

Sakonnet Preservation

newsletter of the Sakonnet Preservation Association

Marsh & Meadow

Rawson family protects 14.6 acres with Sakonnet Preservation

A familiar cliché, nowhere truer than in Sakonnet, is that there's no more land being created, so hold on to what you have.

Yes, there are times when selling seems wise. But the money you get now is never going to be as much as what you could get later, or as much as the land itself is deeply worth, not as a bankbook figure but as a vivid total in the mind and heart. Many of us have family stories of land sold, back when it was cheap. If you really do want to take care of today's deeper values, selling is a short-term folly.

There are other ways to preserve these emotional values. You could entrust the land to your children or grandchildren, whom you love, or beyond them, into the distant future. Or you could give or sell it to some agency which will take care of it as you wish. Fortunately, there is a third way. Little Compton has several institutions to serve varying preservationist hopes and wishes.

After some thought, we settled on the Sakonnet Preservation Association. (A happy name: we call it Sakonnet when we mean the landscape we love, the name given by the inhabitants before the English arrived. Little Compton is the town the English established.) Our decision was to give SPA a conservation easement on 14-or-so acres of mixed waterfront meadow and wetlands, to be maintained into perpetuity. This way, we can leave ownership of that land to our children and grandchildren, not to be sold until future generations, and with no one ever free to build on it. We even get some tax payback from the gift. But mainly, we have preserved beautiful waterfront wetland, an essential, natural homeland. We've owned it since buying this one-time farmland in 1966. That's only 60 years ago, a spot of time in Sakonnet history, but we want to conserve it as it is.

And just how beautiful is this combination of meadow and shrub and red maple swamp, with its cattail marsh, willow, maple and winterberry stands, 80-some flora, a dozen-or-so fauna, leading to varied waterfront on the Sakonnet Passage? Well, how beautiful and precious are the natural landscapes and the plants, birds and animals that make them home? How beautiful are they not just to those inhabitants but also to us who have shared this living space?

Chris and Mary Rawson



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sound finances

ethical conduct

responsible governance

lasting stewardship

From the President

While beating the drum of habitat protection and creation on private lands, I had yet to take much responsibility for doing that on my own property. The habitat management by **Sakonnet Preservation** (SPA) of the Meehan Triangle at the top of Taylor's Lane awakened me. This small property makes a bold statement about what landscaping that supports the web of life looks like; it pollinates our flowers and trees, spreads seeds about, eats pesky insects, makes honey, aerates the soil, feeds us if we choose to eat wild edibles, venison or turkey, and nourishes birds that delight me. I wanted my property to do that too.

Given how wet it usually is, mowing in early spring is not possible on my property with a conventional full-sized tractor as is true of many properties in Little Compton. It has been brush-hogged once a year in the late fall when it is drier—a common practice in Town that SPA has traditionally encouraged as a way to protect grass-nesting bird activity in late spring through mid-summer and to ensure the availability of seeds needed by migratory birds through September.

What I've learned from Meehan Triangle is the significance to wildlife of maintaining seed sources, egg laying material, and the burrows and stems used for hibernation through the coolest times of the year for all sorts of year-round creatures that fall mowing with heavy equipment destroys.

The light weight and adjustable-height cutter of the sickle-bar machine used on Meehan and other open properties SPA manages, allows this now-recommended early spring mowing. Its cutting lays over grasses and hollow-stemmed plants that harbor beneficial insect eggs and hibernators without mulching them to pieces. It is nimble enough to maneuver so that desirable plants can be left unmown. It leaves a gently restrained rather than butchered containment on the landscape that quickly revives. What it leaves through the winter provides spectacular beauty, color, nourishment and protective cover.

I am thrilled to take these lessons learned and apply them. At SPA there is hope that others will be willing to try these small measures of habitat protection that all add up over time across our landscape.

Abigail Brooks



Annual Meeting

Mark your calendar for Wednesday, July 22 at the Little Compton Community Center. We're hosting our Annual Meeting with featured speaker Emily Hall, Coastal Geologist for the RI Coastal Resources Management Council.

Emily works on the frontlines of climate adaptation, helping coastal communities prepare for a changing shoreline through science-based strategies. Her research spans marsh migration, beach dynamics, and coastal resilience - and her insights are deeply relevant to our own work here in Little Compton.

The evening starts at 6pm with drinks and hors d'oeuvres downstairs. At 7 pm, we'll move upstairs for a brief business meeting followed by Emily's talk. It's a great chance to connect with neighbors, stay informed about SPA's work, and learn from someone doing vital coastal science in Rhode Island.

Hope to see you there!



A respite for Konney Cottontail

This past winter brought a record-setting snowfall particularly challenging to local wildlife, but we can take action this summer and fall to allow our wildlife to make it through the next harsh winter. The following short children's parable illustrates how human families can make the land around our homes more hospitable for our animal neighbors.

As Konney Cottontail wanders out of her family's nest beside the old stone wall for the first time on a September morning, her eyes take a moment to adjust to the bright sunny day. Her little tummy grumbles with hunger as she looks across a yard full of tasty grass and clover. Konney hops twice out into the house yard, munching on tender shoots, when she hears a girl calling out to her pet dog barreling straight toward the little rabbit. Her quick paws launch Konney into the stone wall's crevices. The barking beast snorts and scratches at the wall. Unable to reach Konney, the dog turns tail and saunters back across the yard. Trembling, Konney scrambles through the wall to the Old Field on the other side. Though on the same property as the house yard, this field has not been mown for many months. Konney feels much safer foraging underneath a layer of wildflowers, blackberry canes, and wild roses.

The days shorten and the summer greens give way to the fiery oranges of autumn. Konney has gotten quite comfortable in the Old Field knowing that she can travel far in search of a tasty crabapple or a spicy sumac sprout without worrying a hawk or fox might surprise her.

One chilly morning in November, Konney crawls out from under the blanket of crunchy Oak leaves to discover glittering ice crystals clinging to every plant in the Old Field. Her friend Wilbur Woodchuck scurries by, warning ominously "When the ice crystals a-grow, prepare for the snow!" and descends into his winter burrow to hibernate.

The first gentle snowfalls taught Konney to rummage for seeds and berries in the fluffy drifts along the stone walls, but at the end of February the big snow came. Konney awoke in her nest in the Old Field, it was unusually quiet. Tunneling up through the snow, Konney is met with a fierce flurry of snowflakes. She squints toward the house yard seeing only flat white cold. Turning back to the Old Field, she sees something different: rolling hills of snow collect over the taller shrubs, tumbling into low valleys over bare parts of the field. Eager to find out what might be happening beneath, Konney burrows back down to the ground to begin exploring.

Under that thick layer of snow, Konney discovers a wonderland. Stiff plant stems support the thick blanket of the snow like thousands of tentpoles over an insulated maze of critter tunnels. The Meadow Voles have been busy digging all through the night! Sneaky little shrews hunt insects hiding in the earth, and fierce weasels patrol the tunnels for prey. Countless stashes of seeds and berries are accessible through this tunnel network, and so are branches and logs teeming with small bugs and mushrooms, all good eats when little else is available.

After filling up on all that she could scavenge under the snowpack, Konney snuggles back into her nest knowing that if she could make it through this snowstorm, she can make it through anything. As she dozes off, she dreams of spring flowers just around the corner.



The wonderland Konney discovered beneath the snowpack is called the subnivium: an ecosystem that our backyard wildlife builds from scratch to weather the most challenging part of winter. When landowners choose to defer mowing until after the winter, they provide a foundation for these clever and resourceful animals to engineer their way to survival. Even leaving a section or a border around a mown yard is beneficial. We will be rewarded each spring with more fragrant blooms, more vibrant dawn choruses, and of course fluffy bunnies.

Adam Yorks

Planting (and planning) for the future

In the fall of 2024, a single seed starter box was placed in the garden of the Art Café. No one knew then how that quiet beginning would grow into a much larger movement around a simple truth: the work of restoring our landscape belongs to all of us.

The Art Café box is still there today, a growing display where passersby can observe seedlings thriving, read about the project, and understand what native plant restoration looks like in action. Last year, a second seed box was placed at our Trueblood Property. Since that humble start, we have propagated over 1,000 native seedlings representing approximately 15 different native species. Over 70 community members have become part of this work, contributing expertise, time, and enthusiasm. And the momentum continues to build.

In 2025, the Hart Foundation recognized the potential in this fledgling initiative and awarded us a grant to expand our native plant propagation program. This



Seed-starting seminar at the Community Center

year, the Sogkonate Garden Club also granted us funding to develop a community model demonstration site at our Trueblood Property, where restored stone walls would be edged with carefully designed native plantings. Together we are hosting a four-part workshop series focused on native planting guided by Plant Community LLC. These sessions are designed to teach both skill and philosophy, to build a broadened learning community, and to demonstrate what is possible when knowledge is shared and hands work side by side. These grants were not simply financial support; they are affirmations from organizations that understand the value of what we are doing. But the real catalyst has been the partnerships themselves. **Sakonnet Preservation** does not do this work alone. The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society, the Hart Foundation, the Sogkonate Garden Club, the Art Café and others have all become partners in this initiative. Plant Community LLC brings professional expertise through our workshop series.



The Stone Wall Stewards of Little Compton, initiated by the Sogkonate Garden Club, has emerged as the focal point for the documentation and restoration of our historic stone walls. Our aim is to partner in this initiative by demonstrating how, after the disturbance caused by the repair of the stone walls, the habitat use of the walls could be restored with native plantings that support wildlife and prevent invasive non-native species from returning. Luke Driver has generously volunteered his time to teach stone wall construction, passing along his knowledge to help our community rebuild its walls. We aim to include habitat restoration in this effort. This is what collaborative conservation looks like when it is created together.

Our long-term vision is bold. It is possible that part of the Trueblood Property will become the foundation for a larger native plant nursery over the coming years. These plants could not only be used for restoration projects on our organization's conserved land but also could be shared for use with municipal projects, private landowners, landscapers, and other conservation groups in town.

We are early in this journey. Like seeds themselves, this project will take time to grow and mature. The grants provided a critical jump-start, the partnerships created the infrastructure for growth, but the real power lies in what happens next: when community members plant them in their own gardens; when visitors notice the restored stone walls and native plantings around them; when the work spreads organically, person to person, garden to garden.

Little Compton has always been a place where people care deeply about the landscape. What is new is the realization that this care need not be private, isolated, or confined to conservation groups. It can be collective. It can be strengthened by sharing knowledge, by working alongside neighbors, by recognizing that each seedling planted is part of a larger restoration happening across our entire town. When you plant a native seed, you are not separate from conservation. You are a conservator.

To participate in upcoming workshops or learn more about our native plant propagation program, visit sakonnetpreservation.org or contact us at 401-635-8800.

Joy Elvin



Blue vervain

Blue vervain, *Verbena hastata*, is a native perennial found in Little Compton that seems to belong to another world. Tall and slender, reaching three to four feet, it bears delicate spikes of purple-blue flowers that bloom from mid-summer through fall in layers up the stem. The plant is ethereal yet sturdy, offering grace without fragility.

Vervain carries history in its leaves. Across cultures and centuries, it has been revered as a sacred plant. Indigenous peoples used it for healing and ceremony. European herbalists knew it as a plant of protection and restoration. It appears in folklore, in medicine cabinets, in the hands of those tending both body and spirit. Today, herbalists continue to use blue vervain as a nervine - a gentle ally for calming the nervous system and easing stress. To plant vervain is to participate in an ancient conversation about what it means to tend the world.

Ecologically, vervain is a quiet healer. It thrives in disturbed ground - exactly where stone walls are being restored. Its deep taproot stabilizes soil and prevents non-native plants from establishing. Bees and small pollinators visit its flowers throughout the season. It asks little and gives steadily, asking only for sun and well-drained soil.

What makes vervain especially meaningful is the way it bridges worlds. It connects the herbalist's knowledge to the land healer's work. It lives in gardens and in wild places. It serves both practical and spiritual purposes. When we propagated vervain from seed at our workshop this January and plant it out at Trueblood later this year, we're not just restoring habitat. We're honoring a lineage of tending, of knowing plants as allies, of understanding that restoration happens in the spaces between the practical and the sacred.

From seed, blue vervain germinates readily with warmth and light. Scatter seeds on soil surface in spring - they need light to sprout. Once established, vervain is reliable and long-lived, returning year after year, a steady presence in the landscape of care.

Viennia Booth



Our work with your help

Among the various conservation groups working in Little Compton, **Sakonnet Preservation** is distinguished by its willingness to accept properties for conservation that may not be a priority for other groups. We are open to accepting small parcels which make up a high percentage of the remaining undeveloped land in our community. Such parcels are vital for protecting groundwater, habitat corridors, historic stone walls and scenic vistas that define our precious landscape.

Sheila Mackintosh retires

After 26 years of inspired dedication to the core work of **Sakonnet Preservation**, Sheila Mackintosh will be stepping down from our Board of Directors this coming July 22nd. We have benefited enormously from her thoughtful and passionate commitment. She has held herself and our organization to the highest standards of land conservation practice during the entirety of her tenure, serving as board secretary for 10 years and vice-president for 12 while chairing our Land Protection Committee for 23 years.

Sheila's legacy is embedded in our overall policies and practices, archived documentation, and her exemplary model of shepherding 50 uniquely complicated conservation projects to completion adding 170 acres to our holdings. Her sensitivity, dependability, and attention to detail have nourished confidence with landowners seeking the permanent protection and stewardship of their family property and engendered trust both within and outside this organization and our community.

Her work has been recognized and honored at the state level by the Rhode Island Land Trust Council and nationally by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. Her artful eye and editorial skills have greatly influenced the professionalism of our community outreach, publications, and mapping projects.

It has been an extraordinary privilege to work in partnership with Sheila as we have moved through our evolution from all-volunteer to a staffed and accredited land trust.

Her affection for and dedication to this community and SPA have shaped the inner workings of this organization and had lasting influence on those of us who have enjoyed and learned from collaborating with her. Our town continues to benefit from her considerable skills as an appointed member of the Planning Board.

Thank you so much, Sheila!

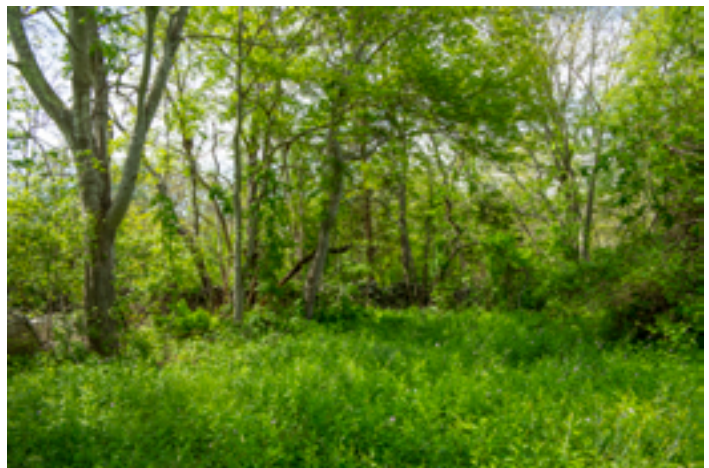


An arboreal report card

In my time working with Little Compton trees, I have seen many trees that unfortunately died too soon. It is never one thing that causes any tree's decline. There is always a cascade of tiny failures that are often invisible and are exacerbated or initiated by other tree stressors, for example, drought, heat and extended humidity.

Little Compton has become more of a land of weather extremes than it used to be. Anybody else besides me miss eating apples off the tree with no spraying? Yes, we are still fighting winter moth on the woods side of town. Yes, the beech leaf nematode may wipe out our beech. Yes, deer are destroying our woods canopy by eating all of our young oaks—not the oaks! But I have hope...

A slow walk through my dying American beech woods shows an amazing amount of regeneration this season. The woods and what thrives in them is always changing. Now is the time to promote and protect our native trees that can survive our weather extremes. Look out for a resurgence of Little Compton's medium story forest trees. This is due to the increase in sunlight from a weak woods canopy. Little black cherry, hickory and nut trees are everywhere! Peel back the invasives and see what's there! You might be pleasantly surprised.



Jason Burchard Sakonnet Tree, Inc.

More than trails

The essential work of land conservation

When visitors ask if they can visit our properties, we direct them to five locations: Greys Mill Pond Guild property, The Meehan Triangle, The Ponderosa, East & West Islands, and the P.T. Marvell Preserve shared with the Nature Conservancy and Agricultural Conservancy Trust. However, we are often asked about access to additional properties, which reveals an important impediment to our work.

Of the nearly 490 acres we protect, just under half are held under Conservation Easements (CEs), voluntary legal agreements that permanently restrict development while keeping land in private ownership. The other half are properties we own outright, called “fee” lands. Many of our fee properties are wetland forests, ecosystems of extraordinary ecological value because they are sensitive, complex, and vulnerable to disturbance. Trails would fragment these habitats and degrade the resources we are protecting.

What many cannot see is equally important: we are protecting the lifeblood of Little Compton. Unlike residents served by municipal water systems, every household depends on groundwater from private wells. Our wetlands and forested watersheds are the infrastructure that keeps our wells pure. Development in wetlands disrupts natural water filtration, alters groundwater flow, and degrades aquifer recharge.

This distinction between **Sakonnet Preservation** and neighboring land trusts matters, not just for individual enjoyment, but for how our community understands and supports conservation work. Land trusts succeed when communities feel connected to their work. When neighbors can walk a trail and see conservation in action, they develop ownership and pride.

Yet we are committed to exploring opportunities and will investigate creating trails in less sensitive areas, balancing public access with ecological protection. We engage through our annual print newsletter, monthly e-newsletter, winter film and speaker series, hands-on workshops, and volunteer opportunities. Time spent in nature offers profound benefits for physical health, mental wellbeing, and connection to place. Whether you visit our five open properties or other locally protected spaces, the experience strengthens your understanding of why conservation matters.

The work Sakonnet Preservation does is the same as any land trust: we identify lands of conservation significance, work with willing landowners to protect those properties permanently, and steward our holdings for the future. What differs is visibility. What remains constant is the dedication of our Little Compton community. We are deeply grateful to everyone who supports our mission, whether through donations, volunteering, or simply believing in the importance of protecting our shared natural resources. Together, we are safeguarding the natural heart of Little Compton for generations to come.

Joy Elvin



Let's get outside

As a child of the 1970s and early 80s, I now look back fondly at a time when television was much more limited (three primary channels, a hand dial to change the three channels, and a reliance upon in-home antennas supplemented with aluminum foil), cell phones were non-existent, and the concept of Facetime chats was only possible on *The Jetsons*. Entertainment and creativity were often discovered outside. We were lifting rocks to find bugs, running down a sidewalk to a city park, hopping on a bike with friends, or playing basketball in a driveway.

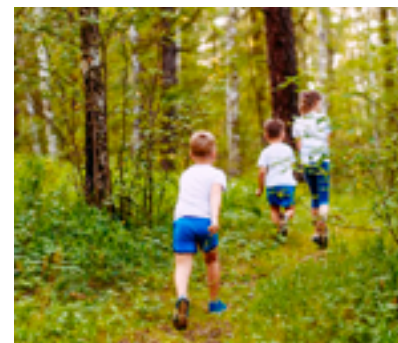
It is a vastly different story for much of today's youth. Television options are endless, electronic devices and video gaming have shaped an entire culture, and smart phones have fundamentally changed how we interact with others. What is undeniable is that these changes have led to more time spent indoors, which is in marked contrast to the childhood that many of us remember.

In his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, author Richard Louv explains the theory of "nature-deficit" and how this disengagement from nature especially affects children. The author suggests that several issues impacting

today's youth, such as obesity rates and depression, can be attributed in some measure to not spending enough time outside engaging in nature. Fortunately, he also offers actions we can take to re-establish this connection.

For our own part, SPA values the importance of connecting youth with the outdoors and instilling an appreciation of the wonders of nature. The R.I. Audubon Society's Youth Conservation League has helped us remove invasives at our Blanchard and Blazer property in prior summers. We continue to partner with Wilbur-McMahon School (WMS) here in Little Compton on various initiatives, including the annual presentation of the Lawrence Richmond Goodnow Young Naturalist award at the WMS Awards Day held each June at the school. This award recognizes an eighth grader "who has developed a keen interest in the natural world" and helps to promote the importance of preserving the beauty of nature for all of us.

SPA also provides public access to selected properties where families can go to experience the outdoors at their own pace and on their own timeline. The Guild Property in Adamsville (right), the Ponderosa and the P.T. Marvell Preserve are all worth a visit and each property offers something unique from the others.



We can do our part as parents and caregivers by providing children with the time and ability to get outside and experience the joys of the outdoors. Sometimes the best experiences are the simple and unscripted ones, where they can spot a bird in a tree, a toad on the grass, or a crab in a tidal pool. If we first give them the opportunity, they can take it from there.

Geoff Manning

Get involved. Make a difference.



The landscape of Little Compton thrives because people like you care deeply about preserving its natural beauty, wildlife, and rural character. There are many ways to be part of this important work:

- Volunteer for stewardship projects
- Attend community walks and events
- Stay informed—subscribe to our newsletter
- Spread the word about land conservation

Sakonnet Preservation relies almost exclusively on donor contributions for its work preserving open space and providing conservation education to all ages in the community with activities, volunteer opportunities and web-based as well as mailed newsletters. Donations supporting our work can be paid by check; credit card payment online at sakonnetpreservation.org; with contributions from donor-advised funds; with gifts of appreciated stock; or with Required Minimum Distribution funds from an IRA. For direct transfer of funds or financial instruments please contact us for instructions.

Thank you to our generous donors - 2025

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