservation success-story, I didn’t hesitate to accept. We set off for Camp Cutler, officially called J. Warren Cutler Scout Reservation, located in South Bristol and Naples, New York. We chose a crisp June morning for a tour of the 1,400-acre site with Senior Ranger, Jeff Emerling. Providing the commentary, Jeff drove one utility-vehicle (UV) with Bill following close behind on another. As we rode, Jeff updated me on the recent inclusion of girls in the Boy Scouts, opening up camp experiences to many more kids. We passed a new pavilion (built by students from FLCC), the air gun and archery ranges, and soccer field before stopping at Wellington Lake.

A large group of middle-schoolers from Irondequoit were busy fishing from the bank. Some excitement erupted further along the shoreline, “I caught one,” an enthusiastic young girl exclaimed as she raised her trophy sunfish. It was the first time she had ever caught a fish. “This happens hundreds of times every season,” Jeff smiled.
Scouts . . . and the fish.
birds, and the trees, and
Built in 1967, the five-acre Wellington Lake was originally stocked with wild trout from Naples Creek and hatchery-raised trout. Over time, the lake has been transformed into a warm-water fishery, stocked with largemouth bass, walleye, perch and crappie. Recently, rainbow trout and splake from the New York State Fish Hatchery in Bath, NY were added. Every April, the camp hosts a fishing derby – last year the winning trophy went to a lucky Camper who caught a 24-inch splake. Jeff reiterates that fishing is a significant part of what campers experience during their stay. Kayaks and canoes are at-the-ready along the waterfront for boaters to mess about in after the fishing is done.

We jumped back on the UVs and headed for the hills. Along the way we passed dozens of Eastern bluebird nest boxes dotting the landscape; more than 200 boxes are installed across the property. Over the years, students and conservation groups helped build bird houses and remove old nesting material prior to the active months of April through July. Successful brood-rearing involves placing boxes far enough from hedgerows to avoid European sparrows and wrens from intruding. The state bird of New York, the bluebird was in serious decline in the late 1960s, but has rebounded due to successful efforts such as this.

Our next stop was probably the prettiest, atop a high hill managed in various successions of grasslands. Jeff explained his use of a three-year rotation of mowing, allowing for various nesting birds to utilize different stages of grass succession. Unlike the bluebird, its numbers are declining as grasslands are converted to crops and housing.

We made our way into the forest, maneuvering skid trails, remnants of recent logging operations. The woods were dense and dappled light led our way. Stopping the vehicle, Jeff brought us to an area of widely spaced trees. In 2012, a 56-acre area of the hilltop was harvested, removing less desirable trees and leaving standing mature, straight oaks of superior form, structure and genetic stock. These remaining trees provide a seed source for the cleared area. To reduce competition from species other than oak, an
herbicide application was made after the initial cut, clearing the undergrowth and making room for fallen acorns to germinate. Jeff recalled how devastated the forest appeared after the treatment and how important it was to post trail-side signage explaining the science behind the process, making their intentions of oak regeneration clear.

The understory came into focus as we approached the stand; carpeting the forest floor were thousands of oak seedlings pushing up from under the fallen leaves, just waiting to catch the sun and reach for the canopy. It had been worth the six year-long wait for this result.

A short distance away are vernal pools, 18-inch deep bodies of water, built as part of a Conservation Stewardship Program grant from
Under the direction of retired Finger Lakes Community College Plant Ecologist, Bruce Gilman, a 15-acre parcel of woods at Camp Cutler was documented by the Western New York Old Growth Forest Survey in 1995. It is one of only three old growth forests identified in Ontario County. This area will remain “forever-wild” and protected by a 100-acre surrounding buffer zone that will also remain untouched by human activity. The oldest tree within the site is a white oak estimated to be over 215 years old. A red oak was measured as the largest tree at 43 inches in diameter and estimated to be over 200 years old.

What is an Old Growth Forest?

Although there is some debate within the forestry community, here are a few characteristics found within old growth forests as described by John Leverett in Eastern Old Growth Forests: Prospects for Rediscovery and Recovery:

• Lack of or minimal disturbance by humans (post-colonization), i.e. no evidence of stumps indicating a history of logging
• Contains trees of all ages including a representative number of individuals reaching their maximum age for that species
• Presence of snags (standing dead trees), large logs on the forest floor, canopy gaps and pit-and-mound topography (caused by tipped-up trees and their root balls decaying in place)
• Stand is in a stable state, also known as a climax forest, with old trees dying of natural causes and being replaced and may continue as such for years to come
• The presence of lichens and fungi in high abundance and diversity

What are some benefits of old growth forests?

• Preservation of wildlife habitat specific to certain species that rely upon this forest type
• Retention of genetic reserves for future tree production health
• Carbon sequestration, helpful in climate change mitigation
• Nutrient cycling necessary for long-term forest health
• Soil conservation leading to reduction of erosion
the National Resource Conservation Service. Their purpose is to develop breeding locations for frogs and salamanders and habitation for aquatic invertebrates and plants. Encouraging these species in the forest increases biodiversity and the ecological functions they contribute.

Forest activities at the Camp are based upon written Forest Management Plans. Marty Dodge, retired Conservation Professor at FLCC, last updated the plan in 2000. Eleven years later, the plan was again updated, addressing the fact that the Appalachian oak-hickory forest was not regenerating in the Bristol Hills region, particularly at Camp Cutler. The goal is to emphasize the restoration of oak and to improve overall tree quality and species composition, which not only helps conserve this waning species-type forest, but also provides revenue.

The Conservation Committee

The success of these conservation efforts is a direct result of the work of the Conservation Committee. Every May, 30 dedicated professionals and volunteers gather to support the activities of the camp with one goal in mind – to balance a meaningful camper experience with the sustainability of natural resources. Don DeClerck, originally Senior Ranger at Cutler, now Camp Operations Director, provides oversight for projects at Camp Cutler, Massawepie, and Babcock Hovey – all of which are located in New York. Don advocates for all conservation projects, and has strong interest in wildlife management. He and Jeff coordinate safe deer hunting practices on the property. Ray Passmore serves as chair of the Conservation Committee, introduced to Camp Cutler through his two sons’ (now grown) involvement in the Scouts. Ray’s story is not unique; this place has special meaning to the more than 100 volunteers he coordinates every year – projects include building...
repair, trail maintenance and erosion control.

When the Committee began updating their Forest Management Plan, DEC Forester, Brice June, became involved. He made specific recommendations for specific areas, such as to harvest or thin pine plantations to promote oak regeneration. Sue and Mark Keister (Keister Consulting Inc.) were hired as consulting foresters to implement the plan. Their job is a fine balancing act; managing what is being cut to comply with the goals of the plan at the same time as ensuring that best management logging practices are followed, resulting in quality harvested material. Sue has worked with a number of area harvesters, utilizing their different specialties and markets. Most recently, Wagner Hardwoods LLC has been doing the work. All parties involved share the Camp’s ethos of forest stewardship and long-term, sustainable management.

Passing It On

Conservation must be taught – this happens on several levels at Camp Cutler. It is essential that visitors to the camp understand the long-term benefits of the logging operations underway, so efforts are made to inform Scout Masters and their troops through campfire talks, field trips and signs along the trails. Every spring, FLCC students in the Conservation program spend a week at Camp Cutler for Field Camp, a program started by Bill while he was Chair of the Environmental Conservation Department. His curriculum provided students with hands-on experience with conservation projects. FLCC Professors Rob Wink, and Department Chair, John Foust, are two of a group of professors now guiding an average of 100 students each spring. Projects include banding birds, managing

Canoes lined up for campers at Lake Wellington

“If civilization is to survive, it must live on the interest, not the capital of nature.”

Ronald Wright, A Short History of Progress
fish populations and collecting oak regeneration data. The Field Camp experience has come full-circle for many – Don, Jeff, Rob, Brice and John were all students of Bill’s and now use their knowledge and skills to carry on the important conservation work here at Cutler and elsewhere.

Having a real-time laboratory at the students’ finger tips has been another positive outcome of the forestry work. Rob Wink and his students make annual measurements on seedling species composition and density in relation to the herbicide treatments. Some areas were intentionally left untreated in order to make comparisons to the treated areas. Additional observations on regeneration are made in areas where slash piles (woody debris from the logging operations) were left on the forest floor.

Conservation is a core ethic of Scout life; as part of their Outdoor Code, Scouts pledge “As an American, I will do my best to be clean in my outdoor manners, be careful with fire, be considerate in the outdoors, and be conservation-minded.” A Forestry Merit Badge event was hosted at Camp Cutler, showcasing the multiple forestry projects on the site. A small group of Order of the Arrow Scouts completed the installation of circular deer fences around young oak trees to prevent deer from browsing the trees. The fences are six feet high and some seedling oaks have grown tall enough to avoid deer.

Camp Cutler is a place where the instant-gratification of this digital era is left behind. Visitors must set their minds to a longer timescale, thinking in decades rather than seconds. Forestry projects provide a powerful example for young conservationists to be a part of a bigger plan. Perhaps one day, girls and boys in the Scouts will bring their children back to Camp Cutler to show them the results of their collective efforts. The baton will then be passed on to that generation, making steps to protect the land for the use of all who call Camp Cutler home, for a season or a lifetime.