

# Sakonnet Preservation

newsletter of the Sakonnet Preservation Association

## Seduced by Simplicity

A magic spell is being cast on us by a project at the Meehan Triangle at the head of Taylor's Lane. Appearing relatively ordinary when passing by, simple beauty and surprising complexity is being revealed as **Sakonnet Preservation** initiates a deep dive into what grows and lives on this small parcel we own. We are trying to learn from this site how to best manage the landscape for native species and the protection of habitat, and then share that knowledge.

Just over two acres of open land supporting grasses, shrubs, wetlands, a few stands of trees, and bounded by Old and West Main Roads, this property was donated to SPA in 1982 by Phoebe and David Meehan. It is centrally located in a vista of open land stretching from west to east known to some as "the plains" because of the uninterrupted views across meadows on both sides of the roadways that surround it.

The vibrant red fruit of our native winterberry provides food for resident birds, along with the seedheads of the many grasses and perennial flowers seen here in late fall at the Meehan Triangle.

A desire to create a public access to a property with educational value has been percolating within Sakonnet Preservation for some time. We've long wanted to offer an opportunity for townspeople of all ages to learn about the plants native to our landscapes, the creatures supported by these native plants, and how land can be best managed for healthy habitats. Could we also demonstrate how seasonal changes can be seen as beautiful on minimally yet thoughtfully managed land? All of these things can deepen our attachment to the healthful attributes of Little Compton's native landscapes and our engagement in protecting them.

With financial support for educational projects like this from the Acebes Family Charitable Fund, and the landscaping assistance of Jeremy Allen, we are bringing this aspiration to fruition. A survey of what grows and lives on the property is being done by Sue Theriault and Garry Plunkett. A narrow access path has been mown, but otherwise mowing has been halted until we further develop our plan for habitat protection. The property's unfolding seasonal beauty will also be informing our decisions. We have been seduced by the subtle, special and unexpected discoveries being revealed by focused attention on these couple of acres.

How does this fit with our mission? The majority of our town's land will always be held by private landowners. By this example, we hope to encourage landowners to undertake similar management practices on their own property to benefit its natural resources. Attachment to our landscape runs deep here in Little Compton, as does a powerful conservation ethic. We wish to build upon that; stay tuned!



## Letter from the President

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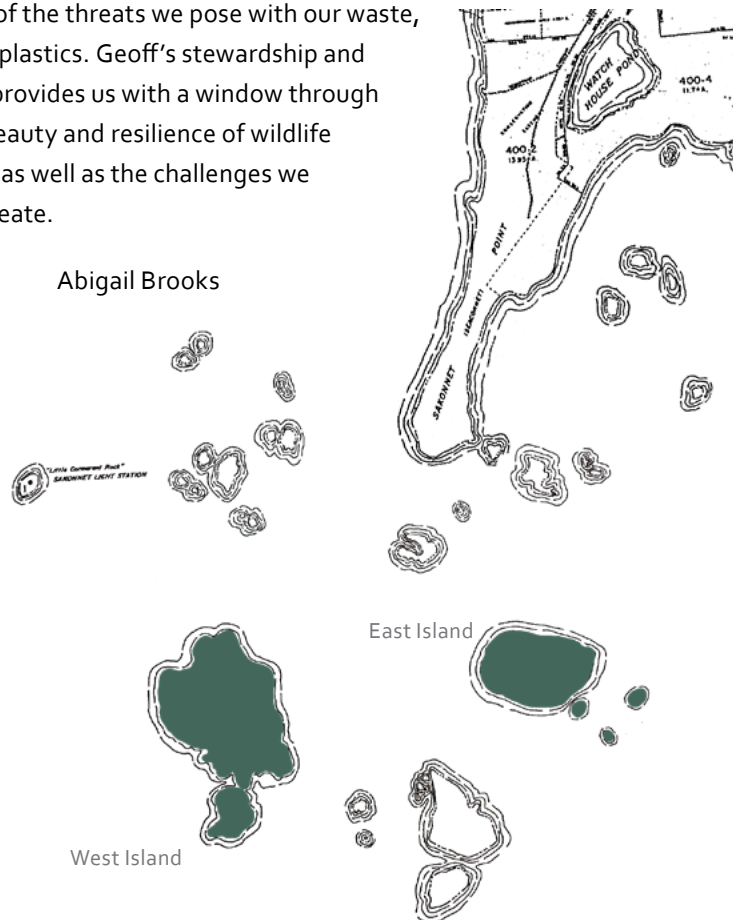
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Snowy owls, gannets, buffleheads, eiders, harlequin ducks, purple sandpipers ... the variety of birds gracing our shoreline, coastal ponds and islands this time of year is one of the many seasonal gifts bestowed on us by Mother Nature. Two places where birds like these (and more) find vital habitat are East and West Islands off Sakonnet Point, islands owned and protected by Sakonnet Preservation.

Protecting these islands requires monitoring them on the ground – not an easy task. We are very fortunate that Geoff Dennis provides this invaluable service. But Geoff not only walks the islands, he also cleans up the considerable debris that washes onto them, and is rewarded for his diligence with sightings of the birds using them as rest stops and outposts. On the next page you can read some of Geoff's brief reporting, and see photos of his discoveries, both lovely and ugly.

Geoff's skilled identification of the birds he sees and the photos he shares with us are reminders that even small places such as these islands have a role to play in supporting wildlife, and deserve our care. For example, East and West Islands hold the largest breeding colony of the double breasted cormorant in the state. These small islands are a microcosm of the threats we pose with our waste, particularly plastics. Geoff's stewardship and caretaking provides us with a window through which the beauty and resilience of wildlife can be seen as well as the challenges we ourselves create.

Abigail Brooks



# Birds, bottles, and balloons

Email excerpts from Geoff Dennis:

November 21

*Beautiful day yesterday. Flat calm and a good day to removed pots that washed up on East Island during that recent northeaster. However, things don't always go as planned. Snowy Owl high atop East stopped me from going ashore – I didn't want to disturb it. So instead, why not go check West Island for recent debris. Nope. Can't go there either.... another Snowy Owl. Took a few pics of both from my boat and then surprise, surprise, on my way in, a third Snowy Owl on a small rock off Lloyd's.*



November 23

*Here's an image of the last run on Sunday to get lobster pots off East. Four of them came in on that northeaster. They joined other debris that recently washed in or reared its ugly head as the island vegetation died away revealing where it hid. Debris in this image such as 27 mylar balloons which came in this summer, blew to high ground on the islands and hid in the vegetation till now. And among the rocks, 25 more single use, plastic bottles that came ashore since Sept 6. The running tally on those two most numerous items collected out there which began in 2015 now stands at...drum roll...489 bottles/cans (99.9% plastic bottles) and 558 mylar balloons – no tally on latex. Many more on the true total of mylars and bottles/cans as there's a six-year span from when our clean-ups began in 2009 to the start of tallying in 2015. Back to bird pictures next time around. That's been the reward of it.*



A Blue-headed Vireo and an Eastern Phoebe photographed by Geoff Dennis on other trips to the Islands

# Helping birds, this winter and beyond

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According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, more than 38,500 wildlife species are threatened with extinction worldwide. Of that number 15% are birds. Birds are struggling to cope with the consequences of climate change:

- False springs (unseasonably warm, mid-winter days) can “trick” dormant plants and animals and alter the timing of seasonal events crucial to the entire ecological food web.
- For migratory birds, the timing of their departure from wintering grounds in southern areas has evolved over thousands of years to match their arrival in northern climes with budding food supplies. Climate change is disrupting that timing, hastening springs in the north faster than most birds can adapt.
- Severe spring heatwaves endanger young birds in the nest.
- Drought destroys water and food resources for many species.
- Heavy rainfall can flood nests and impede parents from feeding their chicks. Rising sea levels and changes in the levels of lakes and streams negatively affect habitat important to nesting birds.
- Development often destroys bird habitat, and unintentional agricultural practices can damage or eliminate bird habitat. Farming can be designed and managed to be bird friendly.



There are four things you can do to help create the essential elements of habitat for birds on your own property--provide food, water, cover, and a place for birds to raise their young. Native plantings are particularly important for attracting local insects, providing birds with essential food and shelter. Birds give you a hand by keeping insect and rodent populations in balance while providing you with countless hours of entertainment.

Nesting boxes increase breeding success in areas where natural nest sites are unavailable or under threat. The best time to put up a new nesting box is in the fall or winter giving birds plenty of time to find them before the breeding season. I also note that the birds in my garden use the boxes as a shelter from storms and cold spells in the winter.

**Sakonnet Preservation** is currently building nesting boxes on a few of our meadow properties, and I encourage you to build or install one or more as well. The type of habitat you have and birds you wish to attract will determine the style and placement. Massachusetts Audubon has a [Birdhouse and Nesting Chart](#) which will help you determine what will work best. You can find plans for building several types in a comprehensive article by the [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#). And [NestWatch](#), a program of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, offers opportunities to help monitor bird nest sites and guidance on how to install a birdhouse camera. The Audubon Society of Rhode Island is instituting a monitoring protocol across all of its properties in the state. Sign up to receive newsletters that will detail how you can be better stewards of habitats that birds rely on and contribute to data gathering. Go to [ASRI.ORG](#) to learn more. Have fun while giving birds a much-needed hand.

Joy Elvin

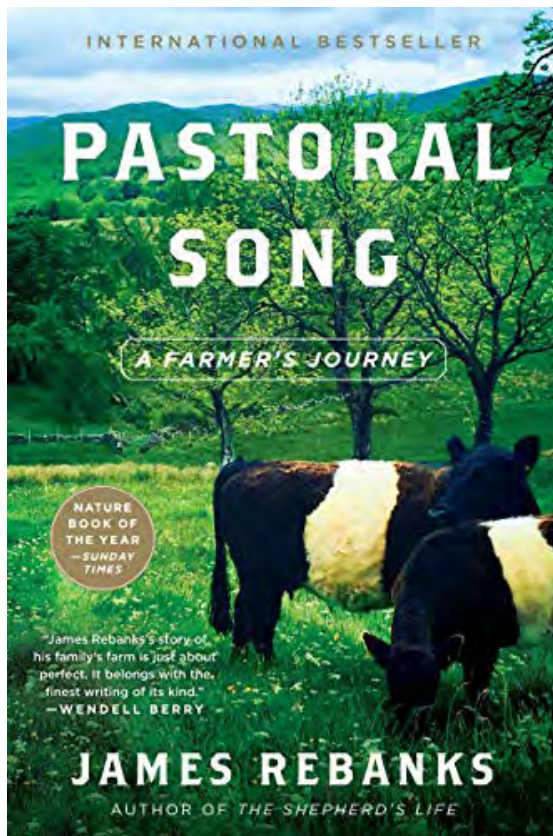
# Pastoral Song: A Farmer's Journey

James Rebanks, author

Very recently, it occurred to me that if I were to write my resume, which I have no reason to do, it should include "sheep shearer guide" as one of the many volunteer jobs I did years ago. Shearing day started early on a Sunday morning in May. My job was to lead the New Hampshire shearer around Little Compton to about ten farms that had small flocks of two to ten sheep in need of their yearly shearing. My flock was one that needed his services and James Rebanks' new book, *Pastoral Song*, brought those memories back to me.

Rebanks' farm is tucked away in England's beautiful Lake District. He likens his 185-acre farm to a poem, and he writes poetically about his herd of 450 prized Herdwick sheep, his dogs, the pastures, his family, and the community, using imagery we can easily relate to in Little Compton. The farm has been in the Rebanks family for 600 years and the author has a deep sense of responsibility to its heritage.

*Pastoral Song* describes the difficult changes farmers in the Lake District, and around the world, have had to make in order to stay ahead of the bank, get a fair market price for their crops and animals, and still be able to support their families. To that end, Rebanks researched the history of farming, the hard lessons learned over many years, the importance of rotational farming, as well as good solid stewardship. Through his research Rebanks acquired an aversion to what he saw as the destructiveness of industrialized farming. He developed a different plan for his farm using science and the skills of ecologists and naturalists to assist him along the way.



Now the farm is managed using smaller pastures and rotational grazing. Thousands of trees have been planted, retaining the wide hedgerows, protecting the bogs. The result has been better soil, more birds, flowers, insects, and varieties of grasses.

James Rebanks' story of his farm is so much more than what I have noted here. *Pastoral Song* is an ode to the hard complicated life of a farm family, sharing the challenges as well as the natural beauty and cycles of life. I would love to be on this farm on shearing day!

Little Compton has farms that are finding their way too, through the trial and error of farming responsibly, and the undeniable hard work. But they underpin a community which greatly appreciates and supports their efforts. We are so grateful.

Sheila Mackintosh

James Rebanks is also the author of *The Shepherd's Life* (2015) and *The Shepherd's View* (2016).

*Pastoral Song* (2020) was named Nature Book of the Year by the *Sunday Times*.

Rebanks' very popular Twitter account with photos and comments: <https://twitter.com/herdyshepherd1>

# The 50th Anniversary Campaign for Sakonnet Preservation

In last spring's issue of this newsletter, we announced this campaign, its purpose to strengthen our organization, improving our land conservation, stewardship, and educational programs. The funds raised will provide more capacity to better fulfill our mission protecting the unique, rural character of Little Compton. Our goal was to raise a minimum of \$1 million, and the response has been strong and heartening.



As one option for giving, we have established a **Family Stewardship Circle** to encourage generational giving as part of the Campaign. We hope that joining this group will encourage multi-generational discussion in families about the importance of conserving some of the remaining undeveloped land in Little Compton. It also offers an opportunity to contribute as a memorial honoring a living or deceased family member(s). Donors can become a founding member of the Family Stewardship Circle by:

- Making a one-time family contribution of \$10,000 or more;
- Making a family pledge of \$10,000 or more paid over five years or less
- Including Sakonnet Preservation as a beneficiary in estate plans by designating \$10,000 or more to the Family Stewardship Circle.

If you are interested in joining the Family Stewardship Circle or in making a multi-year gift of any size, please download and complete the pledge form available on our website, [sakonnetpreservation.org](http://sakonnetpreservation.org), and either email or mail a copy to us at P O Box 945, Little Compton, Rhode Island 02837.

Any amount you can donate to the 50th Anniversary Campaign is sincerely appreciated. Contributions can be made in the form of checks, payable to **Sakonnet Preservation Association**, or with appreciated stock. For questions or instructions on the transfer of shares, please contact Joy Elvin at 401-635-8800 or [jelvin@sakonnetpreservation.org](mailto:jelvin@sakonnetpreservation.org).

## Family Stewardship Circle founding members as of November 2021

Carl & Carol Acebes, Rowan Acebes & Aydan Puth, and family  
Joe Azrack, Abigail Congdon and family  
Bob & Pam Beck, Allison Beck & Jonathan Papasideris,  
Meredith & Adolf Haffenreffer, Lindsay Beck  
The Bordeau Family  
Abigail Brooks & Nick Long and family  
Robert & Rhea Brooks and family  
Chris & Suzie Burns and family  
Kate & Robert Chartener, and William, Jasper & Matilda  
Keith Crudgington & John McCole  
Alison & Eric Dale  
Ken & Lorrie DeAngelis and family  
Charles & Nancy Dunn  
Jim & Janet Field, Lisa & Andy Mims, Jennifer & Peter Whitman  
Karen & Michael Fiorile  
Stephen & Carol Geremia  
Robert Higgins, Mary Higgins, Meg Higgins & Lauren Higgins  
Warren & Janet Jagger  
Mungall Family: Barbara Mungall & Jan Pethick,  
Nancy & Peter McDowell, Marian Smith & Colin Sherer,  
and their families  
Terry Nathan & Marilyn Kanter  
Remington & Alicia Brownell Korper

David & Charisse Mayer  
Mimi & Jamie McCleary  
Maureen & Jim Mellows  
The Merriman & Wells Family  
Elizabeth Morgan & Simon Talbot  
Eric & Jane Philippi  
Jackson Robinson  
Mara & Chris Shore, Peter & Gail Lozier and family  
Richard & Mary Small  
Ruth & James Small  
Jon & Betsy Stapleton and family  
Rush Taggart, Dorothy Bedford and family  
Karen & Jim Tung  
Thomas J. Vander Salm & Adelaide Sherer Vander Salm  
David & Ellen Wagner, Bryn Wagner Hanson, M. Ryan Wagner,  
Lily Hanson, Dylan Hanson  
Ralph E. Watson  
Gurdon & Kathy Wattles  
Randi von Steinwehr & Charles A. Whipple  
Sarah Chartener Whitehead  
Deborah Wiley  
Chris & Alan Willemsen

# Movies and speakers

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Building on the enthusiasm generated for our past movie and speaker series during winter and early spring, we are planning for two movies and two speakers starting in January and running through April of 2022. All events will be free and open to the public whether in person or on Zoom.

The first in our series will be the movie **Microcosmos**, appropriate for all ages. It will be shown in the Little Compton Community Center's upstairs theatre starting at 7pm on Friday, January 28th.

**Microcosmos** is a fascinating and beautiful film and definitely one of the best documentary movies about nature from insects like flies, spiders, bugs and ants, to frogs, worms and snails that live in a French meadow. The filmmakers are watching the beauty of their appearance, movement, actions and search for food. Amazing cinematography, beautiful music and the best studio ever, mother nature! A whole new world rises in front of us.



Watch for announcements of the other movies and events in your inbox or on our website [sakonnetpreservation.org](http://sakonnetpreservation.org).

If you do not already receive our monthly e-news in your email, a link to be added to our mailing list is also on the website.

## Help wanted

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**Sakonnet Preservation Association (SPA)** is seeking a creative self-starter to fill a part-time (16-20 hours weekly) position as **Stewardship Director** to work with the support of an engaged board of directors. The position requires a background in the field of natural resources and the organizational skills to manage an established stewardship program that utilizes a team of trained volunteer property monitors. Evidence of the ability to create baseline documentation reports and management plans as well as proficiency with MS Office, GIS, GPS and Google mapping resources is desirable.

A flexible schedule, physical stamina and a reliable vehicle are essential. The working environment is limited to Little Compton. Residency is preferred but not required. Salary is commensurate with experience. To apply send resumé and cover letter by email to:

Abigail Brooks, President  
[spa@sakonnetpreservation.org](mailto:spa@sakonnetpreservation.org)

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The Sakonnet Preservation Association, a non-profit land trust, is dedicated to preserving the rural character and natural resources of Little Compton for the lasting benefit of the community.