



As free as a bird: Perhaps the most prominent feature of the Hauser Nature Preserve in Litchfield is its 25-acre grassland, a managed space for bobolinks and other migratory songbirds.

Finding My Path to Nature

Moving next to a nature preserve unlocked a longing for open spaces, and showed why protecting them is so vital.

BY TROY McMULLEN

The bobolinks, yellow warblers and other migratory songbirds that nest in Hauser Nature Preserve in Litchfield each spring can journey up to 12,000 miles from South America to get there. But for me, the mosaic of lands that make up the peaceful, 110-acre protected space, is just a few steps away.

My wood-framed, century-old farmhouse sits on 1½ acres of land that abuts the preserve, allowing for daily walks through its varied terrain of grasslands and unobstructed views of the colorful, ground-nesting birds in their natural habitat. More ambitious days will find me hiking with my border collie mix, Ivy, through the preserve’s dense forest of fine hardwoods, relatively flat terrain that is easy to navigate, but rewarding to quiet and attentive hikers.

Yet for anyone who knows me — a life-time urban dweller raised in New York City with virtually no connection to the great outdoors — the distance traveled to Hauser Preserve was much greater. As a kid, getting outdoors usually meant city parks or week-long summer retreats with my Catholic middle school to upstate New York, where faith development and “walks with Christ” rivaled archery and swim classes. As an adult who often found solace in the vitality of urban settings, occasional trips to Vermont went a long way in satisfying any fleeting yearning for nature.

The pandemic changed all of that, of course. Like many city residents, I was in search of an escape as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the spring of 2020 and dragged on through summer. Cooped up and concerned about the post-pandemic future, I began searching for a weekend retreat, joining the herd of urban residents growing tired of donning a mask each time I stepped outside my Manhattan apartment.

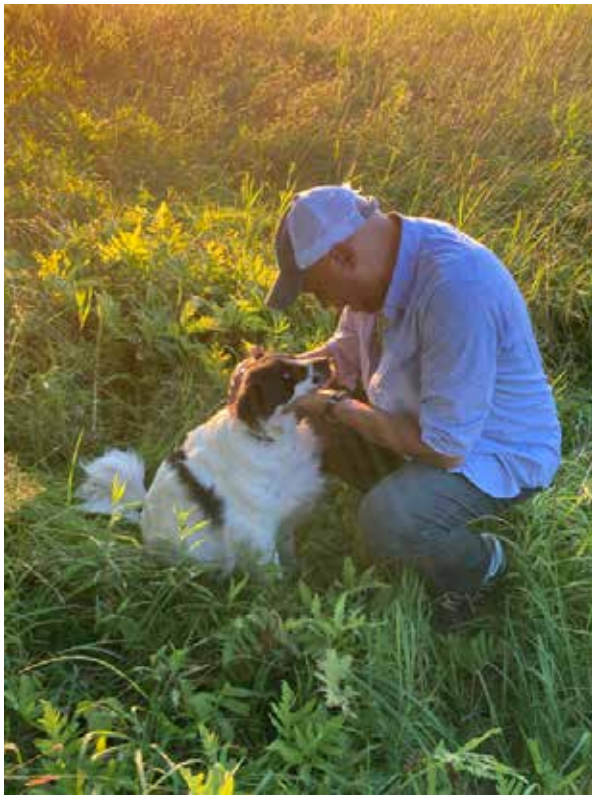
By the time I stumbled upon the property for sale on Fern Avenue here — with its knotty-pine wood interiors and small, country kitchen — it had already been on the market for months. At just under 600 square feet, its size was likely off-putting to many second-home buyers with money to spend on something larger. (At the time of my closing in summer 2020, the property was listed as the smallest home for sale in the town of Litchfield.)

But the home’s appeal was its pastoral setting. Set back from the road on a gentle slope, it was tucked beneath a grove of hickory and maple trees, some soaring more than 100 feet.

RANDY JONES

Hiking buddies:

On some days, McMullen hikes through the grassy stretches and dense forest of Hauser Nature Preserve with his border collie mix, Ivy.



I hadn't fully understood the vastness of the property's most prized amenity until I stepped deeper into its wooded backyard. Peeking through the

brush on that warm summer's day, Hauser Nature Preserve revealed itself in all its lush beauty. Its vast hayfield of Timothy grass and Canada wild rye—with clear views of the Litchfield Hills in the distance—created an almost mirage-like feeling for a space-starved urbanite. By the time I stepped onto the preserve—seeing the gentle flight of American kestrels and red-winged blackbirds soaring above the cool-season grasses—I knew instantly I was prepared to call this place home.

What I didn't know, however, was the preserve's crucial role in the state's migratory bird conservation. Hauser Nature Preserve was created in the mid-1970s by Gustave and Rita Hauser, a New York couple who put the original 66 acres of land into conservation. Litchfield native George Weston later gifted another 36 acres to the preserve, according to his daughter, Sue Weston, who is now with the Litchfield Historical Society. "We don't miss our old house," Sue told me. "But we miss that preserve."

At the time it went into conservation, the preserve was a saving grace to one of Connecticut's last populations of bobolinks, New World blackbirds that require unmown meadows to breed before migrating to Argentina.

The many grassland birds that nest here today—including the Eastern bluebird and yellow warbler—are declining because of land development, early-season hay cutting in North America, and habitat loss in South America, according to Catherine Rawson, executive director at Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy. The nonprofit, regional conservation organization is the state's largest land trust with conserved lands that include over 3,000 acres of habitat for rare and endangered species, including Hauser Preserve. "Hauser Preserve tries to foster the species wherever and whenever we can," Rawson told me during a morning hike through the preserve's forestland.

A conservationist whose work spans more than 20 years, Rawson studied environmental law at Vermont Law School before earning a master's degree in environmental management from the Yale School of Forestry. Her team at NCLC protects 13,000 acres in Litchfield and northern Fairfield counties, including safeguarding natural and working lands and public recreation areas.

When the pandemic reached its peak in late 2020 and 2021—triggering lockdowns and widespread closings—the hiking trails and nature preserves in Litchfield County saw visitor numbers skyrocket as many people sought comfort in nature amid the restrictions, Rawson says. "Open, green spaces with natural

wildlife became a critical part of everyday living during those lockdowns," she says.

But with the pandemic easing, Rawson worries that many people might lose sight of the crucial role conservationists play in not only maintaining these lands for public use, but also working to expand the number of protected acres. "The truth is, Connecticut is not on track to meet its state-wide land-conservation goals," she adds. To address this, the conservancy is ambitiously increasing its pace of conservation and has set a goal of protecting an additional 2,500 acres by 2025. "If we have learned anything over the past several years, it is that nature is essential for our individual and community well-being," Rawson says.

City folks migrating to open spaces is nothing new, of course. But the trend accelerated during the pandemic, says Steve Schappert, founder of Connecticut Real Estate in Litchfield County. After four decades navigating the state's property market, he says the increase in homebuyers being drawn to unspoiled nature—even if it means living on relatively puny lots like mine—has made rural areas like Litchfield County more desirable. "Nature preserves have always been highly valued," says Schappert, a broker with listings throughout the state. "But with the pandemic, we started seeing homebuyers not just interested in nature, but also in conservation."

That theme of conservation runs deep in Litchfield, an 18th-century New England town where protecting its forests and countryside has always taken precedence over sprawl. The town has one of the most restrictive building codes in the state where some zoning dictates that as little as 15 percent of a property can be covered by buildings. In an era when many communities are rushing to modernize, Litchfield embraces its past by safeguarding pristine landscapes like Hauser Preserve.

For me, a lifelong urban dweller new to appreciating the gifts of nature that abound here, life on the preserve offers more than just scenic views and serenity. My daily opportunities to observe birds and wildlife in their natural habitat is another reminder of the intangible benefits of living next to unspoiled nature. ■

Troy McMullen is a former reporter for the Wall Street Journal and now executive editor at ABC News. His work regularly appears in the Washington Post and Architectural Digest. He splits his time between Litchfield and Manhattan.