

THE *Avon* LAND TRUST

Future generations may not remember our names, but they will certainly be glad that we were here.

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

www.avonlandtrust.org

FALL 2020

P R E S I D E N T ' S M E S S A G E



Christine Graesser
President, Avon Land Trust

President's Message

I hope you and your families have been part of the great migration outdoors since the pandemic arrived. The bike and hiking trails have populated like never before, and we hope that as the COVID risk fades, Farmington Valley residents will continue to actively appreciate open space.

For many parents, trails through woods and fields are an unfamiliar experience and may feel like just a matter of getting from point A to B. You can help your children enjoy the in-between by making a hike a journal of discovery. You don't need to be a naturalist. Just challenge your kids to find the details on a trail. You can use this checklist:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boulders | <input type="checkbox"/> Evergreen trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Ferns |
| <input type="checkbox"/> with moss | <input type="checkbox"/> Deciduous trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Mushrooms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> with trees growing on them | <input type="checkbox"/> Maple leaves | <input type="checkbox"/> Flowers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> with lichen | <input type="checkbox"/> Oak leaves | <input type="checkbox"/> White flowers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to climb | <input type="checkbox"/> Two trees growing together | <input type="checkbox"/> Blue flowers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cliffs | <input type="checkbox"/> Vines growing on trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Pink flowers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boulders broken away from cliffs | <input type="checkbox"/> Woodpecker holes in trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Yellow flowers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caves | <input type="checkbox"/> Inset trails on logs | <input type="checkbox"/> Frogs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rocks stuck in the roots of fallen trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Shelf fungi on trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Toads |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey scrapes on the ground (scratched away leaves) | <input type="checkbox"/> Porcupine scrapes on trees | <input type="checkbox"/> Salamanders |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Bear poop with seeds + berries | <input type="checkbox"/> Chipmunks |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Deer poop. | <input type="checkbox"/> Squirrels |
| | Lots of quarter sized pellets | <input type="checkbox"/> Woodpeckers |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Insects beneath a log |

Once you see them, your children may want to learn more. Be patient, don't rush your kids if they want to turn a log over or climb a rock. And bring plenty of snacks to share on breaks. Ticks get active in fall, so spray your hiking shoes with repellent or primethrin and take a shower when you get home.

And please don't let the fear of a tick bite or poison ivy keep you inside. Dr. Tom Morganti, this issue's featured 'celebrity,' worked hard as a trailblazer of the Talcott Ridge trail complex, and he wants you, your children and your pets to know that the health (mental and physical) benefits of taking a hike far outweigh the risks.

So, happy trails! ■

2020 news

TRAIL MAINTENANCE APPEAL

The land trust is raising funds to improve the infrastructure and maintain the Talcott trail complex. To participate, you can make a one-time donation or become a member of the land trust following the instructions right here on the back of this newsletter.

THE LAND TRUST IS LOOKING FOR BOARD MEMBERS

AND volunteers to help us with our digital presence. If interested, please contact Chris Graesser at graessertoal@gmail.com with the subject line Land Trust board or volunteer. Thank you!



Sunning at Countryside Park.



Bikes 'parked' near the Countryside Park trail.



Rope swingers at Countryside Park.

unplugged learning update

One of the few 'benefits' of forced isolation and online school this spring was the cancellation of sports practices and games, art and music lessons, and academic enrichment activities. Although these pursuits have a valuable place in childhood, for these few months, Avon kids got to experience free-range lives – enjoying after-school the way most of their parents did.

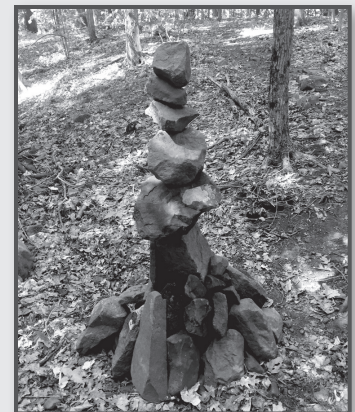
I worried then that afternoons free of tightly scheduled, organized activities might render kids even more plugged-in and tethered to a screen than they already are. I imagined some passively watching life play out on TikTok and Instagram, and others descending into dark basements for marathon video gaming.

But I was refreshingly wrong.

On my side of town, the Huckleberry Hill and Found Land hiking areas were teeming with new hikers and mountain bikers, young and old. Families were discovering the playgrounds (i.e. trails) in their back yards and exploring them together. Usually silent cul de sacs were alive with the sounds of skateboards, roller blades, scooters and bicycles and the lively children riding them. A group of Roaring Brook students pedaled down to our house regularly for a "recess" break on our swings or in our brook. And the rope swing above the upper pond at Countryside Park, long quiet since its constructors grew up, had a waiting line!

With school experienced on a virtual, disconnected platform, our kids craved and found connection in the natural world. It was a beautiful transformation to witness.

Let's hope that, when life returns to "normal", Avon's children remember and seek those wind-in-their-faces, grass-under-feet experiences - and that their schedules make room for them. ■



A Covid Creation on the Skyline Trail.

happenings at the oakes

Inspired by board member Scott Lewis's* recent trail work, Bob Breckinridge and Rick Dubiel braved wind and snow one morning earlier this year to clear the brush between the gazebo and pond at our Oakes Preserve property (located at the end of Chidsey Road). They moved a large dead log that blocked a path, scrubbed down the gazebo, and installed a nice round table. Overhead, a hawk circled, a kingfisher called, and Canada geese flew near a nesting merganser. This ALT property is a wildlife-lover's paradise. Go check it out -and bring a picnic! ■

*Note: Scott Lewis, our trail maintenance hero, also upgraded the loop off the Maher Trail along the Talcott Ridge line. It is an excellent trail for runners.



Oakes preserve, view from the gazebo.



avon land trust legend dr. tom morganti retires

— Susan Rietano Davey



Tom Morganti at Avon Veterinary Clinic.

Most people work as a means to an end. Some lucky ones develop a passion for their work, or create work out of their passion. And a very small few know from the start what they are meant to do. Dr. Tom Morganti falls into the third camp.

The oldest of four boys who grew up in Wallingford in the 60s, Tom always knew he would work with animals. As a teen, he worked on a dairy farm and had aspirations to open his own. But, of course, there was the rather large obstacle of not owning land, so he shifted gears and decided that he would become a large animal vet and care for cows on others' dairy farms. But then, seeing that the decline in local dairy farming would mean less need for cow-doctors, Tom

decided he'd be better off as a veterinary generalist. So, off to the University of Connecticut he went, graduating in 1976 with a pre-Veterinary degree.

The rest of Tom's pre-professional work history falls into the "you can't make this up!" category. And, although Tom, a published author of four YA novels and two books of short stories, really can 'make stuff up,' the stories shared here are all true.

After UConn, Tom headed south. With help from relatives, he established residency in Louisiana and matriculated on to Louisiana State University's Veterinary school. In the process, he worked nights as watchman at the Baton Rouge Zoo, one of the first to create authentic habitats for their animals instead of cages and pens. He was a horsefly-trapper, catching and providing subjects for a pyrethrum (insecticide) study in an LSU lab. And he retrieved (by hand) pig livers from a slaughterhouse for necropsy studies in another LSU lab. His work fed his passion for animals and science, and Tom graduated in 1982 with his Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine.

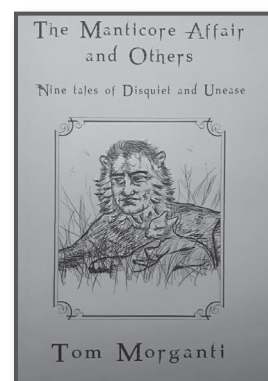
With his degree in hand and new bride, Nan, by his side, Tom returned to CT. After a brief stint at a New Haven-area veterinary clinic, he hit the pavement to find a practice he could call home. On a fortuitous day in 1986, he knocked on

one of the very few doors along a rural Route 44: Avon Veterinary Clinic. There, he was greeted by a genial Dr. Fred Fiebel, Sr. After more of a chat than an interview, Tom was offered a job.

Dr. Fiebel, who passed away this summer, just shy of his 95th birthday, became Tom's longtime mentor. "He taught me how to do and love this job," Tom reflects; "I'm forever grateful."

Tom has cared for countless pets in the Farmington Valley these past 34 years. He also provides extensive pro bono services to museums like the Roaring Brook Nature Center and the CT Children's Museum. There is virtually no species in these parts that Tom Morganti hasn't examined or healed at some point in his career.

In 1990, the owner of one of his patients (a cat named Calliope Spring) recruited Tom to join the Avon Land Trust board of directors. He was a longtime board member, a naturalist and science educator and one of those people you can't say "no" to. "Hey, Tom" said Harry Spring at his cat's annual check-up, "you like to hike; you should join our board,"



One of Tom's seven books.

Tom has cared for, arguably, more of Avon's pets, strays and wild animals than any other vet.

is how Tom recalls the invitation and "rigorous vetting process". At 38, Tom became the youngest ALT board member by decades. "If you took me out of the equation, the average age was about 70," he says with a chuckle. Within months, the resident youngster was 'promoted' to Vice-President of the board.

Of all his accomplishments during 31 years on the ALT board, Tom is most proud of the hiking trails he helped create. The trust, established in 1976, had been a passive organization when Tom joined, existing primarily to accept land donations when they were offered and to maintain those land holdings. Under Tom's leadership (he was President from 1999-2000), the trust took a more active approach to land acquisition and stewardship. Tom was instrumental in routing, clearing and marking the ALT's first hiking trail – the Garvin Trail adjacent to Hunters' Run. The land was too hilly for construction and completely overgrown, Tom recalls, "but, hey, the developer gave us a chunk of land – so I said 'let's build a trail on it!'" With his two young sons, Alex and James, in tow, Tom went to scope out the parcel. "It was impassable; totally overgrown. We had to bushwack our way in and bushwack our way back out." But with hard work and good tools, Tom and other ALT volunteers blazed what we now know as the white trail, accessed via Nod Way.

The Maher (blue) trail, accessible via the Garvin Trail, was Tom's second trail project and it was named after Ruth Maher, longtime ALT board member and editor of the newsletter Tom then wrote. The third is another loop on that Hunters' Run-adjacent parcel. It's a little flatter, easier on tired legs. Naming rights for this one went to Tom's dear friend, the late Harry Spring.

The Spring (red) trail features a resting bench in honor of Harry who hiked at a slower pace in his late years.

The fourth and most ambitious ALT trail project to date, and the one of which Tom and his fellow board members are most proud, connects the town's Hazen Trail to the trust's Garvin and all the way up to the Heublein Tower. It is a trail of challenging terrain with exceptional scenic and historic features – sparked by an impromptu conversation Tom had with then town clerk, Carolyn LaMonica.

As Tom tells it, he stopped at the town offices one day, and Carolyn asked "You're on the land trust board, aren't you, Tom? You should make a trail from the Avon side up to the Heublein Tower. There used to be one when I was a kid." Curious, Tom went to look for remnants of the trail, specifically a cut in between the two peaks that might reveal a path. There was no revelation. But he returned, this time with his fearless and energetic teens, Alex and James, who found the cut and followed it up and down to reveal the general path of a trail. After years of vigorous trail work by many hands, meetings with town officials, hearings with concerned residents, and under the leadership of a new president (Bob Breckinridge), the Skyline Trail was born. It is the land trust's most prized and popular trail.

But it's a steep one, not for the feint of heart. For more leisurely hikes, Tom's favorite spot is the town-owned property, Alsop Meadows. This nature-lover's parcel, tucked away near the intersection of Waterville Road and Route 44, is where Tom has regularly walked and trained six dogs. These days, he's busy with his newest canine companion, Darla, a rescue dog from Alabama who Tom proudly reports is the smartest dog "ever." He taught her to "come on a whistle in one hour, with a piece of string cheese."

Alsop is also the special place where Tom has camped for 25+ years with Alex and James. He recalls many times hearing



Tom and his dog Darla.

the screech of fisher cats late at night and calming his boys by explaining, "no, that's not small children being flayed alive, it's just some fighting fisher cats." (How reassuring!) Alex is now a father himself - he and his wife, Jenny, both AHS grads, have a three-year-old daughter Claire and another child on the way this spring - and granddad is eager to continue the Morganti camping tradition with a new generation. He introduced Claire to hiking before she could walk, from the vantage point of a child-carrying backpack.

The natural slowing down process of walking with a young child and listening to his tired knees and hips has created an opportunity for Tom to indulge yet another of his talents. When not exploring ALT trails, caring for our pets, or writing books (he's on his seventh), Tom paints beautiful acrylic creations. His subjects, no surprise, are landscapes and animals.

As should be expected, a man who spends so much of his free time in the woods and who has cared for, arguably, more of Avon's pets, strays and wild animals than any other vet, Tom has some great stories and, like the author he is, he tells them well. Among his favorites:

■ Hiking along the Metacomet trail and right into a black rat snake that was looped in a tree. "Hit me right between the eyes!"

- Spotting large cat tracks in the snow at Alsop – “four large round prints, then an 8- foot spread, then four large round prints again, and another 8-foot spread.” The pattern continued, suggesting to Tom that a mountain lion had been there, chasing some unfortunate prey.
- At the behest of the DEEP, surgically implanting small tracking devices in hog-nosed snakes, an endangered species (he says they are aptly named).
- Abruptly leaving the clinic to help six Avon police officers in the old Caldor (now Wal-Mart) plaza responding to a call for a wounded, lame Canada goose. Tom instructed the officers to surround the goose in a circle while he got a running start to (carefully) tackle it into submission. Tom took that running start and dove right onto the pavement. Turns out, the goose could fly just fine!

Tom has been eye to eye with a mother coyote and her pups (evidently, and unnervingly, they don't break their stare like dogs do); examined a 45-foot anaconda snake with a head the size of a football; cleared a 40-pound snapping turtle out of the middle of route 44 during rush hour; and come face-to-face with a porcupine, in the flats – twice.

The stories keep coming – one more fascinating than the last – and Tom

shares more of them in his upcoming book “My Life With Animals.” But I have my own favorite Dr. Tom Morganti story; one that, I think, best illustrates the gift he is to Farmington Valley pets, wildlife and nature-lovers:

In the early 90s, my husband Bob and I were young “parents” to a beloved yellow Labrador Retriever named Johnson. Johnson had a long list of ailments in his very short life, but we always remained optimistic. One Friday, I arrived home from work to see Bob in a heap, holding Johnson on his lap in our driveway. He had been especially weak the days prior. “It’s time,” Bob said. “We can’t let him suffer anymore.” Despondent, we called Avon Veterinary Clinic. It was a Friday evening; they were closing soon.

Thirty minutes later, Tom arrived at our house. He sat with us, and our elderly neighbor, (Johnson’s dog walker, “Uncle Dave”), on our deck as we took turns holding and petting Johnson. Over beers, we shared stories of our beloved dog and, when the time was right, we toasted him and wished him farewell. As Bob, Dave and I held our dog, Tom injected him with pentobarbital and he peacefully passed. The four of us carried his body out back beside our barn and, teary-eyed and heartbroken, we dug a hole and lowered his body gently into it. It was late, and nearly dark; Tom was in no rush. He stayed with us until the end.

Days later, I wrote Tom a thank-you note, and Bob and I gave him a dogwood tree like the one – now as tall as our barn – that we’d planted above Johnson’s grave. Nearly thirty years later, I can’t remember what I wrote in that note, but I think I said something about how lucky we would be if all doctors treated their patients with the love and compassion Tom showed our dog. If I didn’t say that, I say it now, and with more conviction because, after years – decades – of experiencing the treasure of Tom Morganti, I know it to be even more true.

On behalf of the Avon Land Trust and all those who use and enjoy our properties, thank you, Tom, for your service and leadership.

And on behalf of Avon’s animals – pets and strays, wild and tame – and one special yellow lab from years ago, thank you for your loving care.

POST-SCRIPT: In recognition of Tom Morganti’s momentous contributions to the ALT, our town and its creatures, we hereby announce that, effective immediately, the Skyline Trail will be renamed after him. ■



Tom’s painting of Talcott Ridge

The Land Trust recently learned that it is a recipient of a CVS Health Foundation Volunteer Challenge Grant for \$1,000.

Thank you, CVS Health!



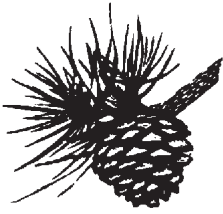
2020scholarships

Avon Land Trust Hugh Blanchard Scholarship

For the first time in recent memory, and due to the pandemic, the Avon Land Trust was not able to present its annual Hugh Blanchard Scholarships in person. No handshake and handing over of the scholarship checks, no face-to-face congratulations, no photos; this year, we present just the recipients’ names. We proudly recognize...

Krishna Donger Justin Shieh Sanjana Nistala

for their commitments to land stewardship and the natural world, and we wish them well in their academic pursuits — all three of them at the University of Connecticut! ■



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THE *Avon* LAND TRUST membership form

Yes, I/we would like to make a tax-deductible annual membership donation to the Avon Land Trust, at the following level:

- _____ \$500 Oak Membership
- _____ \$250 Maple Membership
- _____ \$100 Birch Membership
- _____ \$ 50 Family Membership
- _____ \$ 30 Individual Membership
- _____ \$ 25 Senior/Student Membership
- _____ Please allocate my donation to the Unplugged Learning fund
- _____ Please allocate my donation to the trail maintenance fund

_____ name

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_____ e-mail _____ phone

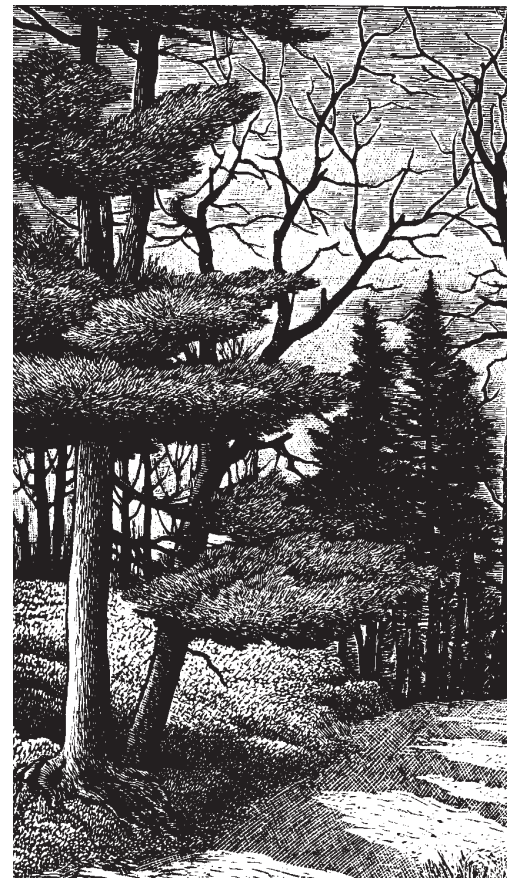
_____ I/We wish to remain anonymous

Please make checks payable to The Avon Land Trust, and mail to: The Avon Land Trust, P.O. Box 267, Avon, CT 06001.
... or pay on-line by visiting our website: www.avonlandtrust.org.

Please let us know if you can help the ALT in any of these other ways:

- My employer will match my contribution.
- I would like information on how to include ALT in my will or estate plan.
- I am interested in donating land to the ALT
- I would like to help the ALT as a member-volunteer

Thank you for becoming a 2021 member of the Avon Land Trust!



The Avon Land Trust is 501(c)(3) certified, so your donation is tax deductible. If your employer offers a matching gift program, or participates in the United Way, please consider making the Avon Land Trust a beneficiary so your money can go even further.