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The College Lodge Forest, a Sanctuary for Migratory Birds, Wildflowers, Amphibians— and Western New Yorkers

With our region slowly reopening, Western New Yorkers are hungry to get outside. For those who are searching for the serenity of a spectacular forest off the beaten path, where they can practice social distancing *and* enjoy nature, what better place is there than the College Lodge Forest near Fredonia?

The College Lodge Forest—which the Western New York Land Conservancy is raising funds in 2020 to permanently protect—is situated on the Portage Escarpment overlooking the Lake Erie plain. The land sits on a continental divide: on one side rainwater drains towards Lake Erie and the Atlantic Ocean, while on the other side it drains towards the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. The heart of the forest is anchored by a large grove of towering old-growth trees hundreds of years old, extremely rare in Western New York. The forest is part of a major flyway for migratory birds that come from as far south as the Amazon rainforest in the spring, such as the plump little Veery with its distinctive flute-like whistle, and from as far north as the Arctic tundra in the fall. It also boasts a stunning diversity of reptiles, amphibians, fish, mammals, and countless other species that have few such sanctuaries left in our region. These include beautiful orchids, carnivorous plants that eat insects, and bryozoans—sometimes referred to as freshwater coral—that live in the marsh. The forest has miles of walking trails named after Muir, Leopold, and Darwin as a testament to the land's natural significance.

Whether you're an avid bird watcher, hiker, or lover of spring ephemerals and old-growth trees, the College Lodge Forest has something to offer.

"These past three months have been difficult on our community and our state," Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul said. "But what I love about Western New Yorkers is our ability to come together during times of crisis. Together, we will get through this and past this, and we will emerge stronger than ever. Getting outdoors to wonderful places like the College Lodge Forest, while maintaining safe social distancing, will be important to continue to keep our numbers low in the coming months—and will give Western New Yorkers the physical and mental boost they need."

To New York State Senator George Borrello, who represents District 57 and grew up in Fredonia, the College Lodge Forest is a vital asset in the community. "It may be hard for some people to believe," he said, "but eighty years ago during the Great Depression, Fredonia college students came together and purchased the forest with their own money to have a place to experience nature. As a result of their foresight, it has become a prized learning laboratory for thousands of teachers, researchers, and students around the globe. And with its long network of trails, open year round, our residents always

have a unique place to go to stay active and healthy—especially after weeks stuck at home. Now it's our turn to save this beautiful forest.”

Although you may not notice them, local Boy Scouts like Calder Annear, a rising sophomore at Fredonia High School who recently earned his Eagle Scout rank, are crucial to the maintenance of the College Lodge Forest. His troop regularly clears the trails of brush and adds trail signs. They even built the kiosk visitors see when they arrive. "I really like going there for hikes and to see the pond," he said. "It's meant a lot to do the different service projects that help the community enjoy the forest. We get to see how happy it makes people."

And this is a central point of the College Lodge Forest: It is a community gathering place.

"The College Lodge Forest has been an incredibly important property for both the college and the community over the years," said Mike Metzger, Vice President of Finance and Administration at SUNY Fredonia. "If you were a student at SUNY Fredonia you know the College Lodge, and you spent time here. As an outdoor classroom, it is a resource for learning and growth. But it is also a valuable spot for our students to go for a hike or ski when they need to get away. We are thrilled to work with the Western New York Land Conservancy to save this amazing place."

The magnificent forest is a sanctuary for us all. As Nancy Smith, Executive Director of the Land Conservancy, noted: "Since the pandemic began, I've been longing for the experiences that make me feel whole: warm hugs, my daughter's eyes when she smiles, the way voices can fill a room with laughter. We all miss these things. But when my nerves feel raw, I go to the College Lodge Forest to surround myself with nature. I welcome spring wildflowers like trout lilies, trillium, and violets. I celebrate the return of my favorite birds to the forest."

That's why the Western New York Land Conservancy is raising money to protect it. The Faculty Student Association (FSA), a non-profit auxiliary of SUNY Fredonia, has owned the property and operated a historic lodge on the site since 1969. But the cost of maintaining the land and all of the buildings is high, and the FSA proposed a plan to raise funds by logging the forest, including the old-growth trees. Fortunately, the FSA decided to sell a large portion of the land to the Land Conservancy instead, and enable protection of the forest. By purchasing 168 acres from the FSA, the Land Conservancy will protect the forest and the FSA will be able to invest funds from the sale into the stewardship of visitor facilities on the portion of the property it retains. The FSA will continue to own and operate the lodge and the 33 acres surrounding it.

The 168 acres of forest that the Land Conservancy will purchase includes miles of hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country ski trails. Once purchased, the Land Conservancy will maintain it as a publicly accessible nature preserve.

The Western New York Land Conservancy has received two major grants toward the protection of the College Lodge Forest. The grants include \$150,000 from New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (EPF #190587) and \$203,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Combined with \$40,000 already donated by community members, the Land Conservancy has now raised nearly \$400,000 to protect the forest, and has until December 31, 2020 to meet its \$790,000 fundraising goal in order to buy the property, keep it open as a publicly accessible nature preserve, and maintain the land forever. They now need donations from people all over the region to succeed.

If you wish to visit, the College Lodge Forest is located at 8067 Route 380 Brocton, NY 14716. For more details on the forest, go to collegelodge.com. To learn more about the Land Conservancy's efforts to save the College Lodge Forest and to donate to the campaign, visit wnylc.org and contribute online, or send a check made payable to "Western New York Land Conservancy" to P.O. Box 471, East Aurora, NY 14052. Please call or email if you have questions: (716) 687-1225 or info@wnylc.org.

The **Western New York Land Conservancy** is a regional, not-for-profit land trust that permanently protects land with significant conservation value in Western New York for current and future generations. The Land Conservancy envisions a future in which open spaces, working lands, wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty are cherished and protected as part of the landscape and character of Western New York. The Land Conservancy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and is one of 1000+ land trusts nationwide, including 90 in New York State. Land trusts have protected over 56 million acres of land.