

THE WILD BUNCH



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Off in the distance, I spotted a felled tree across the edge of the pond where it empties into a stream. My heart sank. The log was slender, had treacherous branches sticking out along the top side, and stretched a good 25 feet over what appeared to be deep water pooled up before a beaver dam. Having just descended a steep, rugged trail to the beaver pond, I was determined to push forward. But this water crossing was a tightrope challenge I wasn't sure I was ready to take on.

I was suddenly reminded of the name of the nature preserve in which I was hiking—Mendell's Folly. A former Yale College dean and classics professor, Clarence Mendell bought the property in 1936. Depending on which history you read, either one of Mendell's students, upon seeing the parcel's muddy expanses and craggy slopes, or Mendell's wife, "Tibby," came up with the "Folly" moniker. It was a play on "Seward's Folly," the U.S.'s 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia.

As I looked at the unwelcoming log, I couldn't help but think I had made a folly of my own. Was this the only way to cross? Was I destined to take a tumble into the drink?

Pushing past the tree, searching for an alternate route,

my hopes began to lift as the stream narrowed and increasing numbers of boulders and rocks dotted the landscape. Scrambling over the boulders further along the stream's edge, I saw it—a series of relatively flat rocks stretching from one side of the stream to the other. They would make for a tidy, low-risk crossing. So tidy, in fact, that the rocks appeared to have been arranged by human hands.

Mere days earlier, a trail crew from the Bethany Land Trust, which owns the preserve, had been hard at work in the Folly, repairing blazes and removing debris from the beaver flow system through the dam. And, yes, reconfiguring the stone bridge over which I had crossed. One of the crew members had posted an update on the work on Facebook, along with news of work completed on another town preserve and more to come on two others. Talk about busy beavers.

The Bethany Land Trust is one of 130 such organizations sprinkled across Connecticut. Some, like Bethany's, are dedicated to individual towns and cities, while others are regional. As writer David Holahan details in his story, "Protecting the Land" (starting on page 68), Connecticut would have "500 fewer miles of hiking trails, fewer nature programs, fewer urban farms and community gardens, and fewer popular events" without land trusts. These nonprofits conserve open spaces across the state both to preserve their habitats for wildlife and maintain them for people to enjoy the wild. And, as Holahan explains, as the state struggles to meet its ambitious open-space conservation goal, land trusts are an invaluable ally.

But the engine that truly makes land trusts hum and their open-to-the-public properties shine are the volunteers who put their time, blood and sweat into the natural spaces. As I easily stepped from one stone to another across the stream in Mendell's Folly, I was surely glad to have local land trust volunteers looking after their wild places.



In hindsight, perhaps I should have attempted a crossing of the log.