

Little Parcels Spell Big Conservation Success



Big Garden and Big White Islands off the coast of Maine are monitored by The Nature Conservancy's Maine chapter with the help of LightHawk volunteer pilots. *photo: Dan Grenier/TNC with aerial support from LightHawk*



Approved construction on an easement property are easily observed and recorded quickly from a LightHawk flight. *photo Eric Hammerstrom/OSI/LightHawk*

The fastest growing conservation movement in the United States isn't very glamorous and garners little national attention. It is typically rooted in the communities served and is entirely voluntary. Private land trusts, little known more than two decades ago, have conserved roughly 40 million acres of land since their inception.

Every year, after the glorious autumn colors of the northern forest fade, LightHawk volunteer pilots Bob Keller and Joris Naiman receive a simple one-line email from program manager Kelley Tucker: "Time for your next land trust flight."

This email exchange starts a familiar round of flight planning. These annual flights usually include the same passenger, flying to achieve the same goals, in the same pattern over the same parcels of land with perhaps one or more additions each year. Pairing the same pilot with a particular partner each year builds trust, improves communication between passenger and pilot, and reaps other significant benefits.

"Aerial monitoring allows us to see every 'corner' of a protected property, something we can't necessarily do on a ground site visit," notes Heidi Bock of the Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC). States require regular monitoring and reporting on these conserved lands. "We are looking for larger scale changes in the property, like logging, new large structures, ponds, or driveways." Over a decade ago, when CLC began aerial monitoring with Keller, a mission required only a few hours of flying. This year, she and Keller will cover 150 parcels comprising over 21,135 acres, or put another way, 5 percent of New York's Columbia County. This year, they'll have a full day of flying to survey all CLC's protected properties.

While the concept of easements has been around for centuries, the first conservation land trust, The Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts (a current LightHawk partner) was founded in 1891. Since then, over 1,600 land trusts have been established across the US, with the greatest concentration in the northeast.

LightHawk's role in this growing movement is essential when preserved lands become too large to survey from the ground, are too remote, or when parcels are scattered across an area too broad for staff to monitor from the



25,000 acres of protected land along the Shawangunk Ridge of New York is monitored with the help of LightHawk. *Photo: Paul Elconin/Open Space Institute with aerial support from LightHawk*



"The Pond" is a protected cove adjacent to the southern headlands on TNC's protected Great Wass Island, Maine. *photo Dan Grenier/TNC with aerial support from LightHawk*



New York's Hudson Valley contains some of the most valued agricultural land in the Northeast. Columbia Land Conservancy works to preserve farmland, forest, wildlife habitat and rural character in the heart of the valley. Coach Farm Dairy (shown) comprises over 650 acres of protected land. *Photo Columbia Land Conservancy with aerial support from LightHawk*

ground each year. The bottom line for a land trust is to ensure that specific protections for a parcel are upheld, oftentimes in perpetuity. Annual flights have become an indispensable tool for these surveys.

Pilot Joris Naiman's one-passenger Piper Cherokee 140 is the ideal platform for Dan Grenier of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Maine. Grenier sets out each year to assess the coastline and myriad remote islands in Maine owned or managed under conservation easements by TNC. The two men have been flying together since 2007. "The majority of easements Joris and I are viewing are designed to preclude development," Grenier explains. "I'm looking for gaps in the tree canopy, but we also monitor for activity along the shorelines. The unique view of these remote islands from above provides macro-scale views and impressions that are invaluable. The aerial perspective is hard to quantify but has changed how I perceive my work." Naiman believes the camaraderie they've established allows he and Grenier to cover this remote ground efficiently and focus in on potential problem areas quickly to gather the information needed.

Land trusts use a variety of tools, including outright purchases of land from willing sellers and conservation easements that leave land in private hands while restricting or preventing further development of that land. Grenier emphasizes the importance of cooperation: "As a land manager who works with many different stakeholders, finding common ground most readily equates to tangible biodiversity conservation."

For Charlotte Clews-Lawther of the Blue Hill Heritage Trust in Maine, who flies annually with LightHawk, land trusts are a hallmark of a modern movement to preserve stewardship. "Rural Maine has a long history of neighborly, good faith land access," says Clews-Lawther. "Hunting, fishing, trapping, a little firewood here and there—for the last two hundred years we have crossed through our neighbor's back 40 acres to get to where we need to go and do what we need to do and thought nothing of it. We were all stewards; it was all 'our' land. Even the summer cottagers knew. But times change, development pressure, land prices, and more people 'from away' created a shift in this commons stewardship mentality. And that's where our local land trust fits in. We are protecting private land for the public good because we value not only the natural history of this area, but also the distinctive cultural history. We believe that, if we can all still use the land, then we will all still care about the land. And that's good stewardship."

A LightHawk volunteer pilot for 8 years, Keller is also a land trust leader in his own right through his work as a board member for New York's Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust. He understands the demands on such groups and the enormous benefit gained through informed flight with dedicated pilots. "There is no doubt that LightHawk has become an invaluable partner in the land trust community of the northeast," he notes. With LightHawk's help, similar conservation success stories will continue to unfold across the country.

About LightHawk

What started in 1979 with one man, a borrowed plane and a vision for making a difference in the Western U.S. has grown to over 200 volunteer pilots flying for conservation across the North and Central America. LightHawk leverages the capacity of more than 300 conservation partners each year by providing an unbiased view of the intersection of land, water, wildlife and the human footprint.

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